Also in the issue:
Alison Bechdel, Olivia Laing, and Camryn Garrett

Plus: A new Stamped remix brings the anti-racist message to kids
I’ve been thinking a lot about freedom. How do we achieve it? Why do some people deny it to others? And what does it even mean to be free?

I’ve gotten into this philosophical frame of mind via two new books I’ve been reading. The first is Louis Menand’s *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, April 20), a sprawling history of ideas and culture in the years between the end of the Second World War in 1945 and the intensification of American involvement in the Vietnam War around 1965. (I’m listening to the nearly 35-hour audiobook, read in suitably professorial tones by David Colacci.)

Menand, a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, writes that he wanted to explore this period (roughly contiguous with his own youth) to understand the transformation in American society that had opened it to art and ideas from abroad. In the course of this exploration, Menand discusses a range of artists and thinkers who left their marks on the time, including George Orwell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hannah Arendt, David Riesman, James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, and many, many more.

“People cared,” he writes of this cultural blossoming. “Ideas mattered. Painting mattered. Movies mattered. Poetry mattered. The way people judged and interpreted paintings, movies, and poetry mattered. People believed in liberty, and they thought it really meant something. They believed in authenticity, and they thought it really meant something. They believed in democracy and (with some blind spots) in the common humanity of everyone on the planet.”

Menand doesn’t ignore the racism and other prejudices of the era, nor the wrongheadedness of America’s military interventions overseas. He may oversell the rosy idealism of the period, but the contrast with our own cynical moment is nevertheless undeniable. And he astutely homes in on the concept that underlay the American ethos of those years: “If you asked me when I was growing up what the most important good in life was, I would have said ‘freedom.’ Now I can see that freedom was the slogan of the time. The word was invoked to justify everything. As I got older, I started to wonder just what freedom is, or what it can realistically mean.”

Olivia Laing engages with the concept of freedom, in her own inimitable manner, in *Everybody: A Book About Freedom* (Norton, May 4). While Menand takes a broad, bird’s-eye view of a two-decade period, Laing channels her inquiry through the life and work of Wilhelm Reich *(1897-1957)*. Best remembered for his eccentric—well, crackpot—development of the “orgone accumulator” late in his career, he began as an Austrian psychoanalyst who sought to bridge the work of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, including the individual physical body—as well as the communal body—in his healing work. Reich opens windows onto many other figures—Susan Sontag, Kathy Acker, Andrea Dworkin, the Marquis de Sade, Agnes Martin, Bayard Rustin, Philip Guston—who Laing productively investigates.

Laing writes, “[W]hat I found most exciting about Reich was the way he functioned as a connector, drawing together many different aspects of the body, from illness to sex, protest to prisons. It was these resonant regions I wanted to explore, and so I took him as a guide, charting a course right through the twentieth century, in order to understand the forces that still shape and limit bodily freedom now.”

Read my interview with Laing on Page 58, and by all means check out both these books. In their own ways, each sheds light on the highly contested concepts of freedom that still resonate in American life.
The Kirkus Star is awarded to books of remarkable merit, as determined by the impartial editors of Kirkus.

Elin Hilderbrand’s 27th novel takes place in the greenroom of the afterlife, as a newly dead Nantucket novelist watches life unfold without her. Read the review on p. 24.
THE COMMUNE
Abeel, Erica
Adelaide Books (328 pp.)
$22.30 paper | Jul. 4, 2021
978-1-954351-79-0

This sharp, shapely roman à clef visits a group of feminists, writers, and intellectual hangers-on living as summer housemates on Long Island’s East End while they plan what will become the historic Women’s Strike for Equality of Aug. 26, 1970.

Abeel affectionately ribs the political maneuverings of the feminists and the self-serving machinations of the writers while more harshly critiquing the proto-Trumpian businessmen, but her novel is at heart a romantic satire marked by apt literary quotations, Dickensian character names, and multiple references to Jane Austen. Running the group house is Gilda Gladstone, the reigning force of the women’s movement (who resembles Betty Friedan). Gilda is middle-aged and homely but charismatic and sexually driven, politically committed to women’s rights but wary of radical feminists, especially lesbians. She’s also deeply jealous of Monica Fairley (a stand-in for Gloria Steinem), who never appears but haunts the novel as Gilda’s glamorous competitor for feminist leadership. Around Gilda swirl her followers, including Leora, a recently divorced mother and struggling writer who’s looking for a husband, preferably rich. Leora takes trenchant, metafictional notes for a future novel while deciding between a crude but rich former boyfriend, “the Polish Gatsby,” and a talented but poor journalist who works at Clive Monomark’s Gotham (aka New York magazine under Clay Felker). Most of the other characters are composites. The guessing game becomes addictive: Is beautiful photographer Edwina Scahill, who’s bisexual and yearning for children, Sally Mann or Annie Leibowitz? Radical highbrow JoBeth Mankiller isn’t quite Susan Sontag. “Well connected dilettante” author Peter Grosvenor must be George Plimpton; rich, organ-playing Sebastian Nye, who co-publishes The National Bugle with William Buckley, sounds like harpsichordist Buckley himself. More important, almost all of Abeel’s characters show complexity—foolish yet brilliant, silly yet sad, insecure yet capable. As they fall in and out of affairs, commit minor treacheries, admit insecurities, and discover love, the reader starts caring deeply.

A joyous literary romp with hidden depth.
THE STARTUP WIFE
Anam, Tahmima
Scribner (304 pp.)
$26.00 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-982156-18-3

A brilliant coder marries her high school crush and creates an app that accidentally turns him into the millennial messiah.

After high school, Asha Ray blossomed. “I stepped into my brain like I was putting on a really great pair of sneakers for the first time....I cut my hair very short and got the first six digits of Pi tattooed on my left shoulder.” She’s working at a high-powered Cambridge AI lab when she attends the funeral of a high school teacher back on Long Island. There, she runs into the beautiful, long-lost Cyrus, who now creates alternative rituals based on all the spiritual traditions of the Earth. Two months later they are married, and she’s left her lab to found a startup with her new husband and his wealthy best friend, Jules. WAI (We Are Infinite), the app Asha writes, leverages Cyrus’ alternative-ritual concept into a social media platform. Though the lawyers they consult about incorporation suggest that the couple get a post-nup, two years later Asha remains on cloud nine. “I’m going to write a marriage guide,” she thinks. “I’ll call it The Startup Wife: How To Succeed in Business and Marriage at the Same Time.” But as WAI scales the heights of venture capital and turns into an international obsession—users have shared 800,000 cat baptisms alone—with Cyrus as its face, any good feminist might predict a darker outcome for this story. Anam’s fourth novel is very good on all the tech and millennial accoutrements, with imaginary apps for everything from consensual sex to anal hygiene and no scene complete without a glass of raspberry shrub or rosemary water. Nits: The outcome is overly signaled; feminism plays an odd role somewhere between liberation ideology and buzzkill; the front end of the pandemic crashing into the back end of the book seems unnecessary.

A clever, often funny anti-romance novel set in the world of platforms, launches, engagements, and turmeric lattes.
It’s been almost 30 years since Laurie Colwin died of a heart attack at 48, and her books are ripe for rediscovery. I’ve thought of her often during the past year, wondering what she would have made of the pandemic. She’s best remembered for her delectable food books, *Home Cooking* and *More Home Cooking*, which include such quarantine-friendly chapters as “Bread Baking Without Agony” and “Easy Cooking for Exhausted People.” (We can save “The Once and Future Dinner Party” for later.)

But her smart, witty fiction is also deeply concerned with food and domestic life in general; she loves to describe her characters’ living rooms and china patterns, what they wear and what they eat, the music they listen to and the books they read—her work makes the case that objects shed light on their owners. As she wrote in a story called “The Lone Pilgrim”: “Oh, domesticity! The wonder of dinner plates and cream pitchers. You know your friends by their ornaments. You want everything. If Mrs. A. has her mama’s old jelly mold, you want one, too, and everything that goes with it—the family, the tradition, the years of having jelly molded in it.” (Colwin had a delightful fondness for exclamations: A story called “My Mistress” ends, “Oh, art! Oh, memory!”)

Colwin’s books have been divided between two publishers, Vintage and Harper Perennial, which are now doing an unusual joint repackaging of all ten of them. The program began in February with *Happy All the Time*—which has a new introduction by Katherine Heiny, whose recent novel, *Early Morning Riser* (Knopf, April 13), I highly recommend—and will continue until both volumes of *Home Cooking* appear on Oct. 12, with introductions by Ruth Reichl and Deb Perelman.

Though her titles include *Another Marvelous Thing* and *Family Happiness*, Colwin’s characters are not, of course, happy all the time—the books would be pretty thin if they were. Their problems are always emotional, though, and never practical. How do they support themselves? They might run their family’s charitable art foundation or practice law; when Elizabeth Bax, the heroine of *Shine On, Bright & Dangerous Object*, is widowed at 27, she tells her brother-in-law, Patrick, that she doesn’t want his late brother’s inheritance, saying, “I have some money of my own, and I can work.” Nothing to worry about! Elizabeth and Patrick fall in love, and that’s a situation Colwin can dig her teeth into. (For some reason, *Shine On* isn’t part of the reissue, but the old edition is still available.)

*Another Marvelous Thing* (Vintage, June 8) is a novel in stories recounting an affair between Francis Clemens and Josephine “Billy” Delielle. It begins with “My Mistress,” told from Francis’ perspective: “My wife is precise, elegant, and well-dressed, but the sloppiness of my mistress knows few bounds.” Colwin excels at prickly women like Billy, who doesn’t care about her appearance or—perhaps alone among Colwin’s characters—her surroundings but does care about intelligence and personal chemistry.

There are love affairs and friendships, stiff new marriages and comfortable old ones. There are new babies but no teenagers—I wish Colwin had lived long enough to tackle teenagers! As I reread the books today, they seem to come from another world, and I don’t mean 1970s and ’80s New York—more like Jane Austen’s England. The people are all rich and White and seem to float through life on a cushion of privilege, with all the time in the world to attend to their emotional turmoil. Colwin ignores the traditional writing-school advice to show, not tell: She talks to her readers, describing her characters from the outside in. This would make her fiction perfect for the audiobook format, but only *Happy All the Time* is available. Maybe that could come next, Vintage and Harper?

*Revisiting Laurie Colwin* by Laurie Muchnick. By Laurie Muchnick. © 2021 by Kirkus Media, LLC. Used with permission.
The Bennet Women

Pride & Prejudice goes to college.

At the prestigious Longbourn College in Massachusetts, best friends EJ, Jamie, and Tessa are members of Bennet House, the first female residence on campus. For them, being Bennet Women isn't just about where they live, it's an ethos adapted from the Bennet House Rules—act with maturity, support your sisters, embrace the adventure of Longbourn. And this year is shaping up to be more adventure-filled than most thanks to fellow student Lee Gregory, son of Hollywood royalty, and the arrival of his arrogant friend Will Pak, a recently disgraced actor. When Jamie finds her match in Lee, EJ agrees to put up with Will's rudeness and insulting behavior for her sake. As they spend more time together, a tentative friendship begins to grow—along with Will's attraction to EJ. That is, until Jordan Walker, an old enemy of Will's, makes EJ's acquaintance and begins wreaking havoc at Longbourn. Now Will and EJ will both have to put their pride aside to prevent the past from repeating itself. The cast of characters is diverse—EJ is Black, Jamie is a recently out trans woman, Tessa is Filipina, and Will has both Chinese and Korean heritage—and hearing EJ, Jamie, Tessa, and the other women who populate Longbourn discuss ambitious career goals, healthy sex lives, and more with unabashed frankness is refreshing. But this tale has been told (and retold) many times, and the plot doesn't offer enough in the way of innovation or excitement to feel wholly necessary. The relationship between EJ and Will, this novel's Elizabeth and Darcy, also lacks the same intense slow-burn spark that has made the original couple a pop-culture mainstay for centuries.

A fine but mostly forgettable addition to the large library of Austen-inspired novels.

A Passage North

Arudpragasam, Anuk

Arudpragasam, whose first novel, The Story of a Brief Marriage, made a critical splash in 2016, is back with an intelligent, quite often moving novel of meditation and aftermath.

The plot of this book, conventionally speaking, would fit on a cocktail napkin: Krishan, a young Sri Lankan man who lives in the southern city of Colombo and works for a nongovernmental organization there, receives a phone call; takes a long walk, during which he stops to smoke a few cigarettes; makes the titular train journey into the recently war-ravaged north, during which he recalls a love affair now over; attends a village funeral. That's it. And yet the novel is charged throughout with tension and excitement. Part of that derives from Arudpragasam's fierce intelligence and his total commitment to plumbing Krishan's psyche, to following his thoughts patiently, relentlessly, with exquisite subtlety. Not many writers can successfully invite comparison to W.G. Sebald's slow, inward, thoughtful—but somehow pulse-pounding—novels, but Arudpragasam can and does. The rest of the novel's tension comes from the powerfully evoked historical context. This isn't just the aftermath of a love now over, or of a young man's idealistic early 20s, or even of the life of a grandmother's caretaker now dead in what appears to be an accidental fall down a well (the funeral to which Krishan is headed); beneath them all, agitating the water to which the book returns again and again, is the long, still-rippling wake of Sri Lanka's bloody three-decade civil war, in which the grandmother's caretaker, Rani, lost both her sons (and in which Krishan's father was killed). The result, if such a thing be possible,
is a novel of philosophic suspense, one whose reader shivers in anticipation not of what will happen next but of where the next thought will lead.

A luminously intelligent, psychologically intricate novel—slow in always rewarding ways.

**WE WERE NEVER HERE**
_Bartz, Andrea_
Ballantine (320 pp.)
$27.00 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-984820-46-4

A backpacking trip gone awry tests the relationship of two best friends.

Emily and Kristen, now almost 30, have been close since college, and as neither are close with their families, they’re more like sisters than friends. Now it’s time for their yearly trip to somewhere adventurous and off the beaten path, trips that have become even more important since Kristen moved to Australia for work a few years ago. Last year’s trip was a disaster, though, ending when Kristen killed a man who’d been sexually assaulting Emily; now, on the last night of their trip to Chile, Emily finds Kristen standing over the body of the cute guy she’d brought back to their room, saying he’d been rough with her. Taken aback by the similarities to what had happened the year before, Emily helps her friend cover it up and heads back to Wisconsin, unsure how to deal with her newly reignited trauma. Just when she thinks she’s ready to move on with her new boyfriend and therapist, Kristen appears on her doorstep as if nothing has happened. Bartz’s latest thriller is full of twists and turns as Emily discovers new things about the friend she thought she knew so well. The dread creeps up slowly on both Emily and the reader as more and more comes to light and the truth slowly reveals itself.

Up to the unexpected climax and beyond, Bartz’s writing will keep readers on their toes, questioning everything and looking for hidden meanings in every communication between Emily and Kristen. While the last 10 pages or so may not quite live up to those that precede it, the overall plot is exhilarating.

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**CAPTAIN OF THE TIDES**
_Gunner Morgan_
Charles D. Morgan
With Jacquie Hillman


Set Sail with a Navy Hero

“An impeccably researched and engaging tale of an authentic war hero.”

—Kirkus Reviews

For Agent Representation or Information on Publishing and Film Rights, Email hilliengroup@gmail.com • www.gunnermorgan.com
“A compelling study of power, sociopathy, and the possibilities of survival.”

FIERCE LITTLE THING

A slow-burn thriller that gradually suffocates both the protagonist and the reader—in a good way.

FIERCE LITTLE THING
Beverly-Whittemore, Miranda
Flatiron Books (432 pp.)
$23.99  |  Jul. 27, 2021
978-1-250-77942-7

When Saskia joined Home, a secluded Maine commune, she thought she had finally found a family. But cults never quite turn out as one might hope.

It all began when Saskia's 4-year-old little brother died. With her father in jail, her mother absconded, and her grandmother unwilling to care for her, Saskia's family disintegrates. Sent to live with family friends just after she turns 12, she initially thrives. Phillip, her new father figure, is an eccentric painter, and although his wife, Jane, is rarely around, Saskia soon bonds with their son, Xavier, who's her age. Then Jane decides not to come home, and Phillip takes them to Home, where the enigmatic leader, Abrah...
extreme cancer treatments, she begins an affair with Dante. She can’t resist the charming Italian and his love for the island and its history, even as she keeps her diagnosis secret. Slowly, the group bonds into something like a family. The novel grapples with the question of what terminally ill people owe their loved ones and themselves. While her best friend is furious that Lizzie might refuse further treatment, Lizzie worries that her illness is a burden. She feels guilty for falling in love with Dante and his daughter, knowing her time is limited. Bly makes an interesting narrative choice, telling the story from the points of view of Lizzie and Etta, Dante’s daughter. Etta is knowledgeable enough about literature to banter with Lizzie about Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and gender roles in Shakespeare’s plays, but she’s still a child, and her perspective confines the reader’s experience of the book.

An emotional journey that’s stunted by the way it’s told.

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**THE PASSENGER**

*Boschwitz, Ulrich Alexander*

Metropolitan/Henry Holt

(288 pp.)

$24.99 | Apr. 13, 2021

978-1250317148

A newly rediscovered masterpiece set in the days following Kristallnacht.

When pounding erupts at the front door of his Berlin apartment with voices crying out for his arrest, Otto Silbermann escapes out the back. It’s Kristallnacht, 1938, and Silbermann, a wealthy, respectable, and—crucially—Jewish businessman doesn’t know where to go. He takes a train, and then another. He goes from Berlin to Hamburg and then back to Berlin. He goes to Aachen and Dresden and Berlin once again. Days pass, and Silbermann is still on a train. His name is recognizably Jewish, so he avoids using it—no hotels for Silbermann, with their registration forms—but his face is not, and his bearing is so upright and respectable he doesn’t seem particularly suspect. Still, he’s in constant danger of arrest. In its dark absurdity, Boschwitz’s brilliant novel recalls Kafka, particularly *The Trial*, in which threat looms like an edifice—and yet, reading, you’re also struck by a panicked, choking laughter. And like Tolstoy’s Ivan Ilyich, Silbermann thinks that by clinging to the last vestiges of middle-class life, he can avoid or outpace death. “Am I traveling?” Silbermann wonders. “No! I’m stuck in the same place, like a person who takes refuge in a cinema where he sits in his seat without moving as the films flicker away—and all the while his worries are lurking just outside the exit.” Then, too, the story behind the novel’s publication is almost as intriguing as the novel itself. Boschwitz, who was half Jewish, was only 23 when he wrote the book; he died in 1942 on a transport ship traveling from Australia to England under German bombardment. The novel briefly appeared in Britain and the United States but never in the German original. In 2015, it was rediscovered by chance. Boschwitz is remarkable not only for his prescience—the novel might be one of the very earliest depictions of the aftermath of Kristallnacht—but also for his rare insight and minutely observed depictions of characters from every strata of German society.

Witty at the same time that it’s tragic, surreal even in its hyper-reality, Boschwitz’s novel is a remarkable achievement.

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**THE TIGER MOM’S TALE**

*Boschwitz, Ulrich Alexander*

Metropolitan/Henry Holt

(288 pp.)

$24.99 | Apr. 13, 2021

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**THE TIGER MOM’S TALE**

*Butler, Lyn Liao*

Berkley (352 pp.)

$16.99 paper | Jul. 6, 2021

978-0-593198-72-8

Butler’s debut novel delves into a biracial Taiwanese American woman’s complicated family relations.

Protagonist Lexa, a 30-something physical trainer in New York City, is building her client list and looking for
“A trophy house, a struggling construction company, and an impossible deadline frame this tense story of greed and friendship.”

GODSPEED

Butler, Nickolas

Putnam (352 pp.)
$27.00 | Jul. 27, 2021
978-0-593-19041-8

A trophy house, a struggling construction company, and an impossible deadline frame this tense story of greed and friendship.

Bart, Cole, and Teddy, blue-collar buddies since Utah childhoods, are now pushing 40 and business partners just getting by on small jobs in Wyoming’s Jackson Hole valley. Their prospects brighten when a wealthy West Coast lawyer named Gretchen offers them the contract to finish her eight-figure house in progress in the mountains outside town. It’s a lot of money for the job itself and comes with a hefty bonus if the men meet her deadline. That’s one problem, because she wants to move in within four months, a near impossibility given the work involved. There’s also the question of why the previous contractors didn’t stick with such a lucrative gig, not to mention the man who died in an accident on the site. But a six-figure bonus crushes a lot of misgivings. For almost half the book, Butler dwells on the beauty of the house and site, the builder’s dreams, the deadline’s pressure, the haves and have-nots as “more and more out-of-state money poured into their quaint little ski town.” The pace drags with repetition and lack of surprise. Fortunately the second half shifts into another gear, characters evolve amid the stress and several neat twists, and the action moves almost like a thriller to a stunning climax. As in his previous three novels, Butler brings sympathy and insight to the familiar rituals and dynamics of male friendship. He might have done more with Gretchen. She has an intriguing backstory that doesn’t develop, and while she’s an impressive force when onstage, the plot mostly keeps her in the wings.

An exceptional tale, once it gets going, of what money can do to those who need it.

—Justen Ahren, Third Martha’s Vineyard Poet Laureate

“For information on film rights, email fansogilvye@gmail.com

ISBN: 978-8-69-200952-4

"Many books will be written about this pandemic, only a few will be memorable, transcendent. Ogilvie’s will be one of these—an intimate, passionate, universal tongue helping us remember and arrive in the new world beyond this one.”

—Billy Collins, Former U.S. Poet Laureate

“My main feeling about these poems is that they are startling and confident....trim and focused....”

—Fanny Howe, Experimental Poet & Novelist
Suffragettes work to advance their cause by planning a march in Washington, D.C.

Leading up to the 1912 election, Maud Malone, a librarian advocating for women’s right to vote, becomes known as a heckler after being arrested for interrupting political rallies to ask presidential candidates their opinions on the issue. After the election, she joins a group of women marching from New York City to Washington, D.C., to ask the newly elected Woodrow Wilson to mention women’s suffrage in his inaugural address. They plan to join the national march for suffrage being planned by Alice Paul, a Quaker from Pennsylvania who spent several years working with the British suffragettes. Yet Alice’s work in planning a successful march on behalf of the National American Woman Suffrage Association threatens to be derailed by red tape and in-fighting among state chapters. Following her career as a journalist, during which she focused on the horrors of lynching, Ida B. Wells-Barnett now leads numerous social groups in Chicago working to ensure the suffrage movement includes women of color and calls attention to the Jim Crow laws preventing Black men from voting in Southern states. She is invited to march with the Illinois delegation, but racism within the movement is prevalent. Chiaverini’s latest work of historical fiction weaves together the actions of these three real women, effective character choices for highlighting the disparate groups advocating for social and legal change while also speaking to the tensions regarding race, class, and rhetorical arguments that prevent these groups from working together smoothly (if at all). The strengths of this work are also its weaknesses: The novel is so heavily researched that it sometimes feels weighed down by biographies and historical details, leaving dialogue sparse and making narrative momentum difficult. Yet the window it provides into the painstaking efforts to secure voting rights for all citizens is undeniably valuable and timely.

Informative and insightful.

After calling off their wedding, a young couple gets stuck in a time loop, reliving the day of their catastrophic rehearsal dinner.

Megan and Tom are a picture-perfect couple. With her job as senior visuals editor at *GQ* and his job as a lawyer at his family’s firm, they’re living the dream. And now, they’re getting married on the picturesque San Juan Island, bringing together their friends and family as they celebrate their love. But all that perfection is merely hiding the problems under the surface. Megan’s and Tom’s families have never gotten along, and Megan has always felt that Tom takes his family’s side over hers. Unbeknownst to Megan, Tom has just accepted a job (at his family’s behest) in Missouri, meaning that she’ll have to move away from New York City and her job. Meanwhile, Megan privately feels guilt over having slept with Tom’s best friend (who is also his best man) years ago. When all the buried secrets come out at their disastrous rehearsal dinner, Megan and Tom angrily call off their wedding…but then they wake up on the morning of their rehearsal dinner, again. Megan and Tom figure out that they’re stuck in a *Groundhog Day*-style time loop, doomed to repeat the horrific day with the one person they never want to see again. Christie doesn’t hold any punches in her adult debut, allowing her characters to act out in surprisingly bold ways. Megan’s and Tom’s betrayals are explored compassionately and honestly, making both of them feel like fully rounded people who are, if not always completely likable, at least...
APPALOOSA SKY
LIES IN A GENRE
SOMEBEFORE BETWEEN
NANCY DREW AND SEX
AND THE CITY.

“An enjoyable, well-written,
action-filled novel that
follows a not-so-typical
Texan family through
decades of life experiences.”
—Sublime Book Review

“Because of the vivid characterization and heart-pounding
action, I am rating Appaloosa Sky by K. Blanton Brenner
4 out of 4 stars. I loved this book, and I can’t
recommend it highly enough.”
—Online Book Club Review

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Before he became a bestselling YA novelist with the books *Frankly in Love* (2019) and *Super Fake Love Song* (2020), David Yoon spent a dozen years working for tech companies. The experience gave him a front-row seat to just how creepy the inner workings of the internet could be. To gather marketable information, companies became increasingly sophisticated at demanding and cajoling people to volunteer scads of personal data.

Yoon’s colleagues were savvy about that in ways users often weren’t. “I worked in ad tech, and at one company everyone who worked there had ad blockers and used proxies to hide their location from trackers,” Yoon says. “It was like we were working at Philip Morris and we’re a bunch of nonsmokers.”

Yoon’s first adult novel, *Version Zero* (Putnam, May 25), explores those ironies at a time when tech titans are facing more scrutiny than ever about their data practices, from legislators exploring potential antitrust violations to everyday consumers sounding alarms. But while the novel is on the news, it’s also a fine techno-thriller in its own right, wrapping its Jaron Lanier-style internet skepticism around a propulsive James Bond-ish plot.

The novel’s hero, Max, is an ambitious programmer who’s discovered that his employer, the Facebook-like social media company Wren, plans to funnel user data to international intelligence agencies. Rather than blow the whistle à la Edward Snowden, Max recruits some fellow programmers to monkey-wrench the algorithm by disabling “like” buttons and erasing anonymity to flush out misogynistic and racist trolls. Enter Pilot, a reclusive tech billionaire who recruits Max and his friends to launch a broader assault on the Amazons, Twitters, and Airbnbs of the world. Pilot is well financed and highly motivated to break the internet; online trolls provoked his daughter’s suicide. But it’s not easy to make society “think about all the evil shit we normalize in our lives,” as one of Max’s colleagues puts it, let alone act on it.

“There are a lot of things we don’t actually like but we’ve just become OK with,” Yoon says over Zoom from his home in Los Angeles. “We’ll say, *My Alexa is spying on me,* or *My phone is listening to me because I saw this [related] ad that popped up on Instagram.* But
we say it almost in a jokey way. We’re so accustomed to living with surveillance capitalism that we don’t notice it anymore.”

Getting the tone right for Version Zero—informed but not lecturing—was part of the reason Yoon spent three years working on the novel. (“This book actually started off as a horror novel—like, straight-up dystopia,” he says.) Another is that Yoon is habitually awash in side projects, from illustration to game design to a patented notebook with sortable and removable pages. Most prominent among them is Joy Revolution, the imprint focused on YA romance stories by and about people of color that he founded last fall with his wife, YA author Nicola Yoon (The Sun Is Also a Star; Everything, Everything).

The two had been talking about a project of that sort ever since the late ’90s, when they met at Emerson College’s MFA program. David, who is Asian American, and Nicola, who is Black, regularly discussed the lack of people of color in the stories they were reading—and writing. “We were like, Are you scared to write about characters who look like yourself? And we had to admit we kind of were,” he says. “Nicola is a huge romance fan, but of all the romance books she’d read, not a single one had a character that looked like her.” When they took their idea to Barbara Marcus, head of Random Housea Children’s Books, “she was down with it, instantly.”

Joy Revolution is designed to spotlight stories about people of color without overt social justice messaging. “There’s another side of the equation that we feel has not been expressed enough, and that’s that POCs fall in love,” he says. “We’re goofy. We make mistakes. We get stupid. We figure things out. So we wanted to promote books that express the full measure of our community in a joyful way.” (Among the first authors signed to the imprint is bestselling British romance novelist Talia Hibbert.)

Within the context of Version Zero, though, Yoon is wrestling with the ways that monopolistic internet culture and institutional racism make being online actively malevolent for many people. Late in the novel, Max speculates about blowing up the internet and starting it over, to “build it new, build it smart, build it fair the next time around.”

What might that look like? The end of Version Zero suggests a possibility. But in the real world, Yoon says there are a lot of factors to wrestle with. “The main problems with the internet are anonymity and massive scale,” he says. “You can hide yourself behind a Pepe the Frog mask, troll the entire internet, and if you wind up getting traction, one person can have an outsized effect on the world. Q is a perfect example of that. What if you removed the anonymity? And what if you scaled it back? What kind of internet would you wind up with?

“I don’t know what that would look like. We’ve never had that.”

Mark Athitakis is a journalist in Phoenix who writes about books for Kirkus, the Washington Post, Los Angeles TimesVersion Zero was reviewed in the April 1, 2021, issue.
understandable. As Megan and Tom relive the same day and get to know each other in an entirely new way, it’s unclear until the very end what will happen with their relationship, creating a level of suspense that will keep readers turning the pages. A compelling story about the power of second chances and forgiveness that’s sure to spark conversation.

**THE VIEW WAS EXHAUSTING**
Clements, Mikaella & Datta, Onjuli
Grand Central Publishing (336 pp.)
$27.00 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-5387-3490-2

Issues of perception and truth are explored as a fake relationship exposes real feelings. Whitman “Win” Tagore, a British Indian actress, is on the precipice of universal critical acclaim. The only thing standing in the way is her less-than-favorable reputation. When Win leaves a cheating ex-boyfriend an angry voicemail that is picked up by the tabloids, she and her publicist must devise a way to get her back in the public graces and back on the directors’ call sheets. Enter Leo Milanowski, a former supermodel and wealthy son of a hotel mogul, who agrees to pose as Win’s on-again, off-again boyfriend whenever she needs a reputation boost. It becomes evident even after their first encounter—told as a flashback—that their chemistry is undeniable, and the public eats it up. Win must grapple with how the world sees her, her desire to further her career, and whether to allow herself to give in to what might be real feelings for Leo. In the hands of lesser authors, this story might have been shallow and clichéd. However, Clements and Datta give the novel grit, depth, and originality as they explore how Win must balance her need for self-preservation with her desire to expose the intersection of racism and sexism in the film industry. This tension is particularly poignant as well-meaning Leo pushes Win to speak out against the injustices she faces, such as a producer’s referring to her as “exotic”: “Leo had always thought she should talk about it openly. If Win wanted, she could become the spokesperson for her generation….She had tried to explain to him the tightrope act of making vague political statements…while avoiding anything more specific….White directors would be afraid to work with her, and white audiences would feel alienated by her.” While it is fairly clear from the start how Win and Leo’s story will end, this will-they, won’t-they journey is packed with emotional resonance.

**THE PRESIDENT’S DAUGHTER**
Clinton, Bill & Patterson, James
Little, Brown and Knopf (608 pp.)
$30.00 | Jun. 7, 2021
978-0-316-54071-1

A bare-chested hero of a one-time president takes on a slew of very bad jihadis, and the bullets fly. In office, Clinton lobbed a few cruise missiles at Osama bin Laden and company, to little apparent effect. Now, teamed up with literary industrialist Patterson, his vengeance is more comprehensive. Matt Keating helms the Oval Office. A former Navy SEAL, he has a special bone to pick with Asim Al-Asheed, a sadistic one-time doctor who once crucified a captive SEAL, leaving him to hang for an hour “before the captors grew bored and slit his throat.” Not nice. Holed up in the Libyan mountains, Asim has an eager enabler in a Chinese operative named Jiang Lijun. SEALs close in, bullets are exchanged, a bomb detonates, and Asim’s family members become collateral damage. What’s a bad guy to do? Kidnap Keating’s teenage daughter, of course, but only after Keating is out of office, “a one-term president known to history as the first to lose my job against an insurgent vice president,” Pamela Barnes, who’d never liked him and defeated him in the primaries. As president, Barnes proves less interested in Mel’s safety than in politics,
so it’s up to Keating to work the phones with Mossad, Saudi intelligence, and the Massachusetts State Police and assemble a crew to find Asim and “separate his brain stem from his spine.” It helps that Melanie, the daughter, knows her way around tactical weapons of various kinds. She’s a tough, resourceful kid, which only serves to tick Asim off even as Jiang woos him with geopolitical calculations and fat bribes. As for Keating, well, he’s the kind of dude given to lines like, “Except for Mel, there are no innocents up there. Armed or unarmed, running away or running toward us, kill ‘em all.” Guess how it all ends? There’s scarcely a moment here that can’t be seen from afar: The bad guys sneer and stab, the good guys come riding in to save the day, the sitting president fumes at having been left out of the fun, and the authors throw in genre tropes like so many grenades.

Written by the numbers, but undemanding entertainment.

**RAZORBLADE TEARS**

Cosby, S.A.
Flatiron Books (320 pp.)
$26.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-250-25270-8

A lean, mean crime story about two bereaved fathers getting their hands bloody.

Coming from the right author, genre fiction has a rare capacity to touch on any number of big ideas: love, death, hatred, violence, freedom, bondage, and redemption, to name just a few. Cosby’s latest fits the bill. Fast on its feet, by turns lethal and tender, the story takes place in small-town Virginia, though it could be the backwoods of a great many places. Ike Randolph and Buddy Lee Jenkins, both ex-cons haunted by their pasts, wouldn’t ordinarily mix, largely because Ike is Black and Buddy Lee is White and a casual racist. But the two men are tragically linked. Their sons were married to each other, and they were murdered together, shot in their faces outside a fancy Richmond wine store on their anniversary. The dads are both homophobes, but they also love their sons, so when the police investigation quickly stalls, Ike and Buddy Lee decide to crack a few skulls on their own. Cosby gives us both the charge of once-bad men getting back in touch with their wild sides and the sad reluctance of relatively straight-and-narrow lives turning to vengeance. These old-timers have done bad, bad things, and they’ve done the time to prove it. Now they’re ready to do those things again in the name of a thorny father-son love that neither man is quite comfortable with. Here’s Buddy Lee after a long, hard night with his new friend: “Chopping up your first body is disgusting. Your second is tiresome. When you’re doing your fifteenth it’s all muscle memory.” This is a bloody good yarn with two compelling anti-heroes you’ll root for from the start, and not only because their enemies, or at least some of them, belong to a White nationalist biker club with murderous ways of its own. Lean and mean, this is crime fiction with a chip on its shoulder.

Violence and love go hand in hand in this tale of two rough men seeking vengeance for their murdered sons.
daughter’s unhappiness, and the distance (and sometimes disdain) she feels for Mark, her needy husband. Mark, who lived in Namibia for a year after college, has received a Fulbright scholarship to study a holocaust that occurred there—though that’s not his only reason for returning. Twenty years ago, Mark was in an accident that “shattered his leg, and everything else,” and—unbeknownst to his wife—he’s returned to make things right. As Persephone, Amanda, and Mila try at something like friendship, their seemingly disparate worlds begin to collide—and their lives as they know it change forever. As the novel begins to solidify and the inevitable is confirmed, Crouch throws another absurd—though not unwelcome—plot twist into the mix. One of the novel’s greatest strengths is the omniscient third-person narration that oscillates focus between main and minor characters. The structure helps heighten the tension between characters, the past and the present, and Namibians and Americans. In addition to sketching complex characters with rich backstories, Crouch excels at moving the plot forward while not missing any opportunity to observe the human condition. With wit and tenderness, the novel explores the complicated nature of race, power, marriage, colonization, diplomacy, and community.

A sharp, funny, page-turning romp.

**TRANSMUTATION**

*Stories*

DiFrancesco, Alex

Seven Stories (444 pp.)

$16.95 paper | Jun. 8, 2021

978-1-64421-066-6

Ten stories of transformation—both real and magical.

On the one hand, transmutation means transformation; on the other, it may suggest change of a specific sort—produced by alchemy or even radioactive decay. The stories in DiFrancesco’s book flirt with both, moving between realistic situations and gothic plots to show us characters in the midst of becoming their real selves, changing into something new, or even being altered. In “Inside my Saffron Cave,” Junie is an angry trans teenager who is waiting to escape her mother and her mother’s abusive boyfriend so she can transition and become who she wants to be. In “The Ledger of the Deep,” a more hopeful piece, Sawyer’s dad embraces his son’s new identity as a trans man by changing the name of their boat from Sara to Sawyer. Both stories feel a little simple—the boyfriend too cruel, the father too quick to understand. Instead, DiFrancesco’s gothic tales, which are wonderfully creepy, are the real winners here. In “A Little Procedure,” based on Rosemary Kennedy’s life, Lily receives a lobotomy when her promiscuity threatens her family’s reputation. But unlike Kennedy, who was disabled by the operation, Lily’s altered intellect doesn’t stop her from getting revenge. A hired girl goes missing in “Hinkypunk” after she gets too close to her boss’s granddaughter. That night, mysterious lights begin appearing in the marsh that the grandmother dismisses as nothing more than marsh gas. The mother in “The Chuck Berry Tape Massacre” loses her grasp on reality and drags her young daughters into her madness until the girls are forever damaged. Another narrative strand about a musician finding a tape made by the oldest daughter and its impact on his career feels like a distraction from the real pathos of the family’s story.

A mixed bag with a few standouts.
Prose and Cons
a novel by
Chuck Katz

Kia Kuniya is the pint-size gal with big-time dreams.
I’m a writer. Might not have heard of me yet. Trust me, you will.

Dylan Miller is the con artist from Brooklyn.
I don’t offer my subway seat to preggoes. I’m not shy about stealing from the dead.

Prose and Cons is the hilarious tale of intrigue as they pursue their passion for prose.

“consistently clever.”

“A kaleidoscopic escapade with a resilient and uniquely addictive pair of characters.”

– Kirkus Reviews

VISIT PROSEANDCONS.COM TO PRE-ORDER
ISBN 978-1-7355634-0-4

For information on publishing and film rights, email charlesevankatz@gmail.com • www.proseandcons.com
Braiding the lives of mothers and daughters in England and Ireland across three generations, Freud explores the joys, heartbreaks, and aching enigmas of family bonds.

Freud's gifts for female empathy and fluid storytelling are fully evident in her ninth novel, which follows the Kelly family from pre–World War II years to more modern times. The lineage begins with Aoife, whose plans for a more ambitious life than her mother's are reshaped by her love for Cashel Kelly, "a man with Ireland in his blood" (read traditionalism and sternly fixed opinions). After the war, Cashel and Aoife give up their London pub and move back to Ireland with their three daughters to farm. But their rebellious oldest, Rosaleen, craves freedom and soon returns to London, claiming a career at a national newspaper though her job is in the mailroom. Still in her teens, Rosaleen has already met Felix—older, richer, a sculptor, the man who couldn't love her more but who will turn away at the crucial moment. Freud's menfolk often prove flawed, including Matt, the unreliable, alcoholic partner of another woman, Kate, whose life of art teaching and care for her daughter, Freya, become increasingly driven by the search for her birth mother. The bones of Freud's story emerge predictably, taking in scenes at the pitiless Convent of the Sacred Heart in Cork, a home for unwed pregnant girls, where Rosaleen suffers the tirelessly punitive attentions of the nuns. Viewers of the movies Philomena and The Magdalene Sisters will feel on horribly familiar territory here while the later developments of the narrative for all three women offer more emotional intensity than surprises. Yet the author's insight is apparent, both in her character studies and expression, as the ambiguity of the book's title demonstrates.

A vivid, reliable saga of female experience.

Gayle leaves lad lit behind in this sentimental novel about a lonely widower living in England.

Hubert Bird just wants to be left alone. The 84-year-old Jamaican man has been living in the U.K. for nearly six decades; now, scarred by a traumatic event that happened five years ago, he's withdrawn from his friends, choosing only to talk to his cat, Puss, and his daughter, Rose, a professor living in Australia whom he misses intensely. Rose worries about her father's isolation, so much so that Hubert has invented a coterie of imaginary friends to assuage her concern, complete with backstories so elaborate that "he had to make a record in a note-pad to help him keep track." But when Rose announces she's coming to visit, Hubert realizes he's going to have to make some real-life friends, and fast. He turns to his neighbor Ashleigh, a young Welsh woman who's tried to reach out to him before without success. Ashleigh manages to entice Hubert into joining a "Campaign to End Loneliness" in their London borough of Bromley. Hubert manages to make a lot of friends but still doesn't know how he's going to tell Rose that he lied to her for so long. The book goes back and forth between the present and the past, when the reader learns about Hubert's arrival in England and his relationship with his late wife, Joyce, a White woman whose family disowned her for marrying a Black man. Gayle's novel doesn't exactly break new ground—the "grumpy old man who turns out to just be lonely" trope is well worn, and Gayle's prose is, for the most part, workmanlike. This novel is resolutely sentimental and ends with an unnecessary chapter that would have been better left out. But despite all that,
Gayle’s book works for what it is, and that’s a testimony to the author’s charm and unfeigned sweetness—the reader can tell he cares a lot about Hubert, and his compassion is contagious.

A little manipulative and a lot sentimental but sweet and charming enough that some readers won’t mind.

**TWO OLD MEN AND A BABY**
Or, How Hendrik and Evert Get Themselves Into a Jam
Groen, Hendrik
Trans. by Velmans, Hester
Grand Central Publishing (384 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-5387-5352-1

If stealing a 12-week-old baby four days before Christmas sounds potentially amusing, this might be the novel for you.

Seventy-something Dutchman Evert Duiker, “loudmouth, bullshit artist, heart of gold,” is on his way to his weekly chess game with fellow septuagenarian Hendrik Groen when he has to pee. He stops at the Princess Margriet School and, on his way out of the bathroom, sees Sabine Verbeek—baby Jesus in the evening’s Christmas pageant—waiting unattended in her pram. Evert decides to take her, not out of malice, but simply because he “[thinks] it would be fun.” He and Hendrik immediately acknowledge that “the parents must be out of their minds with worry” but ultimately worry more about being punished for kidnapping. To assuage their guilt as they bumble through feedings, diaper changes, and abandoned attempts to leave Sabine to be recovered in an underpass, they call the school custodian to say “it’s all been a misunderstanding.” The custodian’s opportunistic brother has other ideas and phones the parents demanding a 100,000 euro ransom. If this plot doesn’t entice you, perhaps the tiresome characters will. The women, with one late exception, are particularly reductive, depicted as either scheming (the mayor), shrinking (Sabine’s mother), or annoying (assorted wives, neighbors, and passersby). Men disparage their appearances by calling them “lard-ass” and “fat”; yearn for one’s “lovely ass” and another’s “big tits”; and belittle them as “that broad,” “old witch,” “nosy bitch,” “nagging old lady,” and more. In the end, the wunderkind chief prosecutor, seemingly motivated solely by his desire to show up the mayor, who “looks like she’s spent an hour at the beauty parlor,” comes to the rescue.

Droll buffoonery built atop antiquated stereotypes, repudiated gender roles, and threadbare “wit.”

**SOMETHING WILD**
Halperin, Hanna
Viking (336 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 29, 2021
978-1-98-488206-6

Attempts by adult sisters to extricate their mother from an abusive relationship force them to confront a shared trauma from their childhood.

The novel begins as Tanya and Nessa Bloom return to their hometown outside Boston to help their mother and stepfather prepare to move to New Hampshire. When the sisters, who are not nearly as close as they once were, arrive home, they are bewildered by what they find. Their mother, Lorraine, seems skittish and fragile; she’s gotten braces seemingly at random, and she’s overly deferential toward their stepfather, Jesse. These hints at domestic abuse quickly bear out, as Jesse grows angry at Lorraine and attacks her, even attempting to strangle her. After the daughters
discover their bloodied mother and rush her to the hospital, Tanya encourages her to seek a restraining order. Nessa, who’s always had a soft spot for Jesse, tries to support Tanya’s plan, but she struggles to perceive her stepfather as a villain. Meanwhile, Lorraine grapples with her conflicting emotions for the man she can’t seem to stop loving. Nessa becomes a crutch, accepting her mother’s rationalizations for wanting to return to Jesse and angering Tanya, who only wants to see Lorraine escape immediately. As the sisters’ already strained relationship deteriorates further, the author reveals a harrowing experience from their adolescence that continues to impact their feelings toward each other, toward men, and toward their mother. The characters face several difficult choices throughout the novel, and they repeatedly disappoint each other. Chapters alternate among the varying perspectives of all three women, and author Halperin expertly weaves scenes from the past into the present to build a more complete world. She also dives deep into the confused, reckless thoughts that can permeate adolescence. The characters are unflinchingly honest as they explore their emotions in a manner that is both refreshing and haunting. The novel is similarly unapologetic as it tackles difficult questions about abusive relationships, toxic secrets, and romantic and familial betrayals. While certain subplots do little to advance the narrative, this difficult story is sufficiently high stakes and relentless that it remains gripping throughout.

A bold and remorseless debut about the agony and affection that are attendant to complicated families.

THE FINAL GIRL SUPPORT GROUP
Hendrix, Grady
Berkley (352 pp.)
$26.00 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-0-593-20123-7

Serial killer survivors are forced to cooperate when they’re dragged screaming back into jeopardy.

You have to give it to Hendrix, author of *The Southern Book Club’s Guide to Slaying Vampires* (2020), for tapping into his deep knowledge of horror films and fiction to find a new angle on the tropes of terror with every outing. In the same way Edgar Cantero lampooned *Scooby Doo* in *Meddling Kids* (2017), this scary unraveling aims straight for the sheer terrors the best slasher films create. Here, Hendrix has zeroed in on the so-called “final girl,” the sole survivor of a horrific massacre—you’re already thinking of Jamie Lee Curtis in the Halloween movies or Sigourney Weaver in *Alien*. This book is even more skin-crawling, as deeply paranoid Lynnette Tarkington (impaled on an antler trophy during her first unfortunate encounter years ago) reluctantly participates in group therapy sessions with Dr. Carol Elliot along with fellow survivors Marilyn Torres, who has buried her emotions in wealth; Dani Shipman, who might have killed the wrong person; Julia Campbell, whose encounter left her in a wheelchair; and Heather DeLuca, who is succumbing to addiction. Hendrix can be tongue-in-cheek (see *Horrorstör*, 2014) but is deadly serious here while still warping the conventions of the genre, including the fact that some of the survivors have participated in graphic horror flicks depicting their very real traumas. The book is creepy enough on its face, but Hendrix’s use of expedient narrative tools, including a laconic cowboy lawman, an overly eager journalist, and a host of archetypal serial killers, heightens the unease. After one member of this vigilant sisterhood is murdered and a series of oddly prescient attacks threaten the rest, Lynnette becomes increasingly suspicious that the attacks are originating way too close to their inner circle. “Does this ever end?” Lynnette asks. “Will there always be someone out there turning little boys into monsters? Will we always be final girls? Will there always be monsters killing us? How do we stop the snake from eating its own tail?”

A bloody and grotesque but ultimately entertaining and inspiring take on horror movies, trauma, and self-determination.
TOWER OF MUD AND STRAW

YAROSLAV BARSUKOV

ISBN: 164076190X

Kindle Best Seller in Gaslamp Fantasy, Steampunk and Metaphysical Fantasy

"Tower of Mud and Straw feels like a step forward for the genre..."
—FanFiAddict

"It’s clever, it’s feverish, and he leaves much up for interpretation."
—The Quill to Live

“This marvelous SF tale about dangerous technology offers sublime stretches that will warrant revisiting.”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review) ★

For Agent Representation or Information on Publishing and Film Rights, Email yaroslav@barsukov.com • https://barsukov.com/
“A subtly ominous story about voyeurism and the danger of losing yourself in someone else.”

**THE WOMAN IN THE PURPLE SKIRT**

“Ama” Vaux, once known as the “Witch of Wall Street,” has buried the other half of her long, seemingly perfect marriage. Power lawyer Omar Tanner, “a quiet man who looked good in suits”—almost every man in this book looks good in or out of suits and resembles Denzel Washington, Billy Dee Williams, Dev Patel, or Paul Newman’s little brother—has collaborated with his wife on her fairy godmother project. Instead of having their own children, they chose young Perry, Olivia, and Billie, filling their plebeian lives with monied ease and Vineyard summers in the elite Black enclave of Oak Bluffs. Now Ama is ready to pass on Chateau Laveau to one of them while bestowing equal, but unnamed, gifts on the others. She arranges several months off for all three women, now a high-powered lawyer, financier, and marine biologist (she’s a witch, all right), and flies them up for a summer that promises to end with not just the gifts, but with revelations. It takes a little too long to get there, though some may enjoy the leisurely setup and relentless name-checking—a concordance of the Black visual artists, musicians, authors, actors, designers, and celebrities mentioned here, along with the New York and Martha’s Vineyard restaurants and bars, could be a valuable book in itself. Hostin’s most serious weakness is substituting catalog copy for characterization—one character “look[s] fierce in a charcoal-gray Rachel Comey jumpsuit”; another “add[s] a pair of playful Sophia Webster sneakers”; Ama chooses a “chinoiserie pattern...as recherché and mysterious as her eldest goddaughter.”

Be patient—one once the Le Creuset pot finally starts boiling, this book earns its place on the beach blanket.

**GOLDEN GIRL**

Hilderbrand, Elin
Little, Brown (384 pp.)
$29.00 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-31642008-2

From the greenroom of the afterlife—make that Benjamin Moore “Parsley Snips” green—a newly dead Nantucket novelist watches life unfold without her. In her 27th novel, Hilderbrand gives herself an alter ego—beloved beach-novel author Vivian Howe—sends her out for a morning jog, and immediately kills her off. A hit-and-run driver leaves Vivi dead by the side of the road, where her son’s best friend discovers her body—or was he responsible for the accident? Vivi doesn’t know, nor does she know yet that her daughter Willa is pregnant, or that her daughter Carston is having a terribly ill-advised affair, or that her son, Leo, has a gnawing secret, or that her ex is getting tired of the girl he dumped her for. She will discover all this and more as she watches one last summer on Nantucket play out under the tutelage of Martha, her “Person,” who receives her in the boho-chic waiting room of the Beyond. Hermès-scarved Martha explains that Vivi will have three nudges—three chances to change the course of events on Earth and prevent her bereaved loved ones from making life-altering mistakes. She will also get to watch the publication of what will be her last novel, titled Golden Girl, natch, and learn the answers to two questions: Will the secret about her own life she buried in this novel come to light (who cares, really—she’s dead now), and will it hit No. 1 on the New York Times bestseller list (now there’s an interesting question). She’ll also get to see one of her biggest wrongs is posthumously righted and that her kids have learned her most important lesson. As Willa says to Carston, “You know how she treats the characters in her books? She gives them flaws, she portrays them doing horrible things—but the reader loves them anyway. Because Mom loves them. Because they’re human.”

If novelists are auditioning to play God, Hilderbrand gets the part.

**SUMMER ON THE BLUFFS**

Hostin, Sunny
Morrow/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$27.99 | May 4, 2021
978-0-06-299417-2

A self-made Black millionaire invites three goddaughters for a last Martha’s Vineyard summer—at the end of which one will get the mansion.

In the first volume of a planned trilogy, Terry McMillan meets Elin Hilderbrand: There are strong Black women in a lovingly detailed coastal Massachusetts location amid clothes, food, and long-kept secrets. Hostin’s grande dame, New Orleans–born Amelia

**THE WOMAN IN THE PURPLE SKIRT**

Imamura, Natsuko
Trans. by North, Lucy
Penguin (224 pp.)
$19.96 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-14-313602-6

One woman obsessively tracks the movements of another.

The narrator of Japanese novelist Imamura’s deliciously creepy English-language debut likes to watch a woman in her neighborhood known as “the Woman in the Purple Skirt.” The Woman in the Purple Skirt doesn’t do anything particularly interesting. She sits on a bench in the park; she goes to the bakery; she is intermittently employed. But there’s something about her that makes it “impossible not to pay attention,” as the narrator explains. “Nobody could ignore her.” The same isn’t true of the narrator, who refers to herself as “the Woman in the Yellow Cardigan.” Gradually, as Imamura’s taut narrative unfolds, we realize just how much of her own life the narrator is willing to give up or, indeed, destroy for the sake of her obsession. She arranges for the Woman in the Purple Skirt to get a job at the hotel where she works cleaning rooms. They’ve never actually spoken, but our narrator imagines she’ll now get the chance to introduce herself. Instead, the Woman in the Purple
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A Chinese singer tries to avoid becoming a political pawn after a tour of the United States puts him at odds with his government. Though 37 years old and a well-established vocalist in his native China, Yao Tian seems curiously naïve and passive. Things seem to happen to him; he doesn’t make them happen. At the end of his government-sponsored troupe’s American tour, he’s invited by a political activist he knew in China to perform at a celebration for Taiwan’s National Day. He accepts, not out of any political convictions but because the fee he’s offered will cover part of his daughter’s tuition at an expensive Beijing prep school. The performance lands him in trouble back home, where he’s threatened with the losses of employment and his passport. Those threats compel him to return to the United States, where he hopes his wife and daughter can eventually join him. The rest of the matter-of-fact narrative documents his life in America and the attempts by the Chinese government to besmirch his reputation, to turn what happens to him into a morality play about the consequences for an artist who betrays his homeland. Written with terse command, in short chapters and without literary flourish, the novel itself is no morality tale. Things happen, life is lived, a very different life than the one Tian might have known had he agreed to quit performing abroad and embarrassing his country. Far from his family and native culture, he processes personal tragedy, professional upheaval, and unlikely romance. Downward mobility takes his performing career from the concert hall to casinos to performing on the streets. Yet he doesn’t seem to regret his exchange of collective security in China for individual freedom in the U.S. Though he had never considered himself particularly political, he becomes more acutely aware of the political dimensions of his position. As he loses some of his voice as a singer, he gains more of a voice as a songwriter. He makes a life for himself, and it is one that both surprises and satisfies him.

Written with great control, the novel unfolds as surprisingly as life often does.
A teenage boy’s life in 1960s rural Iowa.

Before he departs for college at Drake University in Des Moines in the fall of 1967, high school valedictorian Charles Weaver must endure one more long summer in the tiny (pop. 2,500) southern Iowa town of Lockwood. With the assistance of his father, a lawyer and member of the city council, he lands a job on the city street crew, patching potholes and spraying oil on unpaved streets to tamp down the dust. Charles’ romance with Frankie, who happens to be the daughter of his irascible boss, displays occasional sparks without ever truly catching fire. These relationships offer intriguing opportunities to investigate themes of economic and social class that Kinnamon doesn’t explore in depth. From the Fourth of July parade to the county fair to a Pentecostal service, he effectively evokes the atmosphere and daily rhythms of small-town life, though this skill isn’t matched by an ability to create either emotionally complex characters or compelling action. For an intelligent 18-year-old, Charlie seems curiously unreflective, and the closest the novel comes to a moment of real narrative tension is when he and his co-worker Jerry discover a charred body at the site of a fire that destroys a historic church. Unfortunately, the mystery surrounding that event is covered over by a charred body at the site of a fire that destroys a historic church. Unfortunately, the mystery surrounding that event is covered over by a charred body at the site of a fire that destroys a historic church. Unfortunately, the mystery surrounding that event is covered over by a charred body at the site of a fire that destroys a historic church. Unfortunately, the mystery surrounding that event is covered over by a charred body at the site of a fire that destroys a historic church. Unfortunately, the mystery surrounding that event is covered over by a charred body at the site of a fire that destroys a historic church. Unfortunately, the mystery surrounding that event is covered over by a charred body at the site of a fire that destroys a historic church.

A sincere coming-of-age novel that fails to deliver on its promise.

**SILVER TEARS**

Läckberg, Camilla

Knopf (320 pp.)

$21.49 | Jul. 6, 2021

978-0-525-67999-6

Faye Adelheim returns to defend Revenge, her cosmetics company, from a hostile takeover. As she searches for the name of her opponent, can she also protect her daughter and find true love?

Läckberg’s second novel about the brilliant economist who overcame a stifling marriage certainly draws on the strengths of the first: The plot careens at breakneck speed through steamy sex scenes, startling revelations, and flashbacks to Faye’s very dark childhood riddled with rape and murder. What the story lacks in believability (there are poorly planned murders, successful executives who spend inordinate amounts of time drinking without any repercussions, and a heroine who fails to learn from her own mistakes), it more than makes up for with soap-opera–level drama and fireworks. It all begins with Faye having set up house in Italy with her mother and her daughter, Julienne. Faye had framed her ex-husband, Jack, for killing Julienne, though Julienne is secretly still alive, and now Jack has escaped from jail. Meanwhile, a shadowy figure has begun buying up shares of Revenge from Faye’s investors—women who have been loyal up to now, because everyone in Faye’s circle sees the company as a way to strike back at oppressive men. What could possibly be inducing them to sell? As Faye sets out to investigate, she meets David, an angel investor in a bad marriage, and soon the sexual sparks fly. Always ready to support women who need a helping hand, Faye picks up a few new employees along her journey, including Ylva, another smart economist and Jack’s former mistress, and Alice, the ex-wife of Henrik, Jack’s former business partner. Although Faye has a few blind spots that prevent her from recognizing her nemesis, the women band together to save the company and commit some mayhem of their own.

A scandal-filled page-turner sure to delight the beach-read crowd.

**LONG DIVISION**

Laymon, Kiese

Scribner (304 pp.)

$13.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2021

978-1-982174-82-8

A revised version of Laymon’s elliptical, time-folding work of metafiction about Southern racism.

The first novel by Laymon, initially published in 2013, is effectively two novels, both potent yet often funny character studies. In one, it’s 2013 and Citoyen, aka City, is a Mississippi high schooler vying to win a national title in the “Can You Use That Word in a Sentence” competition, a kind of spelling bee for syntax. City’s onstage explosion (over the fraught, contentious word *niggardly*) goes viral, prompting him to escape to his grandmother’s home, where he pores over *Long Division*, a novel that purports to explain the recent, much-discussed disappearance of Baize, a local Black girl. City’s stint with his grandmother is marked by confrontations with racists and extreme payback against them as well as contemplations of racist language from the N-word on down. The novel’s second part is *Long Division* itself, in which City is a teenager in 1985 who, with the help of his friend Shalaya, finds a portal in the woods that sends them forward to 2013, where Baize is an aspiring rapper, and back to 1964, where he’s forced to confront the Ku Klux Klan. In style and structure, Laymon’s novel is an inheritor to Black postmodern literature of the 1960s and 70s—Toni Morrison most famously but also Leon Forrest, Gayl...
Long Division

Laymon has written. Jones, and William Melvin Kelley. And like many pomo works, the plotting gets convoluted as City attempts to untangle the various threads of his personal history. But the struggle is part of the point. Laymon wants to position his complicated hero as part of a throughline of violence against Blacks across decades, from microaggressions to lynching. City proclaims that the Long Division he’s reading is “about tomorrow and yesterday and the magic of love.” That’s also true, if obliquely, of the novel Laymon has written.

A sui generis, sometimes woolly exploration of the complexity and long reach of racism.

WHAT YOU CAN SEE FROM HERE

Levy, Mariana
Trans. by Lewis, Tess
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (336 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-0-374-28882-2

A girl in a charming German town weathers loss and tries to map out her life.

Many of the delights in German author Levy’s new novel are whimsical, but even if whimsy is not your preference, it’s impossible to escape her spell. And why would you want to escape such an entertaining diversion, anyway? The book takes place in a charming Western German village full of oddballs and dreamers: A little boy who longs to be a weight lifter; a Buddhist-leaning optician who refuses to confess his true love; a woman determined to be sad; a husband who wants to roam and the wife who wants to leave him. Our guide through the Westerwald is Luisa, a 10-year-old girl whose life is upended when her grandmother Selma dreams of an okapi. Whenever the creature appears to Selma, someone in town dies within 24 hours. The villagers are understandably worried now: “They kept clear of the good-natured cows who, out of habit, promptly materialize, leading Melville on a merry chase, though he quickly sniffs out the existence of a murderous plot far more labyrinthine than one prompted by pure ideology; “Politics is a stately dance with poisoned daggers,” he observes, as he begins to doubt even his German sidekick, Gustav Steinhauer, who is a Catholic peasant promoted far above his station,” as he jokingly puts it, Melville has risen to Detective Chief Superintendent “through tenacity, low cunning and [his] own clumping fists.” Irish by birth and suspicious by nature, he knows that the imminent royal funeral procession, as it winds through London, will become, “for terrorists...one long shooting gallery, with every prize a jack-pot.” European anarchists are Melville’s main suspects (“how I despised these fanatics”), and, sure enough, villainous zealots promptly materialize, leading Melville on a merry chase, though he quickly sniffs out the existence of a murderous plot far more labyrinthine than one prompted by pure ideology; “Politics is a stately dance with poisoned daggers,” he observes, as he begins to doubt even his German sidekick, Gustav Steinhauer, who is the kaiser’s master spy and therefore on the right side. Or is he? Both Melville and Steinhauer, along with many other characters, are based on historical personages, and their portraits—along with that of stinking, foggy London—are finely drawn. The narrative pace never flags, and even the obligatory scenes of shoot-outs, explosions, and hurtling locomotives are refreshingly vivid. The novel’s quieter moments are, however, its best, and none is better than its final twist. “Let’s just say I work with certain people who share your concerns about developments on the Continent,” an aristocratic stranger says, inviting Melville for a chat at his club. “We could use a man of your experience.” So Melville has risen to Detective Chief Superintendent “through tenacity, low cunning and [his] own clumping fists.” Irish by birth and suspicious by nature, he knows that the imminent royal funeral procession, as it winds through London, will become, “for terrorists...one long shooting gallery, with every prize a jack-pot.” European anarchists are Melville’s main suspects (“how I despised these fanatics”), and, sure enough, villainous zealots promptly materialize, leading Melville on a merry chase, though he quickly sniffs out the existence of a murderous plot far more labyrinthine than one prompted by pure ideology; “Politics is a stately dance with poisoned daggers,” he observes, as he begins to doubt even his German sidekick, Gustav Steinhauer, who is the kaiser’s master spy and therefore on the right side. Or is he? Both Melville and Steinhauer, along with many other characters, are based on historical personages, and their portraits—along with that of stinking, foggy London—are finely drawn. The narrative pace never flags, and even the obligatory scenes of shoot-outs, explosions, and hurtling locomotives are refreshingly vivid. The novel’s quieter moments are, however, its best, and none is better than its final twist. “Let’s just say I work with certain people who share your concerns about developments on the Continent,” an aristocratic stranger says, inviting Melville for a chat at his club. “We could use a man of your experience.” So the next installment has surely begun.

A briskly paced, richly atmospheric historical thriller.

THE LUMINOUS NOVEL

Levrero, Mario
Trans. by McDermott, Annie
And Other Stories (431 pp.)
$29.95 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-91350-501-1

A masterwork of meta-referentiality by the late Uruguayan writer Levrero (1940-2004).

Our narrator, Levrero himself, is a grumbler of Dostoyevskian proportions,
to say nothing of a supremely accomplished procrastinator. He longs for the woman he calls Chl, both confidante and caretaker: “Chl makes wonderful stews, but she says this one didn’t turn out very well; apparently the peas are a bit hard,” he grimly observes. Levrero’s big problem, consuming him throughout the book, is that he’s won a Guggenheim fellowship to write a novel that is overly ambitious to the point of being impossible. “It being impossible wasn’t reason enough not to do it, as I knew full well, but the prospect of attempting the impossible made me feel very lazy,” he allows. His solution is to invent projects for himself, writing little computer routines to address the manifold shortcomings of Windows 95 (the book was written way back in the day) and of Word 2000, against which he fights quixotic battles. When he’s not doing that, he thinks of other ways to procrastinate: fantasize about Chl, to be sure, but also call in an electrician to rewire his flat so that he can move his computer around, the better to play Minesweeper, FreeCell, and Golf at all hours of the day and night. Depressed and ill, our narrator finally concludes that the luminous novel of his dreams is really an autobiography, and life is getting in the way of his writing it. Levrero, a photographer, experimental writer, and humorist, clearly revels in the prospect of writing an unclassifiable novel, as this surely is, but even more clearly he delights in not meeting his obligation to Guggenheim, which, he figures, will accept his explanation that his novel has expanded beyond its original bounds. “Besides, they don’t care,” he rationalizes, “they just need me to take responsibility for the grant I received, to show the donors that they haven’t thrown their money away.”

Fans of Perec, Coover, and other experimentalists will enjoy Levrero’s epic struggle not to write this book.

**THE CAPE DOCTOR**
Levy, E.J.
Little, Brown (352 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-316-53658-5

Historical fiction from the award-winning author of *Love, in Theory* (2012). During his career as a physician with the Royal Army, James Miranda Barry served at various posts throughout the British Empire. He gained renown not only for improving the health care received by soldiers, but also for demanding better living conditions for enslaved people, prisoners, lepers, and the mentally ill. When he died in 1865, it was revealed that he had female genitalia. At the time, Barry was popularly characterized as a woman masquerading as a man or as a hermaphrodite. Contemporary activists and some historians, though, have claimed him as a transgender hero, noting that he lived his entire adult life as a man and took pains to conceal his body from scrutiny upon death. The tension between these two ways of categorizing Barry illustrates why this novel became controversial before anyone had read it, when Levy described her protagonist as “a heroine for our time, for all time.” Levy points out that her work is fiction—in a move that is likely to assuage no one, she has given her character the name Jonathan Miranda Perry—but she also insists that she “read and researched [Barry] for years,” according to *The Guardian*, and rejects the idea that we can retroactively apply concepts like transgender to historical figures, which will sound to some like claims of authority: Her Dr. Perry does not come to realize that he’s a man; instead Perry adopts a new name and puts on a boy’s clothes in order to get an education and lives as a man because he refuses to accept the limitations inflicted on women. Perry refuses a marriage proposal from his friend and benefactor—he learns Perry’s secret—and even hides the birth of their child in order to maintain his public persona and continue his work. The relationship between Perry and Lord Somerton takes up a substantial part of the novel; indeed, it often reads like a Regency romance written by a “literary” author. Levy uses language with care, and there are some beautiful scenes here—particularly those that show Perry discovering his vocation. Describing human dissection, he muses, “The body was not... profaned by examination, as if one were cross-examining God, but honored by attention. Love, all love, is attention.”

*Artfully written but more likely to attract attention for its subject than its author’s craft.*

**THE COUNCIL OF ANIMALS**
McDonell, Nick
Henry Holt (208 pp.)
$22.99 | Jul. 20, 2021
978-1-250-79903-6

Talking animals convene a meeting to decide the fate of humanity after an environmental catastrophe. A bulldog, a horse, a bear, a cat, a crow and a baboon gather on a superyacht grounded on a cliff high above the sea to vote on whether to kill and eat the remaining population of perhaps a dozen humans after an eco-calamity destroyed the animals’ habitats. Each animal representative is given an opportunity to speak for or against consuming the humans. The arguments and vote-by-vote tallies are reported by a historian who, judging by the digressions throughout the narrative, may be more interested in yetis, the nature of courage, and bat justice, among other topics, than the fate of humanity. When the vote goes against the humans, the animals split into two forces: Those who intend to devour the humans and those who hope to save them from the other animals. Humorous wordplay—“it does not behoof the historian,” “the cat and dog confused”—lightens the grim subject matter. Tension builds to a surprising and audacious climax, then flattens to a disappointing ending in which key elements are left unresolved.

*An entertaining animal story that may prove too scary for children and too childish for adults.*
Remy and Alicia’s relationship, founded on a shared fixation with Instagram-savvy hipster it girl Jen, enters strange new territory when Jen becomes a part of their off-screen lives.

Remy and Alicia are two 30-something restaurant servers trying to make it work in New York City. Their relationship is founded on their shared ennui, biting critiques of their peers, and obsessive interest in Jen, a social media savvy, globe-trotting former co-worker of Remy’s who is out of their league but never off their minds. Their obsession with Jen’s perfectly Instagrammable authenticity (gleaned from her social media feeds, which they compulsively scrutinize) oscillates between a kind of bitter hero worship and an increasingly involved sexual and lifestyle role-playing that casts Alicia as Alicia-as-Jen and Remy as a stranger, the gardener, even sometimes himself. When a chance encounter with the actual Jen at an Apple store results in an offhanded invitation to join her and her wealthy boyfriend, Horus, on a surfing weekend at Montauk, the already dotted lines between Remy’s and Alicia’s true selves and the selves they have crafted around their fantasy Jen become even more fragmented. This is particularly true for Alicia, whose self-image is significantly impacted by childhood trauma and whose social gymnastics among the pitch-perfect millennial hipster tropes she encounters at Montauk are as painful as they are funny. Back home in the city, Alicia enters a deepening spiral of Jen-obsession, but just when Morgan seems set on a deep dive into Alicia’s vulnerability to society’s constant pressure to display the most authentic version of an invented self, the plot takes a dramatic twist. The last third of the book is embroiled in the kind of gore usually reserved for less introspective literary genres, with sometimes mixed results.

An ambitious debut which captures the loneliness of the internet age in deft strokes in spite of a slightly confusing end.

God offers a condemned spirit a new lease on life.

In Japanese author Mori’s U.S. debut, a dead soul has forgotten his mortal existence and is drifting toward oblivion when an angel named Prapura appears in his path. Though the soul committed a “grave error” during his time on Earth that would normally trigger his removal from the cycle of rebirth, Prapura’s boss has randomly selected him for a do-over. For the next year, the soul will inhabit the body of Makoto Kobayashi—a 14-year-old who just died of an intentional overdose. (Prapura will provide information and assistance when needed, provided he’s in the mood.) If the soul makes sufficient progress, he’ll regain his own memories, and if he’s then able to acknowledge the enormity of his mistake, he’ll vacate Makoto and move on with a clean slate. At first, the newly resurrected Makoto falls into the same dark rut as his predecessor: His grades are terrible, he has no friends, and he regards his family with disdain. But when Makoto’s parents and older brother open up to him about their own struggles and admit how profoundly his suicide attempt affected them, his conception of the world begins to change. Naoki Prize winner Mori tackles a fraught topic with empathy, humor, and grace. The soul’s wry narration keeps the tone light while the simple yet powerful plot beautifully illustrates the impact that perspective can have on one’s mental health.

An uplifting tale about the kaleidoscopic nature of the human soul.
TO WALK ALONE IN THE CROWD
Muñoz Molina, Antonio
Trans. by Bleichmar, Guillermo
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (432 pp.)
$28.00 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-0-374-19025-5

Muñoz Molina walks through the cacophony of 21st-century life with the ghosts of Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, Edgar Allan Poe, Thomas De Quincey, and other famous men.

In this book, the winner of France’s 2020 Medici Prize for Foreign Novel, Muñoz Molina writes with a poet’s sensibility as he collages subway advertisements, commercials, overheard conversations, and news headlines with writing that feels like it’s part fiction, part memoir. The narrator, “a spy on a secret mission to record and collect it all,” wanders New York and Madrid recording the noise of city life. Muñoz Molina writes, “I switch on the voice recorder to repeat something I’ve read. I press stop but a moment later I have to switch it on again. Give blood. We buy gold. The signs along the sidewalk gradually fall into a cadence. We buy silver and gold. Give life.” Reading paragraphs composed almost entirely of these recorded words across this 400-plus-page book becomes suffocating, though the paragraphs made from news headlines replicate the 24-hour news cycle’s deluge with stunning accuracy. Relief arrives when the collage becomes an epiphany about life, capitalism, wandering, or the self; or when Muñoz Molina indulges in fascinating stories about the lives of Baudelaire, Poe, De Quincey, and more.

The second section, “Mr. Nobody,” tells the story of a man wandering New York City who “has no name, at present, no face, and no biography” and feels as though “he is one more among the city’s invisible denizens.” “Mr. Nobody” is interwoven with stories about the same famous men but feels less claustrophobic because here Muñoz Molina focuses more on describing the city and its people, which enriches the experience of wandering.

While this book is a flâneur’s catalog of walking among the noise of the modern world, it often feels like a marathon.

WE WANT WHAT WE WANT
Stories
Ohlin, Alix
Knopf (256 pp.)
$25.95 | Jul. 27, 2021
978-0-525-65463-6

Stories about people waiting for their lives to change.

The characters in Ohlin’s latest collection seem detached, as if they’re watching their own lives—they’re weary but not unamused. In “Money, Geography, Youth,” a young woman returns to LA after volunteering in Ghana and discovers that her father has gotten engaged to her best friend. “I know, it’s so weird,” her friend says. In “The Brooks Brothers Guru,” a young man joins what may or may not be a cult. He leaves a somewhat cryptic message on his Facebook and then signs off. His cousin goes to look for him, but when she finds him living in a seemingly idyllic old house, discussing literature and philosophy with the other members, she considers staying herself. In “The Point of No Return,” one of the finest stories in this very fine collection, a woman’s life seems to pass her by. “Sometimes she saw her life as a tender thing that was separate from herself,” Ohlin writes, “a tiny animal she had happened upon by chance one day and decided to raise.” Ohlin’s stories have a quiet elegance to them and a restraint, although they’re filled, too, with grief and with loss: In many of the stories, a mother or a daughter has gone away, leaving her family behind without explanation. Some of the stories are told in the first person and some in the third, but, either way, there is a kind of sameness that stretches across the book as a whole. The sameness has less to do with what happens (or doesn’t happen) and more to do with how the characters sound—they all seem to have the same voice. Still, Ohlin handles them with such nuance that, in the end, the book is a pleasure to behold.

A wry and moving collection that supplies no easy, unearned endings.

THE BACHELOR
Palmer, Andrew
Hogarth/Crown (288 pp.)
$23.49 | Jul. 20, 2021
978-0-593-23089-3

Palmer’s ruminative first novel mixes cultural analysis with the affecting story of a young man’s slow reengagement with his life.

The unnamed 29-year-old narrator has returned to his hometown, Des Moines, after the breakup of a long-term relationship. His first novel has been published, and he has abandoned the draft of his second. While staying at his mother’s friend’s house, he becomes enthralled with the reality TV show The Bachelor and with the life and work of the poet John Berryman. As he reflects on art,
love, reality, and relationships, the narrator gradually rejoins the world through platonic and romantic relationships with a series of women, including an ex-turneder-friend, the house’s sexually liberated owner, a would-be poet, and a bookish recent graduate. When circumstances bring him to a housesitting job at a mountaintop California mansion, the protagonist discovers a tentative way forward from his self-created impasse. Some readers may question the narrator’s conceit of himself as an analogue to television’s Bachelor; are these many women solely present for the male hero’s enlightenment? Thankfully, Palmer’s female characters are interesting of their own accord, not merely in relationship to the young man telling the story; and instead of a bed-hopping serial conqueror, the hero, blocked, confused, and frustrated, can be a sad sack. Interspersed with the main narrative are reflections on love, vocation, performance, illusion, and reality occasioned by the high art of John Berryman and the mass culture of reality television. While these analyses may deter plot-oriented readers, these intriguing, amusing, provocative, and insightful passages contribute to the book’s success as a novel equally concerned with the heart and the mind.

A quietly accomplished and unusually constructed novel that marks the debut of a significant talent.

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**UNTHINKABLE**

*Parks, Brad*

Thomas & Mercer (352 pp.)

$24.95 | Jul. 27, 2021

978-1-5420-2495-2

Would you kill your spouse if that were the only way to prevent a billion other deaths?

For lawyer-turned-househusband Nate Lovejoy, this suddenly is no idle question. According to Lorton Rogers, the man who’s kidnapped him, Vanslow DeGange, founder of the shadowy Praesidium, can see the future, and he can see that the lawsuit Jenny Welker’s filing on behalf of 280 clients of Virginia’s Commonwealth Power and Light alleging that its coal-fired Shockoe Generation Plant produced record amounts of lung cancer and COPD will have unintended consequences: Other energy companies that get sued will bring their plants into compliance by using technology that will unintentionally but catastrophically accelerate global warming. Nate won’t be able to talk Jenny out of pressing the suit; she’ll have to die to save all those other lives. Although Nate’s nowhere near ready to pull the trigger once he’s released from captivity, Parks stands ready to unleash a furious barrage of complications that will force his hand. Nate will hear Rogers threaten the couple’s two small children. His attempts to gather more information about the Praesidium will backfire spectacularly. He’ll realize that Rogers is tracking his every move. He’ll press DeGange to make other predictions that come startlingly true. He’ll learn that he’s been reported to the police for domestic violence. He’ll get evidence that Jenny is having an affair. All the while, the cabal responsible for killing John Kennedy and Martin Luther King for the greater good of the greater number will tighten its grip on him until...but that would be telling.

A textbook one-sitting read whose fiendishly inventive details only intensify its remorseless momentum.

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**A PLACE LIKE HOME**

*Pilcher, Rosamunde*

St. Martin’s (304 pp.)

$27.99 | Jul. 27, 2021

978-1-2502-7495-3

A delightful collection of short stories that explore the myriad facets of falling in and out of love.

People are complicated. They have moods and frustrations and make impromptu decisions that have long-lasting repercussions. Love—falling in love, being in love, trying to rediscover love—can be even more wildly complex because it involves two people coming together. In this collection of 15 short stories, published together for the first time, Pilcher (1924-2019) has done something remarkable. Despite the brevity of the tales and the thematic constants (American-British pairings; living in London; monthlong trips; weekends in the country; wild and cultivated gardens; jobs as fashion editors, nurses, and lawyers; unexpected accidents; chance encounters; and a plethora of family members and siblings and children and loving mothers and, sometimes, women who have no one at all), each story stands alone, unique and memorable, with its own story of love found. Many stories cut off at their apexes—a kiss, a walk through an orchard, a walk up the aisle, the realization of joy and love and home found within another soul. These stories are very much products of the times in which they were written, however—many in the 1970s and ‘80s—and some notes clang instead of sing: the 30-year-old man dumping his girlfriend to rush to the side of an 18-year-old woman he’d secretly kissed and who’s now home alone while her mother is gravely injured, and calling it off; the 30-year-old man dumping his girlfriend to rush to the side of an 18-year-old woman he’d secretly kissed and who’s now home alone while her mother is gravely injured, and calling it off; the focus on being thin, looking too thin, or becoming fat after eating a few solid meals.

This collection about love offers snippets of joy, small and large, and the tart balances the sweet to just the right degree.

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**PREPARE HER**

*Plunkett, Genevieve*

Catapult (256 pp.)

$16.95 paper | Jul. 13, 2021

978-1-64622-040-3

Meditative short stories about the befuddling domestic lives of women and girls in northern New England.

The stories in this debut collection are full of horses. Certainly, horses are
common in the landscapes of rural Vermont, where these tales are usually set, but they are absolutely everywhere here, alongside narrators whose demanding young children and difficult marriages make their daily lives gray and exhausting. Often the horses are symbols of comfort: In “Farmer, Angel,” a young trail guide’s horse acts as a buffer between her and a customer with ill intent. In “Arla Had Horses,” a schoolgirl tries to navigate an odd friendship with her Jehovah’s Witness classmate by helping her brush the filthy horses the girl owns. Elsewhere, horses remember their wildness. In the opening story, “Something for a Young Woman,” a young mother, Allison, and her son are thrown from a horse belonging to Allison’s mother-in-law; an event that is tangled up with both what is to come for Allison (leaving her patient, boring husband) and her past (an uncategorizable relationship with her former boss, an antiques shop owner). It is this unpredictability, both human and animal, that is magnified in one of Plunkett’s most memorable stories, “Rodeo,” in which another young mother takes her toddler to the rodeo as an afternoon escape from her husband, who is deteriorating into mental illness, only to watch a horse become fatally injured during the event. Although the narrators blend together as variations on a single theme, Plunkett’s strength is in the patience and precision of her interior and exterior landscapes. Like horses, too, these stories are full of beauty and elegance but also inscrutability, with Plunkett content to braid scenes and images together and let the mystery of their relationships abide.

Wistful tales rendered with delicate writing and powerful perception.

RIDGELINE

Punke, Michael

Henry Holt (384 pp.)

$27.99 | Jun. 1, 2021

978-1-250-31046-0

A fictional portrait of a lesser-known battle in American history.

A massacre of U.S. Army soldiers by Native Americans that foreshadowed the more famous one at the Little Big Horn River a decade later is the subject of this richly detailed but fast-paced novel. The Fetterman Fight on Dec. 21, 1866, resulted in the deaths of 81 Army combatants and helped bring a temporary halt to the expansion of a chain of fortifications in present-day Wyoming. As Punke meticulously describes it, the slaughter resulted from careful planning by an alliance of Native tribes and was executed by bands of skilled warriors that included the famed Lakota leader Crazy Horse, who emerged into prominence at this time. On the Army side, Punke seamlessly shifts perspectives among a cadre of officers and enlisted men, including Col. Henry Carrington, commanding officer at Fort Phil Kearny, and the charismatic but reckless cavalry officer Lt. George Washington Grummond, portrayed as largely responsible for the outcome. Imagined diary entries of Grummond’s wife, Frances, provide valuable insight and color. The novel effectively inhabits the mind of Crazy Horse, a sober, determined fighter who understands that he “must fight not for his own aggrandizement or glory, but only for the betterment of his people.” Punke patiently escalates the tension between the opposing sides, as raids on the fort’s cattle herd and skirmishes with crews dispatched to fell trees for the wood supply threaten its survival while the tribes recognize the need to attempt a fatal blow before the onset of winter. The expansive, vivid account of the climactic battle, in which Crazy Horse acts as a decoy to lure the Army forces into a deadly trap, brings the novel to a pulsating climax.

A nuanced story of conflict between Native people and Whites on the 19th-century American frontier.

SHADOW TARGET

Ricciardi, David

Berkeley (336 pp.)

$27.00 | Jun. 15, 2021

978-1-984804-69-3

CIA hero Jake Keller gets off to a rough start in his fourth fast-moving adventure.

Keller is the only survivor of a mountainside plane crash in the French Alps and barely evades Russian bad guys searching the wreckage of what they hope looks like an accident. But he knows it was no such thing, as someone has been killing off CIA paramilitary officers like him. Now they specifically want to kill Keller, their main obstacle in killing the president when he visits London—which president they mean eventually becomes clear. Keller is the consummate good guy, “a lethal threat to any and all who wished to harm America.” At only 30 years old, he’s already “died” once under the name Zac Miller and is the best at what he does—a “Boy Scout” who “gets his claws into something [and] doesn’t let go,” as one Russian gripes to another. Indeed, he puts a guy’s eye out with his thumb, but it was necessary under the circumstances. But he’s no mindless killing machine—a colleague tells him, “Your compassion is what makes you special.” He’s also blessed with blind luck stretching all the way back to Warning Light (2018). But will he be lucky in love? A CIA woman has the hots for him while he wants to restart his love life with Geneviève, who’s pissed that he hasn’t stayed in touch with her. Of course, he’s been officially dead for two years—let’s see if that excuse flies. Meanwhile, the enemy has a mole in the CIA. And for once, Keller must rely on teamwork to quash the assassination plot. That may even include “working with the woman he loved.” How sweet. Really, he’s a likable character in a profession where people “dance on the razor’s edge for a living.”

Ricciardi’s hero is a killer thriller fans will root for.
“A fertile mind provides many smiles in this entertaining collection—and more than a few out-loud laughs.”

**NEW TEETH**

*Stories*

Rich, Simon

Little, Brown (240 pp.)

$27.00 | Jul. 27, 2021

978-0-316-53668-4

Many of these 11 stories from gifted humorist Rich explore the joys and trials of parenthood.

Two pirates are all at sea when they discover a stowaway little girl and must add a bit of niceness to their nastiness. A screenwriter reluctantly abandons work to be the Beast in his daughter’s obsession with the Disney-fied fairy tale, but he realizes something about the film that helps transform him into a less-beastly father. When simian superhero Clobbo learns that Empire City no longer needs him, he discovers a new role entertaining his granddaughter with bubble wrap on a Facetime call. A young woman raised by wolves returns to human society at 18 and has a normal life, only interacting with the wolves when they visit for Thanksgiving, and eventually she learns to accept their differences. A story about a medieval king’s not very bright son hiding among peasants during a revolution was adapted for Rich’s TV series, “Miracle Workers.” In his sixth collection of stories, and eighth work of fiction since 2007, Rich presents parody, absurdity, observational wit, the sudden shift in a familiar premise, and a surprising touch of sweetness and charm throughout. Fans won’t find anything quite like Rich’s earlier “Unprotected,” with the point of view of an unused condom in a young man’s wallet, or the macabre twist in “The Tribal Rite of the Strombergs,” when a Scrabble game ends in ritual human sacrifice. A couple of pieces are even a bit clunky. But there is much to smile at here, and “The Big Nap” (nodding to Chandler), which uses noir style for a toddler detective on the trail of his baby sister’s lost unicorn, Moomoo, is so consistently funny, so exceptional in its imaginative use of parody as to be near genius.

*A fertile mind provides many smiles in this entertaining collection—and more than a few out-loud laughs.*

**THE WONDER TEST**

Richmond, Michelle

Atlantic Monthly (448 pp.)

$26.00 | Jul. 6, 2021

978-0-8021-5850-5

International spydom meets cutthroat suburban elitism.

After the sudden death of her husband, FBI agent Lina Connerly temporarily moves with her teenage son across the country to Northern California.

Her father has also died recently, and she figures she can deal with his house while Rory attends the local public school, giving them both a change of scenery after having lost Fred. The school has all the markers of affluent suburban America: overly involved parents, a ridiculous endowment, and the Wonder Test, an extreme standardized test taken by all the schools in Silicon Valley. Studying such esoteric categories as “Ethicalities” and “Future Functionalities,” students don’t attend any real classes but instead spend all of their time taking seminars that will prepare them for the test. Lina isn’t overly concerned about the school’s eccentricities, but when she hears that three students have gone missing in past years only to reappear a week later, underfed and with their heads shaved, her spider sense begins to tingle. Having spent her FBI career in foreign counterintelligence, she can’t resist a mystery. Between pinging phones, following suspects, and staging interrogations, Lina eventually approaches the truth—and danger. When Rory’s girlfriend disappears on the eve of the Wonder Test, Lina and Rory must find her. Appealingly, all of this happens as Lina navigates her own grief, comes to terms with the way she has allowed her job to consume her, and faces the fact that Rory shares her interest in intrigue. The overlay of international spycraft on suburban California, whose shiny facade conceals the most heinous of sins and vanities, is surprisingly effective. Richmond also has fun by including a question from the Wonder Test at the beginning of each chapter, emphasizing the ridiculously competitive world of affluent high schools.

*The plot is sound, the action exciting, and the characters resoundingly human.*

**MEADOWLARK**

A Coming-of-Age Crime Story

Ruth, Greg & Hawke, Ethan

Illus. by Ruth, Greg

Grand Central Publishing (256 pp.)

$26.00 | Jul. 20, 2021

978-1-5387-1457-7

For this coming-of-age neo noir about a troubled boy and his troubled dad, illustrator and author Ruth reteams with his *Indeb* (2016) collaborator, actor/writer/director Hawke.

Teenage troublemaker Coop has been expelled from school, hates his mom's dorky boyfriend, and wishes he could just live with his dad, Jack, a brave and charming (if frequently late) corrections officer with a past as a boxer. But when Jack’s fraught relationship with Coop’s mom forces an impromptu bring-your-son-to-work day at the local prison, a series of events unfold that upend Coop’s understanding of his father and force him to grow up quickly. The story is swift and breezy, relying on archetypes (tough but maternal boss, lunatic killer inmates, exasperated woman who still cares about her screw-up ex-husband) and pattering dialogue (“Buck will never be too dumb to forget how smart you think you are, Jack”) to fill in characters painted mostly in broad strokes. Coop is unhappy and self-sabotaging but without clear motivation other than the strained relationship with his father. We get a peek into Coop’s head through dreams and nature-inspired reveries, and Ruth’s exceptional art imbues those moments with a power beyond words. But with the intensity of Coop’s experience by the end, a bit more
exploration of his interior landscape would’ve helped the brutally life-changing events of the story resonate beyond the raw power of blood spatter. The near photorealism and energy of Ruth’s linework are absolutely gorgeous, and the striking similarity between Jack’s physical appearance and that of co-writer Hawke is a fun nod to the actor and co-author. But the story’s reliance on Hollywood tropes keeps the tale from full poignancy.

Rich art in need of a richer story.

CHINA ROOM
Sabota, Sunjeev
Viking (256 pp.)
$27.00 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-0-593-29814-5

Two teenagers come of age in India’s Punjab region, one in 1929 and one in 1999.

Although 15-year-old Mehar Kaur is a newlywed, she isn’t sure who her husband is: She and her sisters-in-law, Gurleen and Harbans, spend most of their time doing chores or cloistered in a small room known as the china room, where they eat and sleep. The three brothers in the family had been married to the three women in a single ceremony, and their domineering mother, Mai, makes sure to keep Mehar, Gurleen, and Harbans in the dark. Each woman sometimes meets her husband at night in a “windowless chamber,” but their identities remain a mystery. Mehar can’t help wanting to find out the identity of her husband, and her curiosity winds up having disastrous consequences. Meanwhile, decades later, Mehar’s great-grandson travels to India from England before his first year at university to visit family and detox from his addiction to heroin. He spends the summer living in and cleaning up the house where Mehar once lived, nursing a crush on an unconventional older woman who befriends him, and hearing incomplete stories about Mehar from locals who remember her as a legendary figure more than a real person. Sahota, who was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for The Year of the Runaways (2015), demonstrates his command through this novel’s smooth, evocative language. His expert prose never resorts to pyrotechnics but conveys a great deal through deft description: The three young brothers have “unconvincing shoulders”; Mehar’s husband speaks to her “not unkindly, but with the contingent kindness of a husband who knows he will be obeyed.” But the novel’s characters and plots remain frustratingly underdeveloped. By including both storylines in this short novel, Sahota limits his ability to deeply explore either, and the result feels like a missed opportunity.

A beautifully written but narratively limited family saga.

THE EAGLE’S CLAW
Shaara, Jeff
Ballantine (352 pp.)
$18.64 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-525-61944-4

Deadly enemies clash in the Pacific in this dramatic novel about the Battle of Midway Island.

Japan has conquered much of Asia, and after striking Pearl Harbor, Adm. Yamamoto worries that the emperor’s forces suffer from Victory Disease, the idea that they will win every battle. He’d never thought attacking American soil was such a good idea in the first place—as shown in Shaara’s last book, To Wake the Giant (2020)—and now he must capture Midway Island and the airstrips that American pilots would use to attack Japan. And he must destroy the aircraft carriers that bring the fighters and bombers from the U.S. mainland. Yamamoto is an insightful man who knows “the airplane will rule this war” and “aircraft carriers are the future.” If he can lure the enemy ships into a trap, his superior forces can sink them all. Meanwhile, the U.S. Navy has men like Cmdr. Rochefort, a codebreaker whose team in the top-secret Dungeon deciphers enemy intentions. The story shows both sides’ viewpoints as men sail to their destinies—there are no spoilers to be had, as it’s slightly fictionalized history made highly readable. The narration carries a heavier load than the dialogue, yet Shaara deftly digs into the minds of the major players. Yamamoto, who has never failed at anything, “violates one of the tenets of warfare—he divides his forces.” Adm. Nagumo takes too long preparing an attack and so loses three carriers. With no ships to land on, the Zeros have “nothing left but to fly into the sea.” Adm. Yamaguchi commands his crew to abandon the burning Hiryu while he declares, “I shall remain with my ship.” Shaara writes a well-researched and evenhanded portrayal of the event that changed the direction of the Pacific War.

Compelling wartime excitement that’s much more history than fiction.

THE THIRD MRS. GALWAY
Sinnott, Deirdre
Kaylie Jones/Akashic (336 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-61775-842-3

When an abolitionist convention comes to Utica, New York, in 1835, mayhem both public and private ensues.

In this eloquent debut, a diverse cast of characters embodies the political, class, and racial upheavals of its time and milieu, and does it all in living local color. Helen, an orphan raised in a genteel finishing school for young ladies, is wed in a quasi-arranged marriage to Galway, a prosperous older widower. Her naïveté regarding the issues of the day—in school she was
taught that Southern masters treated their slaves like family—is tested when Ilmari and her son, Joe, escapees from a Virginia plantation, turn up in Galway’s shed. Helen’s domicile is further disrupted when Galway breaks his leg in a drunken fall, ushering quack doctor McCoike into their midst, as lecherous as he is incompetent. Meanwhile, Pryce, a young man unsure of his career path, pays more welcome attention to Helen. The streets of Utica come alive, especially as observed by minor characters—Owen Sylvanus, a conductor on the Underground Railroad, Alvan Stewart, a crusading lawyer leading the abolitionists, and Horace Wilberforce, a fishmonger and fixer. Utica’s section of the Erie Canal, where freighters are hauled by mules along a towpath, is vividly evoked. Slave catchers have arrived, not only menacing Ilmari and Joe, but rallying the mob against the abolitionists. Galway himself opposes abolition—instead, he advocates sending American Blacks to colonize Liberia. His servant, Maggie, who was formerly enslaved by his family, is a force to be reckoned with. Since Helen is the second Mrs. Galway, the title provides a clue to explosive family secrets. The text treads very carefully when treating the subject of slavery, and, occasionally, unavoidable echoes of today’s world lead to didactic moments that feel anachronistic. Often, when too many characters crowd into a scene, the logistics can verge on unintentional farce. But despite Sinnott’s extensive research into her hometown and its role in abolition, the pace is never slowed by excessive detail.

A localized but no less powerful look at the prologue to Emancipation.

Wayward
Spitto, Dana
Knopf (288 pp.)
$26.95 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-593-31873-7

A woman pursuing a midlife reset finds her received notions about domesticity and justice unraveling.

In her previous smart, spiky novels, Spitto explored the tenuous bonds between brothers and sisters (Stone Arabia, 2011) and female friends (Innocents and Others, 2016). Here the themes are motherhood and marriage, as Sam, a 50-something woman, attempts to reboot her life after Trump’s election. The protest groups she joins on Facebook are contentious (one is called “Hardcore Hags, Harridans, and Harpies”), which she at first finds inspirational. On an impulse, she leaves her husband and buys a dilapidated historic house in Syracuse. But she still needs her husband’s financial support (she works part time in the historic home of a “problematic” 19th-century feminist), and the infighting among her activist friends soon becomes confounding. (She’s strong-armed into signing a petition censuring one woman for unexplained transgressions.) Lost in the shuffle is Sam’s ailing mother as well as Ally, her 16-year-old daughter, who’s an academic high achiever seduced by her 29-year-old mentor in an entrepreneurship program. Sam processes all this in irrational, woman-on-the-brink ways (keying a truck, a disastrous turn at a stand-up open mic) that are typical in domestic-crisis novels. But Spitto’s characterization of Sam is more complicated and slippery as she begins to recognize that the entrapment she feels is as much a function of broader forces she’s helpless to control; shifting between Sam’s and Ally’s perspectives, Spitto asks how much leeway a mother has in a society in which patriarchal attitudes carry so much weight. A violent act at the tail end of the novel both clarifies and complicates the predicament, and Spitto artfully contextualizes Sam’s existential crisis as part of her hometown’s history. As Sam asks, for herself, and everybody: “What happened to us? When did progress become so ugly?”

An engrossing, interior mother-daughter story that expands into a sharp social commentary.

Bolla
Statovci, Rajtim
Trans. by Hackston, David
Pantheon (240 pp.)
$25.95 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-5247-4920-0

Two men fall for each other in the wrong place at the wrong time in this bleak tale of love and war.

The third novel by the Kosovo-born Finnish novelist Statovci is structured around the alternating narratives of Arsim, a closeted gay man and aspiring Albanian writer, and Miloš, a medical student. Arsim is in emotional retreat twice over, entering a loveless marriage to hide his homosexuality and treading carefully in Pristina, Kosovo, where he’s an “Albanian in a world run by Serbs.” His furtive relationship with Miloš is exhilarating but short-lived: It’s 1995, and the Bosnian War soon sends Miloš to the front and Arsim to exile in an unnamed city. As the story follows the two into the 21st century, each has suffered badly, and an attempt at reconnection only reveals the depth of the damage. Miloš’ chapters are briefer and more impressionistic, suffused with horrific memories of war’s carnage. (“I have held a friend’s heart in the palm of my hand.”) Arsim’s chapters are more straightforward, but though his PTSD is less acute, he’s still suffused with fear, repression, and anger. He is routinely abusive toward his wife, Ajshe, and their children and makes a series of poor decisions that further sabotage his well-being. Statovci lets little sunlight into the narrative, the better to emphasize just how powerful homophobia and self-loathing can be, and Arsim is deeply unlikable; “may the Devil eat you,” Ajshe spits at him, and he deserves that world-class insult. But he comes undone in engaging and complicated ways. Indeed, he’s so well drawn that Miloš’s portion of the narrative, however graceful, feels disproportionately thin. From either perspective, though, the mood is profoundly sorrowful.

An unflinching consideration of the long aftereffects of an affair cut short.
THE DEVIL MAY DANCE

Tapper, Jake
Little, Brown (316 pp.)
$28.00 | May 11, 2021
978-0-316-53023-1

In 1962, Congressman Charlie Marder is sent to Hollywood to spy on Frank Sinatra and find out what special favor mobster Sam Giancana, a buddy of the singer’s, wants from him.

Charlie, a moderate New York Republican, is forced into taking on the assignment. Under the authority of Attorney General Robert Kennedy (who makes a brief appearance), the feds have imprisoned Charlie’s ailing father, power broker Winston Marder, on charges of consorting with criminals. They won’t release him until Charlie gets the goods on Giancana.

The congressman has fun out West posing as a consultant to The Manchurian Candidate, less fun when he and his sleuthing wife, Margaret, find a dead body in the trunk of their rented car. What’s this secret worth killing for? Successful mysteries have been built on weaker premises, but Tapper does little in the way of plot construction. Stuffed with gossipy tidbits that have long withered on the vine and useless trivia (do we really need Janet Leigh explaining the technical achievement of Psycho?), this sequel to The Hellfire Club (2018) never gains steam. Sinatra is a cardboard figure who rants a lot, especially after his genitalia and his life. Even better, Scott quickly identifies his captor as BHS science teacher Randall Thompson. But as attorney Robert Kavin, whose son, Gabe, was the Bloody Heart Killer’s sixth victim, tells Gwen shortly after he picks her up at a bar and follows her home to bed, he’s so far from convinced that Thompson is the man who killed his son that he offers to defend him pro bono and asks Gwen to join his team as a consultant who can assemble a psychological profile.

Misfortunes and strokes of luck recur within a family over the course of generations, and sometimes, the universe connives to make the connecting thread hard to follow.

Drawing on themes from children’s literature, Shakespeare, and T.S. Eliot, Van Booy traces the circular paths through time followed by one family in a series of moody—probably black-and-white—snapshots. As an uneducated young teen in impoverished 1930s rural Kentucky, Carol lives a life of privation and meanness with her widowed father. Escape of a sort comes when she is wagered away to her father’s poker buddy. But harm continues to accrue to Carol in countless brutal ways until her rescue by a trio of “outsiders.” Van Booy’s often poetic yet spare recounting of the events set in motion after Carol’s relinquishment covers the course of three generations in Carol’s family with nods to contemporary trends as well as an acknowledgement of the inevitability of the seasons of a lifetime. Cycles of racism, violence, and misogyny are disrupted by the grace-filled actions of friends, relatives, and strangers all making their ways through the same inhospitable environment. In the words of one of Carol’s unlikely saviors, everyone reaches a crossroads in life, where they can choose to act like insomniacs just this once.

A vertiginous tale of serial kidnapping and murder that begins with a miracle and then heads sharply downhill.

There’s a reason Gwen Moore is known as the Doc of Death. The patients in her psychiatric practice have angry, volatile, or violent histories; they’re people who are afraid they’re going to hurt somebody. On the morning she fails to respond to messages from pharmacist John Abbott, who’s expressed mounting hostility toward his wife, Brooke, the couple are both found dead in their home, she stricken by a heart attack, he stabbed in the stomach. So Gwen, overwhelmed with guilt, is in no mood to celebrate the miraculous escape of Beverly High School senior Scott Harden, the seventh victim the Bloody Heart Killer has kidnapped and imprisoned and the only one to survive with his genitalia and his life. Even better, Scott quickly identifies his captor as BHS science teacher Randall Thompson. But as attorney Robert Kavin, whose son, Gabe, was the Bloody Heart Killer’s sixth victim, tells Gwen shortly after he picks her up at a bar and follows her home to bed, he’s so far from convinced that Thompson is the man who killed his son that he offers to defend him pro bono and asks Gwen to join his team as a consultant who can assemble a psychological profile.

Great bedtime reading for insomniacs and people willing to act like insomniacs just this once.

NIGHT CAME WITH MANY STARS

Van Booy, Simon
Godine (248 pp.)
$19.82 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-56792-703-0

Misfortunes and strokes of luck recur within a family over the course of generations, and sometimes, the universe connives to make the connecting thread hard to follow.

Drawing on themes from children’s literature, Shakespeare, and T.S. Eliot, Van Booy traces the circular paths through time followed by one family in a series of moody—probably black-and-white—snapshots. As an uneducated young teen in impoverished 1930s rural Kentucky, Carol lives a life of privation and meanness with her widowed father. Escape of a sort comes when she is wagered away to her father’s poker buddy. But harm continues to accrue to Carol in countless brutal ways until her rescue by a trio of “outsiders.” Van Booy’s often poetic yet spare recounting of the events set in motion after Carol’s relinquishment covers the course of three generations in Carol’s family with nods to contemporary trends as well as an acknowledgement of the inevitability of the seasons of a lifetime. Cycles of racism, violence, and misogyny are disrupted by the grace-filled actions of friends, relatives, and strangers all making their ways through the same inhospitable environment. In the words of one of Carol’s unlikely saviors, everyone reaches a crossroads in life, where they can choose to take another way. The same sage observes that what you give in the world will be returned and what you take will be returned; these lessons, shared with Carol on a miserable ride to
redemption, inform just about every action and interaction between and among the myriad characters Van Booy sets loose on the slowly revolving stage of rural, karmic destiny.

This well-crafted and often serendipitous saga recognizes that family cannot be escaped but can be expanded.

**BATH HAUS**

Vernon, P.J.
Doubleday (320 pp.)
$26.95 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-385-54673-7

One night of infidelity sets this thriller in motion.

While his partner, Nathan, is away at a medical conference, Oliver goes in search of some commitment-free sex. His fantasy takes a terrifying turn when the stranger he hooks up with tries to murder him. Oliver escapes with his life, but the repercussions of this encounter follow him home. When he tries to explain away the bruises encircling his neck by telling Nathan he was mugged, he’s telling lies that will necessitate more lies. What makes the book compelling is the way author Vernon uses a deranged killer as a catalyst for revealing the hidden dimensions of the main characters’ inner lives. Oliver was in Indiana, where Nathan was doing his residency; when they met at the trauma center of the South Bend hospital. The fact that Nathan is older, more accomplished, and exponentially wealthier means that Oliver has access to a lifestyle he’d never imagined. It also means there is a huge power imbalance in their relationship, and it’s ultimately this dynamic that drives the plot—and it’s the plot that makes the book compelling is the way author Vernon uses a deranged killer as a catalyst for revealing the hidden dimensions of the main characters’ inner lives. Oliver was in Indiana, where Nathan was doing his residency; when they met at the trauma center of the South Bend hospital. The fact that Nathan is older, more accomplished, and exponentially wealthier means that Oliver has access to a lifestyle he’d never imagined. It also means there is a huge power imbalance in their relationship, and it’s ultimately this dynamic that drives the plot—and it’s the plot that makes the shlocky style endurable. “My stomach twists like a wet rag, wringing damp fear from itself” is unfortunate, but at least it makes a kind of sense. “The voices grow sharper, like bedazzled kitchen knives,” however, is more baffling than revealing, and it’s hard to know what to make of “martinis screaming for help through olive eyes” even in context. But it’s Vernon’s penchant for piling metaphor on top of metaphor that is most trying: “I center myself and clear my mind because the game is about to change. A snap of my fingers, and the stage will tilt in a new direction. Listing like the deck of a foundering ship, and I will not drown.” It’s also noteworthy that, while chapters alternate between Oliver’s and Nathan’s perspectives, they have indistinguishable voices.

A gripping story rendered in overwrought prose.

**THE SNAKE PIT**

Ward, Mary Jane
Library of America (360 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-59853-680-5

One of the first novels about the American mental health system turns out to be among the freshest, and most darkly funny, examples of a genre that is often grimly earnest if well-meaning.

Published by the Library of America to honor its 75th anniversary, Ward’s novel was a bestseller, the basis of a popular movie, and the impetus behind change to state mental institutions. The semiautobiographical novel is told from the constantly changing and unreliable point of view of sardonic novelist Virginia Cunningham, who, as the story opens, is puzzled to discover herself in what seems at first to be a public park but which she gradually identifies as a mental institution, in which she has been confined for an indeterminate amount of time. Virginia, whose primary tie to the outside world is her faithful husband, Robert, and who is beset by lapses in her memory, bounces around through the wards of Juniper Hill, a severely understaffed state institution whose motto, she believes, is “Keep Them Quiet.” For a while, she makes it up to Ward One, the closest to release. Other times, she comes to consciousness in wards where she is being drugged, treated with ice baths, or given shock treatment. She alludes to sessions with a psychoanalyst, but her main focus is on the nurses and patients with whom she interacts and on her own desperate attempts to make sense of her situation, or to fake her way out of it. Virginia, deep in confusion and occasionally violent, is also sharply observant, noting that the medication given to the patients makes them smell like “badly tended lions” and observing that the eyes of one fearsome nurse “had a look you do not mind seeing in the eyes of your cat.” The novel, admirably, doesn’t oversimplify Virginia’s mental state or provide an explanation for it but reveals it in all its complexity.

An uncompromising look inside a troubled mind and a troubled institution.

**THE BOOK OF ACCIDENTS**

Wendig, Chuck
Del Rey (544 pp.)
$28.99 | Jul. 20, 2021
978-0-399-18213-6

A family that’s banished itself to the woods of rural Pennsylvania finds more than they bargained for when supernaturally forces decide they would make quite a snack.

Prolific and delightfully profane, Wendig pulled off a good trick last time with his sprawling, inventive, and prescient apocalypse chronicle, Wanderers (2019). This is another doorstopper, but here he returns to macabre horror

A gripping story rendered in overwrought prose.
At Nate's new job as a Fish and Game officer, his partner, Axel In the present day, former Philly cop Nate Graves is stewing over the death of his abusive father, who's left him a home in the woods. Maddie, Nate's artist wife, thinks it's perfect for her newfound predilection for chainsaw sculpture. Oliver gets the worst of it, finding himself caught between a couple of vicious bullies and a newfound frenemy, Jake, who quickly emerges as someone—or something—far darker than he appears. The characters are eccentric and likable even if their plight isn't quite unpredictable, and the book will be catnip to horror fans, complete with meddling kids, doppelgangers, dimensional fissures, demons, and ghosts; it's a prototypical edge-of-your-seat plunge into real terror.

A grade-A, weirdly comforting, and familiar stew of domestic drama, slasher horror, and primeval evil.

**MYSTERY**

**ANTIQUES CARRY ON**

*Allan, Barbara*

Severn House (208 pp.)

$28.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-7278-9081-8

An Iowa mother and daughter who sell antiques and solve mysteries fly off to England and into another case of murder. Vivian Borne has relinquished her job as sheriff but not her right, at least in her own eyes, to investigate crime. Her long-suffering daughter, Brandy, often has a different take on crime-solving. So does Brandy's fiancé, Tony, the police chief in Serenity, Iowa. On a trip to England to meet the new publisher of their true-crime books, they visit a Charing Cross Road antiques shop to do a favor for fellow Serenity dealer Skylar James, who sold a necklace to Mr. Wescott, the owner. Since neither party wanted to pay shipping and duty, Vivian bought the necklace from Skylar and agreed to bring it to Wescott and sell it to him for the same price. At the last minute, though, Vivian decides to keep the necklace since she's been wearing it and raking in the compliments. Regardless, she agrees to come back to pick up a collectible Agatha Christie novel Wescott wants to send to Skylar as a gift. On their second trip to Wescott's, Vivian and Brandy find the door open and the dealer stabbed with a letter opener Brandy had handled earlier, earning them a trip to jail. Set free, they return home determined to investigate Skylar's involvement as well as the accidental death of a woman whose will left her daughter and son-in-law rich. In their typical fashion, they stumble from clue to clue, raising Tony's blood pressure, and discover another murder that plunges them into a dangerous situation from which Brandy's dog, Sushi, must rescue them.

Although there's a sameness to Allan's long string of comic mysteries, they always entertain.

**AUNTIE POLDI AND THE LOST MADONNA**

*Giordano, Mario*

Mariner/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (352 pp.)

$15.99 paper | May 18, 2021
978-0-358-44627-9

Poldi proves again that although killing herself may not be the best idea, seaside Sicily is a great place to not do it. Auntie Poldi's plan to drink herself to death in sight of the sea having been foiled multiple times by her involvement in a series of juicy murder investigations, her nameless nephew thinks it may be safe to go off to Paris to join Valérie, the object of his sometimes-requited affections. When he returns in a funk because his would-be beloved is now back with her photographer ex-boyfriend, he finds everything topsy-turvy in Poldi's home in the Via Baroneessa. Vito Montana, the virile policeman who occupies Poldi's ever lustful thoughts, is nowhere to be found. Instead, a sitar player named Ravi wanders the hallways mixing cleansing smoothies, and Poldi herself seems caught on the great wheel of karma. A tape surfaces that shows an Italian woman with Poldi's face cursing in Bavarian at the priests who are trying to exorcise her demons. Then a young nun who'd attended the exorcism falls as a cardinals and get herself arrested. Her best friends back home in Torre Archirafi abandon her. The search for a missing statue of the Black Madonna beckons, but an authority even more powerful than the pope puts sex, drink, and sleuthing out of her reach. Poldi rebels as only Poldi can, and the results spiral to epic and profound heights only a manic genius could have imagined.

When a heroine so fearless spars with karma, who can doubt the result?
The Boston police reluctantly ask a nonviolent sociopath to catch a sadistic psychopath.

“I messed up, Gretch,” attorney Lena Booker, who specializes in defending poor kids and mob bosses, voice-mails her old friend, consulting psychiatrist Gretchen White. When she gets the message, Gretchen rushes to Lena’s side, but it’s too late to save Lena’s life. The obvious client she was referring to is Viola Kent, accused of killing her mother even though she’s only 13. What if, against all the evidence, Viola, whose floridly sociopathic tendencies have been well documented for years, was actually innocent of stabbing Claire Kent 13 times? Since she’s a higher-functioning sociopath herself, Gretchen would seem to be the perfect investigator to cast a cold eye over the alternative suspects: Reed Kent, Claire’s husband and Viola’s long-suffering father; his sister, Ainsley; and Lena’s lover, Congressman Declan Murphy, whose sister, Tess Murphy, Reed’s high school sweetheart and Lena’s best friend, vanished more than 20 years ago. But Detective Patrick Shaughnessy, who’s always suspected Gretchen of stabbing her aunt to death when she was 8, is so obsessed by the similarities that make Claire’s murder an all-too-familiar sight that he’s far from ready to trust anything Gretchen purports to discover. As Labuskes cuts frantically between the present and past segments from weeks, months, years, and decades before Claire’s death, it becomes disturbingly more and more clear that “genetics loaded the gun, environment pulled the trigger.”

A horrific brew for readers willing to immerse themselves in it.

**A FAMILIAR SIGHT**

*Labuskes, Brianna*

Thomas & Mercer (379 pp.)

$15.95 paper | Jul. 20, 2021

978-1-5420-2734-2

Erling’s 50th birthday turns out to be his last. Fortunately, Brody, out in the llama pen, avoids the trauma of watching the eminent neurosurgeon take one final drink and keel over. Soon Dirk and Savannah are on the case. Dirk officially and Savannah, who’s between cases, tagging along. Just as soon, they discover that very few of Stephen’s birthday guests actually wanted their host to live to 51. Carolyn’s former employee Pat Conway leaves the party in tears. Neighbor Shane Keller is angry at Stephen for hitting Shane’s son. Even Dr. Carolyn admits that her late husband was a bully who cheated on her. With so many suspects, Dirk has his work cut out for him, but Savannah keeps her keen eye out to make sure her husband doesn’t fixate on the one person whose arrest would break their foster son’s heart.

McKevet balances family drama and puzzle nicely before dropping the hammer too quickly at the climax.

**A FEW DROPS OF BITTERS**

*McKevet, G.A.*

Kensington (304 pp.)

$26.00 | Jul. 27, 2021

978-1-4967-2016-0

A birthday party turns deadly, and private eye Savannah Reid needs to know why.

Being foster parents to 6-year-old Brody Greyson has its ups and downs. DS Dirk Coulter isn’t amused when the little scamp mixes kitty kibble with Dirk’s breakfast cereal. But Savannah marvels at Brody’s resilience, his curiosity, and his love for all living creatures. To indulge the latter, she lets him spend long hours with the family’s beloved vet, Dr. Carolyn Erling. And when Brody manages to wangle an invitation to the birthday bash Dr. Carolyn’s throwing for her husband, Stephen, Savannah even manages to persuade Dirk to give up his favorite televised sports so they can go as a family. Which is kind of a shame, since Stephen

**GOLDEN AGE DETECTIVE STORIES**

*Ed. by Penzler, Otto*

American Mystery Classics (312 pp.)

$25.95 | $15.95 paper | Jul. 6, 2021

978-1-61316-216-3 paper

Think the English have a monopoly on the classic, fair-play detective stories that flourished between the two world wars? Think again, says this lineup of 14 all-American reprints dating from 1925 to 1955.

The keynotes here are variety and consistency. There are classics like Ellery Queen’s brainy “The Adventure of the African Traveler” and rediscoveries like “Postiche,” by Mignon G. Eberhart, whom editor Penzler aptly describes as the Mary Higgins Clark of her day. Fans of Erle Stanley Gardner’s Perry Mason and Anthony Boucher’s Sister Ursula will find the sleuths in the rare short stories “The Case of the Crimson Kiss” and “The Striper.” Pamela and Jerry North meet murder at a class reunion in Frances and Richard Lockridge’s “There’s Death for Remembrance,” and the Great Merlini solves a locked-room murder in Clayton Rawson’s “From Another World.” H.F. Hearld’s “The Enchanted Garden” is a floridly written Sherlock-ian pastiche about the mysterious Mr. Mycroft; Chicago lawyer John J. Malone talks a suicidal woman off a ledge and solves her actress mother’s apparent suicide in the pungent “Goodbye, Goodbye!” Neighbors come together to help solve the case of a poisoned dog in Charlotte Armstrong’s “The Enemy”; a much wealthier dog narrowly escapes a second poisoning in Patrick Quentin’s “Puzzle for Poppy.” The principals in Baynard Kendrick’s “5-4=Murderer” draw no closer together than you’d expect people at a truck stop to do; the family home in Mary Roberts Rinehart’s “Locked Doors” might as well be a prison. In the longest story, Cornell Woolrich’s house detective investigates a series of fatal leaps years apart from a single hotel window in “The Mystery in Room 913.” The only serious disappointment is the absence of John Dickson Carr and Rex Stout.

So much for variety. What’s consistent is the quality, which is exemplary.
“A sprawling space exploration agency, a divided crew, and a ship full of uncanny androids converge on a mysterious planet.”

WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN HERE

DENISE SWANSON

BODY OVER TROUBLED WATERS


A school psychologist covering three schools finds a trio of crises on her hands.

Recently returned from maternity leave, Skye Denison-Boyd needs all the help she can get serving the entire student body at Scumble River’s elementary school, middle school, and high school. Her intern, Piper Townsend, is a godsend, but she also relies on security officer Scott Ricci to provide extra support. Too bad the district’s superintendent, Dr. Shamus Wraige, decides the district doesn’t need a security officer; instead they need an attendance and residency investigator, who just happens to be Wraige’s son, Tavish. Unfortunately but predictably, Tavish is useless in dealing with Skye’s first crisis: an active shooter at the high school. Once Skye’s handled that volatile situation, the next blow lands closer to home. Her godfather, Charlie Patukas, has been arrested for alleged dirty dealings at his motel, the Up A Lazy River Motor Courts. Skye has to hand off that emergency to her sister-in-law, attorney Loretta Steiner-Denison, when the third horse in her trifecta of woes crosses the finish line. Dr. Wraige is found dead in his home, pierced by the tip of an arrow held by a statue of Cupid. Thanks to the superintendent’s unpleasant personality and unorthodox sexual preferences, suspects abound. But Skye wants to get this one wrapped up quickly because, as any school psychologist knows, you just can’t get any work done with a homicidal maniac running loose.

As misfortunes multiply, each one loses some punch. Next time, maybe fewer but choicer aggravations?

CHARLES TODD

AN IRISH HOSTAGE

Morrow/HarperCollins (336 pp.) $27.99 | Jul. 6, 2021 978-0-06-285985-3

In 1919, a trip to a friend’s wedding reminds Bess Crawford once again that hatred doesn’t come to an end when war does.

On leave from Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service, Bess is free to travel to Ireland to serve as a bridesmaid for Eileen Flynn, another nurse whose leg she helped save from amputation. It’s clear that venturing across the Irish Sea will be anything but routine. Instead of taking trains and motorcars subject to hijacking by nationalist fanatics, Bess asks American pilot Capt. Arthur Jackson to fly her to tiny Killeighbeg, where all is in readiness except for the groom, Michael Sullivan, who’s presumably been abducted by members of the Rising in retaliation for his wartime service to the Crown. But Bess doesn’t need to venture outside Eileen’s home to find furious conflicts raging. Granny Flynn seems to hate Eileen, whose mother is Anglo-Irish, as much as she hates Bess, and Eileen’s cousin Terrence Flynn, a Rising star, suggests that the bride made her own bed when she chose an Englishwoman for her bridesmaid and her intended chose an English officer, Maj. Ellis Dawson, as his best man. Days after local painter Fergus Kennedy turns up coshed to death, Eileen decides to forge ahead with her preparations for the ceremony in case the groom happens to show up, and a half-dead Michael appears in a superb theatrical stroke that confounds plausibility and logic. No sooner has Bess packed him off to bed than Ellis Dawson disappears. It’s enough to make you wonder who the title refers to: Michael, Ellis, or Bess herself.

The mystery is peripheral to this worm’s-eye view of the struggles that tore the Emerald Isle in two.

LENAGUYEN

WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN HERE

DAW/Berkley (368 pp.) $27.00 | Jul. 6, 2021 978-0-756417-29-1

A sprawling space exploration agency, a divided crew, and a ship full of uncanny androids converge on a mysterious planet.

Grace Park is one of two psychologists on a ship bound for Eos, ostensibly to study whether the planet is fit for human colonization. But the space agency, ISF, buoyed by deteriorating conditions on Earth that force people into a life of conscription in exchange for a place on a colonized planet, maintains a tight control over the crew, which means that Park might not know their true mission. It’s unlikely that anyone will tell her what’s really going on either—her crewmates don’t trust her because of her close relationship with the ship’s androids and because they think she might be a spy for ISF. As the crew arrives at the planet to begin their explorations, they fall ill one by one, complaining of strange dreams and behaving erratically. Park wants to find out the truth, but how can she if only the androids are on her side? As Park’s paranoia increases and the androids grow stronger, it becomes increasingly clear that there’s more to the planet than anyone knows, including ISF. Nguyen’s debut is claustrophobic and dark, full of twisting ship corridors and unreliable characters. While many of these elements have been seen before,
Nguyen combines them in ways that raise questions about totalitarian systems, environmental destruction, and the nature of humanity.

A promising, atmospheric debut.

THE WOLF AND THE WOODSMAN

Reid, Ava
Harper Voyager (432 pp.)
$27.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-06-297312-2

A young woman from a desolate village and a disgraced prince must join together to save the kingdom from the prince’s violent, religious zealot of a half brother in Reid’s debut fantasy.

Évike, the only woman in her pagan village without magical abilities, is shunned and bullied because the gods have chosen not to grace her with power. So when members of the king’s Holy Order of Woodsmen make the perilous journey through the forest to take a “seer,” a pagan woman with the power to see the future, Évike is offered up as a substitute. The King, who represents the dominant, monotheistic state religion called the Patrifaith, steals a pagan woman every year to use as a blood sacrifice. Rather than lose someone with the power to foresee ruined crops and other dangers, Évike’s village is happy to send her to die instead. But when all the Woodsmen except their captain are killed off by forest monsters, Évike learns he is no ordinary Woodman but Prince Bárány Gáspár himself. Gáspár is desperate to give his father, the King, a magical edge to a war he is currently losing. Otherwise, Gáspár’s despotlic brother, Nándor, will have the chance at a hostile takeover, and if Nándor is on the throne, everyone outside the Patrifaith is in serious danger. That includes not just Évike’s village, but other groups like the Yehuli, who follow a lightly fictionalized version of Judaism and include Évike’s long-lost father. There is an overreliance on simile in the prose, and sometimes the action gets muddled, but overall this is an impressive debut. Reid’s academic background in ethnonationalist religious history is used to great effect here, and she shows how folklore is bent and twisted to fit the dominant culture of the moment. Reid wades thoughtfully into thorny conversations about religious persecution, identity, and personal sacrifice.

Compelling, complicated, and worthwhile.

HOLD FAST THROUGH THE FIRE

Wagers, K.B.
Harper Voyager (416 pp.)
$26.99 | Jul. 27, 2021
978-0-06-288781-8

Seamlessly blending elements of military science fiction and space opera, the second installment in Wagers’ NeoG series—after A Pale Light in the Black (2020)—continues the exploits of the crew of Zuma’s Ghost as they patrol the solar system as part of the Near-Earth Orbital Guard, the space equivalent of the Coast Guard.

Having won the annual Boarding Games—a team competition among various military branches—two years in a row, Lt. Max Carmichael is concerned about her ship’s chances against other NeoG teams in the upcoming preliminary competitions as key crew members have retired and new, untested personnel have joined the ranks. The focus on the competitions is all but forgotten, however, when the crew is deployed as part of a task force to ensure safer trade routes around a remote Trappist station where invaluable funds and supplies have gone missing. The task force uncovers a grand-scale conspiracy in which those behind the plot are attempting to ignite a war between the military and Mars separatists to draw attention away from their nefarious dealings. The storyline gets exponentially more complicated when members of the Zuma’s Ghost realize that one of their own is being blackmailed and forced to help the ruthless conspirators, who will stop at nothing to keep their maneuvers a secret—even if it means murder. Although the storyline is powered by an impressively intricate plot that features mystery, intrigue, and nonstop action, it’s the deeply developed characters and the dynamic relationships among them that fuel this narrative. Wagers creates a cast of characters that are not only authentic, but endearingly flawed. Many characters are memorable, but it’s Chief Petty Officer Altandai “Jenks” Khan who steals the show. So much more than a proverbial badass (“I’m just the weapon you point at whatever you want destroyed”), she has an extensive backstory, and her relationship issues with those she loves are worth the price of the book alone.

Top-notch character-driven science fiction.
WHILE WE WERE DATING  
Guillory, Jasmine  
Berkley (352 pp.)  
$14.49 paper | Jul. 13, 2021  
978-0-593-10085-1

A famous actress begins a harmless flirtation with an advertising executive, but their casual dates are likely to have serious consequences.

When Ben Stephens leads the pitch presentation for a commercial slated to feature Oscar-nominated actress Anna Gardiner, he never imagines he’ll impress her enough that she’ll demand he lead the project. He also doesn’t expect his casual on-set banter with Anna to lead anywhere. But when she has a family emergency and he offers to drive her hundreds of miles, they wind up learning about each other’s pasts: While Ben resents his father for abandoning him as a child and assiduously avoids serious relationships, Anna is recovering from severe anxiety. As Black professionals, they’ve both had to confront deep-seated racial prejudice in their fields, and Anna is now desperately hoping to keep her from landing a film role she believes will be career-defining. Guillory infuses ample charm and wit in Ben and Anna’s interactions as she deftly highlights the lack of public sensitivity to mental health issues and the prevalence of sizeism and racism in popular culture. While several characters introduced in Guillory’s previous works make interesting and welcome appearances, Ben and Anna remain conspicuously one-note. He is endlessly considerate, she leans on him repeatedly, and their struggles, imperfections, and vulnerabilities are dealt with perfunctorily. But the camaraderie among Ben, Anna, and their respective families is always entertaining and often heartwarming.

A light, frothy, and fun concoction.

TOO GOOD TO BE REAL  
Johnson, Melonie  
St. Martin’s Griffin (352 pp.)  
$16.99 paper | Jul. 6, 2021  
978-1-2507-6880-3

A reporter falls in love at a resort designed to provide guests with the full rom-com experience.

Julia Carpenter writes listicles and pop-culture puff pieces for a Chicago-based website, but she worries about rumors of a new round of layoffs. Determined to prove she’s an integral part of the team, she pitches a story for the site’s booming travel section. A few hours north in Wisconsin, the newly opened Notting Hill Resort promises guests a full role-playing experience based on rom-com movies. Luke O’Neal is the head game developer, in charge of creating characters, activities, and experiences for guests, allowing them to choose everything from paintball to karaoke. If the resort’s opening week is a success, Luke will receive a bonus large enough to fund his own startup. After a chance meeting with Julia on the hotel grounds, Luke decides to pretend to be a guest and experience the game from the inside; meanwhile, Julia keeps her status as a reporter secret in order to avoid special treatment that might influence her review. Johnson’s homage to rom-coms focuses on developing the hallmarks of the genre—quirky secondary characters, outdoors shenanigans, and complicated misunderstandings—at the expense of the romantic relationship between Luke and Julia, which falls flat. The lack of communication between the protagonists and the rushed ending make for an emotionally unsatisfying resolution. The 20-something characters all have extensive knowledge of 1980s and ’90s rom-coms but never reference pop culture from their own generation, which gives the novel the feeling of a stale time capsule.

A cute premise meant to honor the rom-com genre fails to deliver.

THE MAN BAN  
Marsh, Nicola  
Berkley (352 pp.)  
$16.00 paper | Jul. 27, 2021  
978-0-593-19864-3

In Australia, a playboy doctor strikes sparks off a food stylist who isn’t looking for love.

A careless remark at a friend’s wedding puts Manish Gomes in Harper Ryland’s bad books. Harper is facing multiple upheavals—her parents have separated, her career needs a boost, and her love life tanked after she was diagnosed with vitiligo. The last thing she wants is to end her man ban with the cocky Anglo-Indian medico. Manny has reached 40 without risking his heart, though his grandmother has been nagging him to marry someone who shares his ethnic heritage. Harper neither fits the bill nor is she willing to give him the time of day despite his attractiveness. But when an unexpected hitch threatens Harper’s big career break in New Zealand and a vacationing Manny steps in to help, proximity makes the two rethink their single status. Though Harper insists it’s a casual fling, Manny convinces her it’s more; yet with both keeping secrets, their new bond is soon tested. The novel’s setting in Melbourne and New Zealand, a protagonist from the Anglo-Indian diaspora, and the inclusive representation of vitiligo are welcome departures from the standard setups in the romance genre. But off-key notes abound: There are far-fetched actions by both leads that make it hard to imagine their happy-ever-after; at least two instances of Manny kissing Harper without permission; a reference to how her robust eating habits make her superior to women who eat less and are skinny; an ableist statement by her physical therapist friend; a clumsy plot turn...
that telegraphs the novel’s crisis; too much screen time for supporting characters; and a deus ex machina in the form of a remarkably unprofessional psychologist.  
Dated tropes mar this novel.

OUTRAGEOUS  
Spencer Minerva  
Kensington (304 pp.)  
$9.49 paper | Jun. 29, 2021  
978-1-4967-3285-9

From Spencer, another single-word-titled, sexually explicit romance, this one with a 30-something earl and a feisty teenage heroine.

Godric Fleming, a boilerplate rake, is about to kidnap and compromise the wife of Gabriel Marlington, who he believes has caused the death of his entire family (nine of them). Gabe’s sister Eva and her best friend, James, turn the tables and kidnap the earl instead. War hero Godric, 36, wakes up in a carriage with the 19-year-old heroine, “barely out of the schoolroom,” and in a show of force, turns the tables and regains the upper hand. Since Eva has now been compromised by spending multiple unchaperoned days with him, society dictates they will have to wed. Eva doesn’t want to marry; she wants to breed horses. Godric blames himself for the brutal deaths of his wife and child during the Napoleonic wars, and in the ongoing romance trend, he resolutely refuses to father a child: copulation yes, babies no. Thrown together on the road to Scotland for quick nuptials and often compelled to be inside a carriage or an inn, since it never seems to stop raining, they find their mutual lust growing. Spencer describes sex in educationally anatomical detail. Like her stepmother, the wise Mia, Eva clearly believes that young women should know what will give them pleasure. Eva’s father, the marquess, catches up with the happily deflowered Eva and tells her she need not marry if she doesn’t want to. It’s her choice. Godric, who believes he can never give her the love and children she deserves, lies and says he doesn’t want to wed Eva because her mother was mad and madness may run in the family. Then, as she works at her father’s home breeding horses, Eva finds that she too is breeding.

The hero switches roles between father and lover in this lackluster venture.

THE DEVIL AND THE HEIRESS  
St. George, Harper Berkley (304 pp.)  
$7.99 paper | Jun. 29, 2021  
978-0-593-19722-6

An heiress falls for the rakish earl helping her run away, but he’s hiding his true intentions.

Violet Crenshaw wants to be a published author. The book she’s working on is inspired by her experiences as an American in London and features a wicked love-interest character named Lord Lucifer, based on her acquaintance Christian Halston, Earl of Leigh. She doesn’t actually expect anything to happen with him in real life. When she discovers her father plans to marry her off to a dreadful lord because it would benefit his business, Violet decides to run away. Christian offers himself as a companion on her journey. Marriage hadn’t been on his mind before, but now Christian needs money to restore his Scottish estate. He’s been interested in fiery Violet since they first met. During their escapade together, their feelings evolve, but secrets and society’s demands threaten to ruin their love. Christian starts as a flawed character who is later redeemed and spends the rest of the story trying to make up for his past errors with plenty of satisfying groveling and introspection. Violet has always gone along with any expectations of her, and it’s gratifying to see her grow and fight for her own choices. This captivating second installment of the Gilded Age Heiresses series is rich with historical detail and filled with desire and passion.

A delightful romance between a man who learns to be vulnerable and a woman who discovers her strength.
SECRETS OF THE FORCE
The Complete, Uncensored, Unauthorized Oral History of Star Wars
Altman, Mark A. & Gross, Edward
St. Martin's (576 pp.)
$29.99 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-250-23687-6

Everything you ever wanted to know—and then some—about the Star Wars film franchise.

Having teamed up for an oral history of both the Star Trek and James Bond film series, among other projects, Altman and Gross head back to the Hollywood well to discuss how George Lucas’ culture-transforming Star Wars and its sequels came into being. It wasn’t an easy victory: Lucas had failed terribly with his first effort at science fiction, the “experimental” THX 1138, and though he redeemed himself with “the massive smash that was American Graffiti,” Universal Pictures still wouldn’t bankroll his Joseph Campbell–inspired tale of a boy and his father battling through deep space. Alan Ladd Jr., the head of production for 20th Century Fox, saw something in the premise, and “almost five decades later, Star Wars continues to dominate the pop culture landscape.” Some of those films are cinematic gold, including the first. Some are much despised, especially the turgid Phantom Menace. Altman and Gross consult with some of the principal players, from first to last, and if the business side of the enterprise occupies too much space, the best parts of the book are when the actors and writers reflect on their work. Adam Driver, the Kylo Ren of the most recent epic film, reveals his struggle to make his on-paper evil character more morally complex, “because that to me...seemed more dangerous and more unpredictable,” while writer and filmmaker Lawrence Kasdan pegs it more succinctly: “He hasn’t got his shit all together.” Mark Hamill recalls asking the distinguished actor Alec Guinness why he would deign to appear in “a movie like this” and in a role that Lucas had originally slated for Toshiro Mifune. A bonus: Hayden Christensen, who played the petulant, pouty, pre-aqualung Darth Vader, reveals just why he was so whiny.

A trove for hardcore fans. If you’re obsessive about the films, there’s no end to the fun.
The past year has been plagued by grief. Whether or not you lost a loved one during the pandemic, you have dealt with grief in some form, whether it be personal, familial, societal, spiritual, and/or existential. While I am blessed that both of my parents—and most members of my extended family—are alive and healthy, I have dealt with grief in a variety of forms in the past few years.

The stuck-in-place, existential dread that has characterized much of this pandemic year got me thinking about grief and how it has manifested in my adult life. Foremost among those memories are the deaths of three beloved grandparents (all of whom lived long, fulfilling lives) and, perhaps more tragically, the suicide of one of my lifelong friends a few years ago. His death haunted me, and his memory continues to both enhance and harass my dreams. It’s nearly impossible to put into words the feelings that arise from such an event, but regardless of the form my grief assumes, I have always learned more from raw, personal expressions of grief rather than self-help guidebooks.

As I was considering the concept of grief, I was fortunate to have new, relevant work from one of our most emotionally attuned writers: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Her latest, Notes on Grief (Knopf, May 11), is a slim yet potent tribute to her father, James Nwoye Adichie (1932-2020), the first professor of statistics in his native Nigeria. As our critic notes in a starred review, the author “moves through some of the classic stages of grief, including no small amount of anger—at the well-meaning but empty word demise as well as the ineffectual condolences of well-meaning people....Eventually, the author reflects on a newfound awareness of mortality and finds a ‘new urgency’ to live her life and do her work in the ever present shadow of death.”

Some of the most insidious aspects of grief are its duration and strength and how it forces near-daily games of what if and why me. Near the end of the book, Adichie addresses the capacity of grief to warp chronology, drown the mind in “rolling thoughts,” and force us to face head-on the reality of death:

“I finally understand why people get tattoos of those they have lost. The need to proclaim not merely the loss but the love, the continuity...It is an act of resistance and refusal: grief telling you it is over and your heart saying it is not; grief trying to shrink your love to the past and your heart saying it is present. It doesn’t matter whether I want to be changed, because I am changed. A new voice is pushing itself out of my writing, full of the closeness I feel to death, the awareness of my own mortality, so finely threaded, so acute. A new urgency. An impermanence in the air. I must write everything now, because who knows how long I have?”

For anyone experiencing grief, regardless of its source, Adichie’s new book is a welcome balm, as are these three significant books on the subject: Hope Edelman’s The Aftergrief: Finding Your Way Along the Long Arc of Loss (“a timelessly relevant chronicle on enduring grief,” said Kirkus); Naja Maria Aidt’s When Death Takes Something From You Give It Back (“a stirring, inventive masterpiece of heartbreak”); and Joan Didion’s Blue Nights (“a slim, somber classic”).

Eric Liebetrau is the nonfiction and managing editor.
An account of racial violence in 1900 New Orleans reveals a complex system of institutional racism.

Bates College history professor Baker tells the multilayered story of Robert Charles, who shot a White police officer and later died in a shootout with police. The book is a nuanced history of a Black man unable to improve his status in a racist world who was ultimately no longer willing to cower to White hostility. Charles, writes the author, was “conceived in slavery,” the son of sharecroppers with little education. After an altercation while working as a railroad laborer in Mississippi, he fled and joined the wave of laborers who left rural areas for the big city, New Orleans. Escaping not just poverty, but also the horrendous violence of Reconstruction-era Mississippi, where White terrorism was common, Charles “reached a city on the edge, suspended between a tumultuous and disappointing history and dreams of a remarkable future.” The populous former slave-market hub was a commercial capital, and the corrupt local government often caved to business concerns. All the while, racial tensions simmered. “Emancipation was a red-hot torch in the social powder keg,” writes Baker, “as struggles over the meaning of black freedom made New Orleans the most dangerous city in postwar America.”

Violence erupted in July 1900, when Charles—then involved in the International Migration Society, which helped Blacks relocate to Liberia—was resisted police interrogation as he waited outside a girlfriend’s apartment building with his friend. Riots shook the city for days, killing at least 28 people and culminating in Charles’ lynching, an event that served as a launching pad for the police force to reinforce and extend its extreme measures against Black citizens. In an intricate narrative, Baker also traces into the 20th century other examples of police brutality and vigilantism in the city.

A sturdy addition to the literature on the early period of the Jim Crow era.

“A lively, lucid exploration—everything you ever wanted to know about flies and then some.”

SUPER FLY
The Unexpected Lives of the World’s Most Successful Insects
Balcombe, Jonathan
Penguin (352 pp.)
$18.00 paper | May 25, 2021
978-0-14-313427-5

All the latest buzz about the tiny, winged critters we love to hate—often unjustly.

“They’re addictive. Bet you can’t read just one.”
—Jon Winokur, Author of The Portable Curmudgeon

“A treasury of compact wit and wisdom.”
—Richard Lederer, Author of Anguished English

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consciousness and have more going on mentally than we may believe. "Flies subjected to peripheral nerve injury by amputation of one of their legs developed long-lasting hypersensitivity to stimuli not perceived as painful by uninjured flies," he writes, which may give one pause when an intrusive fly invites being smacked by a rolled-up paper. More definitively, he writes at the close of this appreciative natural history, flies help return us to our origins: "We are all bags of nutrients," one entomologist told him, "and flies recycle those nutrients back to the earth."

A lively, lucid exploration—everything you ever wanted to know about flies and then some.

THE SOUND OF THE SEA
Seashells and the Fate of the Oceans
Barnett, Cynthia
Norton (336 pp.)
$27.95 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-393-65144-7

An exploration of the history and biology of mollusks.

As environmental journalist Barnett notes, humans have long been captivated by seashells (“the work of marine mollusks”), collecting and using them for art, jewelry, and currency. In this well-researched, consistently illuminating work, the author smoothly combines environmental science and cultural history to trace the origins and decline of mollusks. The book is divided into chapters based on a particular species—among others, the chambered nautilus, the lightning whelk, the money cowrie, the lettered olive, and the queen conch. In each chapter, Barnett discusses the biology of the species, including the formation of its shell, as well as related culture and history. She also explores the factors that have led to the declines of all of these species, including climate change and overfishing. Barnett discusses observations and writings of other naturalists and scientists that she has found significant. Among them are Leonardo da Vinci, who wrote about visible fossils in the hillsides of Italy, testifying to changes the Earth has experienced across millennia; Julia Ellen Rogers, who authored The Shell Book (1908), which “brought the world of seashells to Americans during the national zeal for nature as a hobby”; and Thomas Say, the “father of American Conchology.” Barnett explores the many ways that Native Americans used shells in their daily lives—as tools, in trade, and for ceremonial purposes—as well as the various historically significant shell mounds that have been discovered throughout the U.S. The author also takes us around the world: to the Maldives, where ancient folktales of queens and a “cowrie monopoly” are vanishing; the Lowcountry coast of the Carolinas and Georgia, home of Gullah Geechee tradition; Andros Island in the Bahamas, where Barnett investigated the effects of the annual Conch Fest; and Florida's Sanibel Island, where “every tide brings a treasure hunt.” Fans of Rebecca Giggs’ excellent Fatboms will find much to savor here as well.

An absolutely captivating nature book.

TO END A PLAGUE
America’s Fight To Defeat AIDS in Africa
Bass, Emily
PublicAffairs (496 pp.)
$28.00 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-5417-6243-5

A chronicle of one of America’s bold health initiatives.

With 25 years of experience as an AIDS activist, journalist Bass makes a
vivid book debut with a detailed recounting of a prevention program that effectively stemmed AIDS in Africa. Drawing on medical reports, scientific papers, and interviews with activists, AIDS sufferers and their families, and health care providers and administrators (Deborah Birx, among them), the author examines the impact of a plan put forth by George W. Bush in 2003: the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. Astonishingly to Bass, the scientifically sound, rigorously researched plan—informed by experts including physicians Anthony Fauci and Mark Dybul—was met with skepticism both within Washington and among AIDS activists, who treated it “as a false promise and a political ploy.” As Bass watched the fate of the plan play out, she saw that “the structure of the program designed to wage war on the virus had engendered a war for resources” among a plethora of agencies whose acronyms sometimes overwhelm the narrative. The rivalries, she notes, continued “as long as the program did, defining and undermining this singular, purpose-built effort to control a modern plague.” Although in the U.S., “it was a workaround for the enduring ambivalence about foreign aid that made efforts by turns competitive, ineffective, and fragmented,” in Uganda—where Bass had been a Fulbright scholar in 2004-2005 and returned for many extended visits—PEPFAR became “a solution to the problem of keeping people with HIV alive when their own government did not care to try.” The plan had effectively “married research with implementation, relied on local partners, moved fast,” and responded to Ugandans’ urgent needs. PEPFAR, Bass asserts, proved to be “an unprecedented achievement in promoting public health instead of public death” and an important lesson “in how the US government can organize and implement a long-term plague war.”

A timely history of successful government intervention.
“A three-cheers homage to an America that, Bennett suggests, is returning to its open-arms promise of days past.”

**(RE)BORN IN THE USA**

**An Englishman’s Love Letter to His Chosen Home**

Bennett, Roger

Dey Street/HarperCollins (336 pp.)

$27.99 | Jun. 29, 2021

978-0-06-295869-3

A fan’s notes on the beckoning city on the hill, the America of old. “America existed almost as an alternate planet to me, a place filled with possibility and promise, where life seemed to be lived with a different gravitational pull.” So writes Liverpudlian Bennett, the descendant of a Russian Jew who left home to go to America and mistakenly got off in the U.K. instead—all reason enough for the author to have considered himself, from his earliest years, as “an American trapped in an Englishman’s body.” If his parents and schoolmates were sometimes bemused by his attachment to such emblems of American popular culture as *Saturday Night Live*, he found encouragement in the teacher he fondly calls “Fat Knacker,” who told tales of an America that welcomed newcomers and promised grand adventures. Most of Bennett’s entertaining memoir takes place in the U.K., though at the end, he finally arrives in the U.S., first in Chicago and then in New York. “For me, the United States has proven to be a land so free, you even allow bald blokes with accents to appear on television,” he writes appreciatively, having logged many hours as the co-host of *Men in Blazers*, a popular soccer-focused sports show. Bennett is good-natured, self-deprecating, and wryly observant throughout, recounting a disastrous bar mitzvah, feckless romances, teenage infatuations, and suchlike things. He takes a serious turn, though, when he writes about when he finally became an American, a time when the nation was presided over by a racist xenophobe. “The fact I had become a citizen at the very time the United States became so turbulent and chaotic was crushing,” he writes, noting that like so many other immigrants, he had come to the country on a tourist visa and simply stayed on, never having had to cultivate the fear of authorities that so many other would-be Americans have to endure.

A three-cheers homage to an America that, Bennett suggests, is returning to its open-arms promise of days past.

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**WELL, THIS IS EXHAUSTING Essays**

Benoit, Sophia

Gallery Books/Simon & Schuster

(336 pp.)

$26.00 | Jul. 13, 2021

978-1-982151-93-5

A 20-something comedian and journalist explores how she “learned to be good for herself rather than for other people.” For Benoit, a sex and relationship advice columnist for *GQ*, trying to “beat the system just by behaving” is impossible, especially as a woman or member of a marginalized community. A people-pleaser who strove to be “a good kid” for her divorced parents, she grew up feeling pressured to follow standards of female beauty and behavior that did not fit her. As a teen with a “voracious sexual appetite,” she struggled with the conventional notion that males were the only ones allowed to express desire. That she happened to be overweight made her desires seem transgressive and “something to tell jokes about.” Consequently, she became “an approachable, kind, upbeat girl who didn’t talk too much.” Through college, she dated a series of “hot asshole[s]” who treated her poorly. Not until she became a young professional did Benoit cultivate meaningful friendships with other women that allowed her to stop prioritizing the “male gaze” over her own happiness. Tired of trying so hard to please men, she eventually tried online dating for a period of time (“Cocktober”) and discovered that she “liked hooking up with strangers.” In finding the nurturing love she thought was as “sappy” as the romance novels she secretly adored, the author began to understand that the socially lauded female
independence she admired was part of a “hypercapitalistic fantasy of girl power” that put women in an impossible double bind. Though often sharply observed, Benoit’s essays offer too many details, which she often footnotes with observations on her own observations, as well as trivialities—e.g., how-to lists and hit-or-miss film critiques “based on whether I thought [the protagonist’s] character was a helpful or harmful depiction of adult womanhood.” The result is a book that should appeal to young women but that also exhausts rather than satisfies.

Humorous, intermittently insightful, but overdone.

THE WEALTH OF REFUGEES
How Displaced People Can Build Economies
Bettis, Alexander
Oxford Univ. (432 pp.)
$25.95 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-19-887068-5

Scholarly examination of the politics and economics of displacement. Oxford professor Bettis, a specialist in “forced migration,” opens by noting that the number of refugees and internally displaced people—i.e., those who remain in their homeland but not in their homes—is vast and likely to grow “due to a proliferation in the number of fragile states.” These states are made fragile both by internal political and economic failings and by external forces such as war, pandemic, and climate change. Two principal examples of nations affected by numerous forces at once are Syria and Venezuela, which have seen huge outflows of people. As Bettis argues, one effective means of dealing with the problem of displacement is to apply remedies at home, with the wealthy nations providing aid to poorer ones so that their peoples have less need to go elsewhere—a win for both those poorer nations and wealthier ones in Europe and North America that are less and less inclined to take in large numbers of immigrants. The author calls for programs of infrastructure development and job creation as well as enlisting developed neighbors in a “high degree of specialization,” with those nearby states providing regions of refuge and “sustainable sanctuaries” given that those neighbors are likely to share cultural similarities that would allow for easier assimilation. Bettis highlights Uganda as a case study of a place where refugees are allowed to settle and to engage fully in the outside economy, which has mostly good effects though some perhaps unintended consequences as well (Idi Amin drew support from those refugees to shore up a regime that oppressed native Ugandans). Given nationalist tendencies around the world, Bettis notes, the Ugandan model may be difficult to apply. “In the short term, amid global recession,” he writes, “the willingness of publics and politicians to share scarce resources with distant strangers will be tested to [the] breaking point.”

A thoughtful contribution to the literature of humanitarian aid.

PASTELS AND PEDOPHILES
Inside the Mind of QAnon
Bloom, Mia & Moskalenko, Sophia
Redwood Press/Stanford Univ. (256 pp.)
$20.00 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-5036-3029-1

An international security scholar teams up with a psychologist specializing in radicalization to explore the QAnon movement.

QAnon, a congeries of conspiracy theories whose origins lie in a curious blend of popular culture, science fiction, and deep-rooted antisemitism, has swept up millions of people of varying ideologies and levels of education. Bloom and Moskalenko quote David Gilbert from Vice News: “There are highly educated people that fall into these movements, and it is dangerous and remiss to pigeonhole QAnon followers according to educational attainment or social status.” Even so, write the authors, QAnon is a magnet for the mentally...
Alison Bechdel, acclaimed creator of the “Dykes To Watch Out For” comic strip and award-winning author and illustrator of the masterful graphic memoirs *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*, is one of the most acclaimed and respected cartoonists working today. A MacArthur and Guggenheim fellow, Bechdel is known for her incisive explorations of sex and gender and meticulous excavations of twisted family history. As we see in *The Secret to Superhuman Strength* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, May 4), Bechdel is also a fitness freak. “Yet this book is about more than just exercise,” writes our reviewer. “Bechdel’s work always encompasses multiple interlocking themes, and here she delves into body image; her emerging gay consciousness; the connection between nature and inner meaning”; and many other relevant themes. I spoke to the author via Zoom from her studio in Jericho, Vermont. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Why did you write this book now?**

After writing these heavy family memoirs, I thought my exercise life would be a fun, timely topic. Not just because I have always liked exercise. It’s a very capacious subject, allowing me to work a lot of other stuff in, including ideas about getting older and the changes we go through.

**The concept of the mind-body connection runs throughout the story.**

Yes. I have liked doing physical stuff from a young age. At a certain point, I noticed that I would actually feel kind of euphoric, where I wasn't in my usual incredibly self-conscious state. My normal condition was to be very aware of myself, and physical activity could lessen that and give me relief. When I got older, I learned that you could get there with drugs, as well. So the book becomes a sort of quest for what is happening in those moments when we’re feeling that kind of peace and bliss. For me, it’s about transcending this self that I spend most of my time in, which is really kind of a false construct. We’re all connected to each other in some way.

**You write that “being exhausted is one way to stop thinking.” Have your exercise routines helped you get out of your own head and focus your creativity?**

I didn’t try to draw too many direct lines between the activities I was doing and the ways that it affected my creativity, but in some cases I do—for example, body-weight exercises, around the time I was 40, when I was able to do a pullup. I was able to push myself out of my own way, which was part of what enabled me to do this difficult project of writing about my own life and family. In my 30s, yoga showed me how to turn my attention
deeply inward and to experience whatever was happen-
ing as I did a yoga pose—not necessarily as pain but as
a series of distinct sensations. That helped to focus my
writing about real experiences, and my work got a lot
richer at that point.

Where are you now in your fitness journey?
I still do a lot of things but not as intensely as I did at oth-
er points in my life: yoga, biking, stretching, skiing. But
the thing that really came around in an interesting, full-
circle way was running, which I did as a young person and
really loved. I stopped doing it at a certain point, partly
because I had an injury and partly because running is hard. I was happy to have an excuse not to do it. As I look
back, I see that the time in my 30s when I stopped run-
ning was the time I started drinking. My book also looks
at my drinking behavior and how I struggled to curtail it.
Running absolutely helped. It’s like an anti-anxiety drug,
and it calmed me down without having a bottle of wine or
a couple beers every night.

Are exercise trends and fads proliferating especially
rapidly these days, or is it just part of a normal histori-
cal progression? And how has the pandemic played
into it?
It’s been such a weird intersection of the beginning of
the pandemic with wherever fitness was going. More and
more people are doing stuff like Peloton, but that and
other similar programs are private in your home. I feel
bad because in this pandemic year, I stopped going to the
gym, and I could not get myself to do my weight routine
at home. It was easy if I was leaving the house, but I can’t
motivate myself at home. I bought some [equipment] for
my basement, and I just walk past it every day. Then Ap-
ple Fitness+ came out, with a bunch of workouts for rea-
sponsible fees, and you can have a trainer tell you what to
do. First I thought that was bullshit, but now I find it’s a
good way to motivate.

Sidestepping into process, could you discuss how you
approach writing and illustrating and how they come
together?
I don’t know how other cartoonists do it, but I write
in Adobe Illustrator. I have my dialogue and narration
blocks set out visually, and I’m imagining what those im-
gages and words will be—at first not in any detail. When
I come to actually draw the images, I begin an intense
process of research, looking things up and sketching, and
then I’ll go off on some tangent because I find something
interesting on Google. Sometimes that diversion will
change the way a panel is laid out or the sequence.

What about your relationship with your colorist, Holly
Rae Taylor?
With my deadline approaching, I knew there wasn’t
even time to do all the coloring myself. Fortunately;
Holly stepped in. We did this thing that’s kind of like an
old-fashioned comics technique. She wasn’t working with
any color media at all; she used different gradations, and
she would make a cyan layer, a magenta layer, and a yel-
low layer for each page. It was like a mathematical puzzle
and not at all like an organic experience of coloring, you
know, beautiful blue skies. There’s all these layers upon
layers, and it was hard to remember and keep track of ev-
everything. It was an all-consuming process.

Can you discuss how the tumult of the past few years
has affected your work?
The whole Trump era was demoralizing, depressing, and
crazy-making. I felt like, Why am I writing a book about
exercise? It seemed absurd. But I had to pull out of it. When
the pandemic hit, I was absorbed in this project, and just doing this drawing was a huge gift. I felt grateful
to have that focus when there was so much bad news ev-
everywhere. I also began to see some themes of the book
manifesting in the world: We need each other—we are
interdependent—and what illustrates interdependence
more vividly than a pandemic? It’s like we’re one big or-
ganism, and if one of us gets sick, others will, and we
have to address it as a group. So it was cool to see this
awareness, at least in half the population; the other half
seems to have left reality.

The Secret to Superhuman Strength was reviewed in the
March 15, 2021, issue.
ill, particularly people suffering from PTSD, one manifestation of which is "the feeling of not belonging." Other forms of anomie and detachment are evident throughout the movement. An unusually large segment of members are women, who “have been at the forefront of white racist movements for the past 100 years.” Such women have been responsible for numerous crimes, and those involved in QAnon were well represented in the attack on the Capitol of Jan. 6, 2021. Oddly, the authors note, there are connections between QAnon and the fuzzy New Age movement, which shares a mistrust of corporations, government, and the media and a view that all are dark forces bent on poisoning minds and bodies. With the canonical doctrine that Democrats are satanic pedophiles and that Donald Trump is the only person on the planet who can combat them (and their “Jewish space lasers”), we’re on the dark side of the moon indeed. And it just gets weirder, but more urgent, with QAnon planks that paint Tom Hanks and Oprah Winfrey as agents of a movement meant to destroy the Constitution and enslave those who don’t share their liberal views. The authors close with the note that the madness is contagious and that QAnon views have spread to dozens of other countries.

A revealing—and disturbing—analysis of a dangerous threat to American democracy.

ON THE HOUSE
A Washington Memoir
Boehner, John
St. Martin’s (288 pp.)
$26.99 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-250-23844-3

Much anticipated tell-all by the former speaker of the House of Representatives.

Boehner (b. 1949), the former Ohio congressman who served as speaker from 2011 to 2015, has a flair for the crude mot juste and a willingness to scrap, as when he told Don Young, a powerful, long-serving fellow Republican, “Fuck you.” Granted, Young had put a knife up to his throat—a knife, Young would later say, that grew longer and sharper every time Boehner told the story. The author, who grew up in his father’s Ohio bar, has plenty of stories to tell. Some of them come with grudging admiration: He never liked Trump, but he gives him credit for his ruthless political maneuvering. He laments the radical craziness of the current GOP, touting Mitt Romney as the kind of conservative who should have led the party “before the rabble-rousers decided he wasn’t a big enough lunatic for their liking.” Not that Boehner cares much for Obama and the left either, whom he accuses of arrogance—though he does write about his friendships with Teddy Kennedy and Joe Biden. Valuable lessons in crossing the aisle came from Gerald Ford, who kept him from becoming “a bomb-throwing Meadows/Mulvaney-type jackass.” In passing, after denigrating almost everyone in national politics, Boehner corrects his bibulous image. As he writes, he preferred beer when he came to D.C., learned that hard liquor was a recipe for disaster, and switched to red wine. “Drinking wine is a marathon, not a sprint, and makes sense for the more mature drinker,” he counsels. That, a pack of cigarettes, and a golf club, and he seems to have quite enough to keep him contented far from the fray.

Boehner doesn’t take himself too seriously, but this is a serious study in how our politics went so far off track.

NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I’VE SEEN
The Emotional Lives of Black Women
Burnett-Zeigler, Inger
Amistad/HarperCollins (256 pp.)
$24.99 | Jun. 29, 2021
978-0-06-295982-9

A clinical psychologist looks at the interior lives of Black women.

Burnett-Zeigler sets out to “examine the parts of the strong Black woman prototype that continue to serve us—such as compassion, loving care for others, community orientation, determination, resilience, self-assuredness, faith in God, joyfulness—while leaving behind the parts that no longer serve us—suppressing emotion, denying our needs, [and] being reluctant to set boundaries.” Religion is central to the author’s view of Black women and her worldview in general. She describes her own experience of becoming a Christian in detail, and across the 256-page text, the word “God” appears more than 60 times. She notes that 83% of Black adults say that they believe in God, and 73% say that they pray daily. Her narrative is rife with platitudes (“we have to wipe our tears aside and keep it moving”) and generalizations that exclude many nonreligious Black women: “Above all, [Black women] never forget to give praise and honor to God for all that He has done for them.” In one shocking passage, the author presents Halle Berry’s suicidal thoughts as a cautionary tale, with suicide and loss of faith in God deemed “one of the deadliest sins in the Black community.” To write that “Scripture also promises punishment if one harms oneself” reads as harsh and—especially coming from a mental health professional—irresponsible. Conspicuously absent is any mention of sex other than sexual trauma, violence, and dysfunction, and Burnett-Zeigler also ignores Black LGBTQ+ women: “Today’s strong Black women are climbing professional ladders, while also taking care of their husbands, children, and extended family members.” Some Black Christian heterosexual women may find encouragement and validation in these pages, but this ‘guidebook for healing’ offers more proselytizing than comfort.

Barley scratches the surface of the emotional complexities of Black womanhood.
The former president takes up brush and pen to portray nearly four dozen immigrants and highlight their contributions.

Bush’s latest book reveals a couple of things. One is that any discussion of immigration reform is likely to be difficult and even a little schizophrenic. The author argues for strongly enforced borders, a thorough reform of the immigration system, and “full assimilation of immigrants into the American economy and culture.” Another is that the former president has, like Dwight Eisenhower, become a serviceable painter in his retirement. The political point is the more important, though Bush protests that he withheld publication until the 2020 election had passed lest any of his subjects become political hostages. As well they might have: One of the immigrants is a Mexican man who arrived illegally as a teenager, worked as a mechanic and painter, and then founded a produce company that nets $60 million per year. Though he became a citizen along the way, that’s just the sort of thing to set a nativist’s blood boiling. Arnold Schwarzenegger, depicted with a horsey grin and an Uncle Sam top hat, subtly addresses those nativists: “I wish every American realized that being born here is the greatest opportunity. You don’t know how lucky you are. And because of that, it’s our duty to do everything in our power to leave a better America to the next generation.” Henry Kissinger and Madeleine Albright take their places alongside a North Korean refugee who works in Bush’s organization and an Iraqi interpreter who legally changed his name to Tony George Bush. A few of Bush’s subjects are of modest achievement, but many, including Dominican baseball star Albert Pujols and Swedish-born golf celebrity Annika Sörenstam, have made outsized marks. The author also includes a two-page flow chart that shows the
impossibly complex ways (there are four of them) “to obtain a green card” in the U.S. 

A surprisingly satisfying tribute to the vigor that immigrants bring to the nation’s culture and economy.

THE PERFECT POLICE STATE
An Undercover Odyssey Into China’s Terrifying Surveillance Dystopia of the Future
Cain, Geoffrey
PublicAffairs (304 pp.)
$25.99 | Jun. 29, 2021
978-1-5417-5703-5

A scarifying dive into China’s pernicious spy state.

Enlisting interviews with Uyghur refugees in Turkey, where he now lives, American investigative journalist Cain digs into the “sophisticated surveillance dystopia” set up by the Chinese government. Unprecedented advances in artificial intelligence, facial recognition, and other technologies have allowed the state to monitor and control the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. This is just the beginning, warns the author, whose previous book, Samsung Rising (2020), exposed many of the secrets of the South Korean tech giant. In his latest investigation, Cain determined to infiltrate China’s crackdown in Xinjiang, where the state accuses the native Uyghurs, a Turkic Muslim people, of the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. With China’s aim to revive the historic Silk Road via its ambitious, $1 trillion One Belt, One Road initiative, it needed to pacify the restive region of Xinjiang, its most sensitive border. However, beginning in 2014, China escalated its counterterrorism tactics to unseen levels of brutality. As Cain writes, “China’s goal was to erase one people’s identity, culture, and history and to achieve a total assimilation of millions of people.” The author systematically breaks down these methods, including the creation of “vocational training centers” and “reeducation centers,” which, by 2017, housed more than 1.5 million Uyghurs. Cain’s main protagonist, “Maysem,” chronicles the increased monitoring of her family and home and tells about how she was placed in a concentration camp because of her supposed propensity for crime. This was based on “predictive policing,” in which AI uses an algorithm “to guess who might commit a crime in the future.” In addition to hundreds of hours of personal interviews with 168 Uyghurs, the author also examines documentation suggesting “deep connivance of many Chinese technology firms in creating the monstrosity in Xinjiang.” And the monster continues to expand, with Chinese tentacles reaching outside its borders to bring refugees back into the fold. Cain also tracks how similar technology is being deployed in the U.S.

A prescient, alarming work on the overreach of technology and state power.

THE KEY MAN
The True Story of How the Global Elite Was Duped by a Capitalist Fairy Tale
Clark, Simon & Louch, Will
Harper Business (368 pp.)
$29.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-06-299621-3

Two Wall Street Journal reporters demonstrate how a charismatic but crooked businessman conned elite investors into believing they could profit from doing good for the globally dispossessed.

Until he was accused of misappropriating funds in 2018, Pakistani-born Arif Naqvi, founder of the Abraaj Group, was a celebrated private equity tycoon. In this expansion of their investigation for the WSJ, Clark and Louch—who gathered information from “more than 150 people, including 70 former Abraaj employees, business chiefs, politicians and a Vatican cardinal”—chart Naqvi’s breathtaking rise to prominence and
his even more stupendous fall from grace. The authors depict the young Naqvi as an exceptionally talented student of modest means whose “priority was to get rich.” The more ruthless side of his personality began to emerge in his young professional days. A real estate developer in Pakistan, one of his first bosses, noted Naqvi’s extreme ego and ambition and willingness to take problematic risks with debt. These traits served him well in his days as an independent fundraiser and dealmaker in Dubai and led him to form the relationships that led to the creation of Abraaj in 2002. The company quickly began making huge profits in developing countries that Naqvi marketed to Western investors and academics as “places of excitement and opportunity.” For the next 15 years, banks, philanthropists, and a host of foreign governments—including those of the U.S. and Britain—entrusted Abraaj with spectacular sums meant to fund socially conscious projects (such as the rescue of the perennially failing Karachi Electric company) that Naqvi surreptitiously used to “keep his billionaire lifestyle afloat.” As his fame grew, so did his darker tendencies, which manifested as significant abuses of corporate power. Compelling and disturbing, the book is a pointed tale of hubris, greed, and the narrow limits of so-called capitalistic “benevolence” in the era of growing economic inequality.

Timely and provocative reading on one of the many perils of the murky private equity world.

THE BURNING BLUE
The Untold Story of Christa McAuliffe and NASA’s Challenger Disaster
Cook, Kevin
Henry Holt (288 pp.)
$27.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-250-75555-1

A 1986 space shuttle disaster killed seven crew members. Why?

In 1984, when Ronald Reagan announced that he wanted to send a teacher into space, Christa McAuliffe, who taught high school social studies in Concord, New Hampshire, applied. From over 11,000 applicants, the upbeat, energetic 36-year-old mother of two was selected to join NASA’s 25th space mission, scheduled to launch in January 1986. That mission ended in tragedy when the Challenger exploded, killing everyone aboard. Journalist Cook draws on NASA’s archives, McAuliffe’s correspondence and family papers, newspaper and TV reports, and interviews with scientists, astronauts, and crew members’ families to create a fast-paced chronicle of the horrific event and its aftermath. McAuliffe’s job, writes the author, was to conduct a few science lessons to be broadcast on PBS, keep a journal, prepare lesson plans for teachers, and, above all, serve as an inspiration for students. Unlike fellow crew member Judith Resnik, who had been American’s second woman in space—after Sally Ride—when she flew in 1984, McAuliffe trained “to eat, sleep, and go to the bathroom in space” but not to interact with any of the 1,300 switches and dials on the flight deck. Cook conveys McAuliffe’s optimistic spirit and occasional doubts as she embarked on her adventure, and he gives a brisk, tense recounting of the shuttle’s final moments, during which the crew was likely to have remained alive for nearly three minutes until the exploded orbiter crashed into the sea. Beginning in February 1986, a presidential commission—including the skeptical physicist Richard Feynman—investigated the crash, albeit with a mandate from Reagan not to “embarrass NASA.” Nevertheless, serious revelations emerged about what NASA knew about mechanical problems, how decisions were made, and why the launch proceeded despite unusually cold weather that compromised equipment. Considerable reforms followed, but not enough to prevent the crash of the Columbia, in 2003.

A vivid, thoroughly researched space history.
You never know where a book by Olivia Laing will take you. Her 2016 book, The Lonely City—called a “beautiful meander” by novelist Hanya Yanagihara—considered loneliness and outsiderdom in her own life and in the work of artists from Edward Hopper and Henry Darger to Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat. The essays collected in Funny Weather mused on diverse subjects including Georgia O’Keeffe, Hilary Mantel, Davie Bowie, and John Ashbery. Laing, with her quicksilver mind, sees points of connection everywhere, but she’s a very amiable critic, bringing readers along on a journey of continual discovery.

Her new book may be her rangiest yet. Everybody: A Book About Freedom (Norton, May 4) regards the human body through the various lenses of illness, sex, violence, protest, and incarceration; underlying this ambitious project are the biography and writings of Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957), the Austrian psychoanalyst who had once been an acolyte of Freud but later became notorious for his “orgone accumulators,” a contraption that was ultimately banned by the Food and Drug Administration and led to Reich’s imprisonment. (Fans of ’80s pop music will recognize Reich as the subject of Kate Bush’s song “Cloudbursting.”)

With Reich at the center of Everybody, Laing branches off in fascinating, often surprising directions, encompassing the life and work of Susan Sontag, Kathy Acker, Magnus Hirschfeld, Andrea Dworkin, Angela Carter, Agnes Martin, Bayard Rustin, Malcolm X, and Nina Simone. Our reviewer found the book “intellectually vigorous and emotionally stirring,” and an interview with Laing over Zoom from her home in Sussex, England, proved just as stimulating. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Why did you want to write about Wilhelm Reich?
I’ve had a career of writing about difficult and complicated people, and Reich takes the biscuit. He had been a sexual liberationist, he’d been an anti-fascist. He had this visionary idea in the 1920s of uniting the ideas of Freud and Marx; he thought that trauma was encapsulated in the body, that it lived in the body. And at the same time, he saw our bodies as agents of change. But then he has this whole second life in America that is far wilder, where he’s got cranky ideas about health and healing, where he falls afoul of the political apparatus and ends up dying in a prison cell.

I wanted to use Reich as a way of entering these different regions of bodily experience, from illness to sexuality, from protest to incarceration. He allowed me to do that while also taking me on this wild ride through the 20th century and a very idiosyncratic personal life.

Nowadays we want to put a stamp of approval or disapproval on a person’s life and work. You don’t do that here.
I’m not into that. I’m really very much into ambiguity and complexity. And it seems to me this obsession with purity that we have, at the moment—if somebody puts a foot
wrong, then everything about them is discarded—is toxic. It’s not helpful, right? Reich is somebody who has very useful ideas for us and also elements of his life that are very unpleasant. But if you look back at his own personal life, the things that befell him, you can see that the ways that he’s abusive come from a legacy of abuse. It’s a complicated tapestry. And then I think the other characters that I was drawn to in the book—Andrea Dworkin, say, or Nina Simone—they’re also people who are not pure, they’re not perfect by any means. But they have things to offer us, they have all kinds of riches in them. If you discard them, because they said one thing that Twitter doesn’t like, you would lose access to all of that.

**Andrea Dworkin is a perfect example.** I completely associated her with the anti-pornography crusades of the 1980s, but you offer a more nuanced portrait.

Like you, I remembered Dworkin at the time, and she’s not somebody that I’ve thought about very much in the intervening years, because in the “porn wars” I felt like I was on the other side. But she came back to prominence in the last couple of years, especially with the collected writings in *Last Days at Hot Slit*. Her voice just leaps off the page—I mean, full throttle grabs you. It was reencountering a visionary, incantatory, furious, but witty, voice. I’d forgotten, or maybe I’d never realized, how funny she was, how dry she was, how pitiless she was, though I still don’t agree with everything that she says, by any means. There are ways in which she’s not a good reader, not very skilled at handling critical material; it was interesting to set her up against somebody like Angela Carter, with their different takes on the Marquis de Sade. But as an activist, she’s extraordinary. She heard the worst stories of [abuse from] thousands upon thousands of women and held that within her. That sense of her as a person who is handling mass trauma and trying to convey its reality to people who are ignoring it—we’d say *gaslighting* now—feels very painful to me. She was somebody who wasn’t well treated by the culture, and it was very exciting to reencounter her.

**One of the great discoveries in the book, for me, was the artist Ana Mendieta.**

I first came across her back in the ’90s, I had a boyfriend who was an artist who handed me a book of her work. It was electrifying—particularly the Siluetas, which are the works where she carves out the crude shape of a woman’s body in sand, fills it with pigment that looks like blood, and it is slowly taken over by waves and vanishes. It felt like she was capable of conveying both the body’s vulnerability to violence but also the fact that our bodies are perpetually in flux and heading toward mortality. What happens to Mendieta is that she is a witness to violence; she died falling out of a window [in 1985 at the age of 36]. It’s unclear whether she was pushed or not. Her husband, [artist] Carl Andre, was tried for the murder and found not guilty; a question mark hangs over it. Mendieta’s story is so much about the body in harm, the body in jeopardy, and there was no way I could write a book about bodies without her being in it.

I’m ashamed to say I wasn’t familiar with her work. Like Dworkin [who died in 2005 at the age of 58], she’s somebody who sort of vanished from the culture—once you’re not there to press your work forward, you sort of slip away. It feels like she’s emerged back into the mainstream in the last few years because of #MeToo. Her “*Untitled (Rape Scene)*” is so viscerally about sexual violence. These are people who are reemerging in the 21st century and feel like they are full of ideas that are relevant to us.

**It feels like the pandemic has also made us think about bodies anew.**

We’ve had an experience of the precarity of bodies, and people who’ve maybe been sheltered from that—because of their gender, because of their skin color—have understood that their bodies are more precarious, more vulnerable than they’d thought. And at the same time, we’ve had this sequestered experience where people have realized that we don’t want to live virtually; we want to have our physical lives back. How much nicer would it be if we were talking face to face in a room rather than on our little screens.

Everybody received a starred review in the April 15, 2021, issue.
The founder of the popular grocery store chain delivers a memoir wrapped in a handbook for would-be entrepreneurs.

Coulombe (1930-2020) was a born wheeler-dealer, turning a 1958 partnership with Rexall Drugs in Los Angeles into a small grocery chain called Pronto Markets. The chain flourished for lack of competition, with market leader 7-Eleven effectively held back from the region until California laws changed and barriers to entry fell. Annual sales at Pronto and its successor, Trader Joe's, "grew at a compound rate of 19 percent per year" from the founding until Coulombe left the company in 1988; he reckons sales and net worth growth to be about that today. Success in a business with historically tight margins came from an ability to pivot nimbly, drop products that didn't work (including, in Southern California, bullets until the assassination of Robert Kennedy), and procure products wisely from suppliers with as few middlemen as possible. "The fundamental job of a retailer is to buy goods whole, cut them into pieces, and sell the pieces to the ultimate consumers," he writes, going on to gloss each of those mandates. Unusually for the sector, Coulombe also offered high rates of pay, which kept turnover—a huge hidden cost—low. The author, who takes a gruffly scholarly approach to many business problems, keyed Trader Joe's to demographic changes that recognized the anti–mass-market sentiments of the counterculture and the rise in international travel that led Americans to appreciate such things as high-quality coffee and wine. Any student of social trends, logistics, and supply chains will learn much from Coulombe's pages and the stern dicta they contain, as, for example, when he offers this formula: "my preference is to have a few stores, as far apart as possible, and to make them as high-volume as possible."

Sure to be required reading in business school—and for fans of Coulombe's creation as well.
“In the history of humankind,” she writes, “‘white people’ are babies. You have only existed since 1661! (To be fair, so have ‘black people.’) Dabiri dismisses Whiteness as “a generic term that collapses crucial distinctions in order to consolidate capital.” Related to her argument that the B in black should not be capitalized because it reinforces division instead of dismantling it, she explains that she regularly places quotation marks around “black” and “white” to disrupt “the comfort with which we rely on that terminology.”

A must-read for anyone seeking to be an agent of much-needed societal change.

LIEUTENANT DANGEROUS
A Vietnam War Memoir
Danziger, Jeff
Illus. by the author
Steerforth (208 pp.)
$14.95 paper | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-58642-273-8

Acclaimed political cartoonist Danziger looks back at his year in Vietnam, somehow managing to convey difficult truths without completely depressing readers.

Drafted shortly after graduating college in 1968, Danziger believed (as many did) that the war was in its final stages. He reported to Fort Dix hoping the worst would be over before he could be sent overseas. He offers detailed, often amusing accounts of the ill-focused basic training, which was “phenomenally stupid, left over from World War II and had nothing to do with conditions in Southeast Asia. It was this side of mad.” Seeking ways to further delay deployment, he entered language school to learn Vietnamese, assuming he would then be stationed far from combat zones, interpreting intercepted signals from the field. But the instruction was perfunctory at best, and after acceptance to officer training—another ploy to postpone deployment—Danziger was sent for ordnance training, and his language skills eroded quickly. Then he was deployed to Vietnam, where he was one of many junior officers with inadequate training and no enthusiasm for the missions. The author’s account of his year “in-country” is consistently candid about the futility of the war, and he makes little effort to portray his own role as anything but ineffectual. The book’s title plays on the Vietnamese’s attempts to pronounce his name. Looking back, as if trying to explain the era to a younger audience, he tries to provide perspective. Subsequent history shows that America learned nothing from Vietnam, he writes; the country has entered one unwinnable war after another, with few moments of success and thousands of lives lost. Unsettling as these truths may be, Danziger’s compelling presentation of his experience makes the book a must-read war memoir. The author aptly opens his trenchant book with an epigraph from Joseph Heller.

A Vietnam memoir with zero punches pulled, related by one of the most incisive observers of the American political scene.
They structure our world, giving us authority to respect, myths in "To be educated for attachment," he writes, "is to learn the art of long-haul heroes" from friends, family, public figures (Martin Luther King Jr., Ken Burns, sports champions, and political activists, among many others), and myriad interviewees, Davis makes a persuasive case for dedication as "an alternative path of life." He acknowledges that commitment may generate fears: "If we commit to something, we will later regret having not committed to something else instead," or we fear undermining "our identity, reputation, and sense of control." But he asserts that rather than threaten identity, commitment enhances it, bestowing the "gift of solidarity" within a shared moral culture rather than affiliation with the kind of micro-identities found in Twitter communities and on Reddit boards. Davis laments that in the Culture of Open Options, education focuses on training for personal advancement rather than on cultivating attachments or honing professionalism. "To be educated for attachment," he writes, "is to learn the art of settling—into particular professions, crafts, causes, and communities—and to find there the peace of reverence and duty." Commitments foster looking out for others rather than only for ourselves: "They structure our world, giving us authority to respect, myths in which to see ourselves, and communities in which we have a voice." An earnest invitation to reassess personal priorities.

**OPERATION BARBAROSSA**

_The History of a Cataclysm_

Dimbleby, Jonathan

Oxford Univ. (496 pp.)

$34.95 | Jun. 1, 2021

978-0-19-754721-2

A chilling reassessment of the Nazi invasion of Russia in June 1941.

Dimbleby's premise, similar to that of other historians, is that Hitler's attempted conquest of Russia, like Napoleon's march on Moscow more than a century earlier, was a supreme act of hubris and miscalculation. The author begins in April 1922, with a delineation of the Rapallo Treaty, which encouraged the Germans and Soviets, who were both exasperated after World War I, to create a mutual aid pact that allowed Germany to skirt the punitive strictures of the Treaty of Versailles and build up its armaments. This was the precursor to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, which shocked the world but again displayed the deep suspicions of the British held by the Soviet Union and Germany. Indeed, as Prime Minister Lloyd George lamented, Rapallo represented "the deepest slime of pre-war treachery and intrigue," since Hitler had no intention of keeping his word to the Bolsheviks he despised. Dimbleby writes in excruciating detail of the Germans' march toward Kiev, Leningrad, and Moscow, resulting in hideous carnage on both sides, as well as the Nazis' cynical design of a "Hunger Plan" for the invaded country—i.e., deliberate starvation. Though the Nazis, who considered the Slavic people to be "subhuman," expected a swift victory, they were continually surprised by the fierce resistance. Weeks of standoff with his generals weakened Hitler's resolve to take Moscow first, diverting badly needed resources into Crimea and toward Leningrad. Over the course of this masterly chronicle, Dimbleby shows that while the imbalance of man and materiel worked in the Soviet Union's favor, "the collapse of Barbarossa owed more, far more, to a catalogue of self-deceptions, false assumptions, and miscalculations that flowed directly from the arrogance of the German High Command and the folly of its supreme commander, the Führer." Though he acknowledges the work of Ian Kershaw and other notable historians, he delivers his own fresh perspective.

An excellent addition to the library of any World War II buff.

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**BRING YOUR BAGGAGE AND DON'T PACK LIGHT**

_Essays_

Ellis, Helen

Doubleday (192 pp.)

$23.00 | Jul. 13, 2021

978-0-385-54015-7

The author of _American Housewife_ and _Southern Lady Code_ cuts loose with uproarious observations on friendship, middle age, and her own life.

In this essay collection, Ellis considers her everyday world from the perspective of a quirky midlife Southern woman who sees the lighter side of everything, including dire situations. In the first piece, “Grown-Ass Ladies Gone Mild,” the author recounts a series of escapades with childhood friends. Just before the first trip, one friend was diagnosed with breast cancer. Through quasi-adolescent hijinks—including zany water park rides, an evening at a Smoky Mountain theater watching _Long Island Medium_ Theresa Caputo, and a text-message celebration of the friend’s new breast implants—Ellis and her friends strengthened their “lady gang” bonds in defiance of death. Another essay, “Are You There Menopause? It’s Me, Helen” satirizes Judy Blume’s classic, _Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret_. Ellis observes how the unpredictable, sometimes embarrassing bodily changes brought on by the climacteric are just like puberty. The only difference is that women, rather than boys, are “the ones who get a mustache.” Other essays showcase the author’s deadpan humor, such as the mock-manifesto “I’m a Believer!” There, Ellis lets her “freak flag” fly and writes, “I believe in what goes around comes around, reincarnation, and time travel, so my idea of heaven is being Betty White on Match Game.” In “There’s a Lady at the Poker Table,” Ellis cheerfully details how the same Southern lady “primness” she undercuts as well as anyone who enjoys the quick-witted jocularity of a singular Southern woman who refuses to let anything—or anyone—get her down.

Like her previous books, this one is darkly hilarious and nearly always on-point.
How the electronic cigarette industry emerged, evolved, and imploded beneath the weight of controversy and grievous misguidance.

In this comprehensive scrutiny of the vaping craze and the business behind it, Bloomberg News investigative reporter Etter focuses on two major contributors. Faced with declining adult consumption metrics throughout the 1990s, cigarette titan Altria (previously known as Philip Morris Companies Inc.) and its former upper-level executive Howard Willard III, a tobacco-industry lifer, were desperate for a comeback. Etter seamlessly infuses this story with that of tech wunderkinds and ex-smokers James Monsees and Adam Bowen, who strived to develop a nicotine delivery prototype in 2006, positioned as a beneficial “public health contribution” and an alternative to more harmfully combustive tobacco products. The author diligently chronicles the numerous redesigns of their nicotine liquid vaporizing invention, the Juul, as well as the dogged attention from tobacco executives, whom Etter categorizes as “not unlike spies” as they grew gluttonous for opportunities to collaborate or create their own version of the vape pen. Despite “gung-ho dealmaker” Willard’s former contradictory affiliations with smoking cessation programs, he forged ahead, sacrificed public safety, and became a “Juulionaire” with many others. As the interests of big tobacco and Silicon Valley came together, the e-cigarette wars declared Juul the victor, though the product became mired in corruption regarding the maximization of nicotine’s psychoactive effects and deceptive advertising of candied flavor variations targeting youth on social media. The backlash from public safety watchdogs was brutal, and as consumer trust faltered, an onslaught of personal injury lawsuits sealed the product’s fate. Etter illuminates the crucial missteps that can occur when greed and poor leadership obscure the vision of an enterprising product. Armed with an immense body of research and insider interview material,
“An inspiring page-turner for all readers, especially those seeking to overcome significant obstacles to find success.”

MISEDUCATED

How a broken Black boy who was almost lost forever found himself—and many others.

Cornel West’s glowing introduction to Fleming’s debut memoir reveals the basic outlines of a journey “from a life of drugs, violence and hoop dreams to a quest for intellectual and spiritual excellence,” a journey that eventually led to Harvard. It is a tribute to Fleming’s spellbinding storytelling that you almost forget that you know how it ends. He begins with the aftermath of a suicide attempt made when he was an 18-year-old college dropout working on a grim assembly line, having seemingly forfeited his chances at success or happiness. The autobiographical account that follows shows how slim those chances were. “The factory was a dystopia,” he writes. “No one laughed. No one smiled. No one hugged in the morning. The first-shift workers filed into the factory like a grim assembly line, having seemingly forfeited their heartless tradition of recycling the dynastic names of dead children.” The early chapters move slowly as Flavell introduces generations of Georges and Sophias and Charlottes and remote ancestors to argue about and plenty for patient readers to enjoy.

An intelligent, sympathetic portrait that challenges popular views of the Howe family.
The author Gabriel García Márquez (1927-2014), and his mother, Mercedes Barcha, who died in 2020. His father’s life, Garcia reflects, seemed to him “one of the most fortunate and privileged” ever enjoyed by a Latin American. Yet Garcia was impelled to make “a deliberate, if unconscious choice” to distance himself from his father’s fame by living and working in Los Angeles. He traveled frequently to Mexico during his father’s final years, when García Márquez descended into dementia, able to recall only those whom he saw daily—a secretary, driver, cook, and, of course, his beloved wife. When Garcia and his brother visited, he looked at them “with uninhibited curiosity” but no recognition.

The man they were speaking to, though welcoming, was “hardly there at all.” However, his death, while expected, still felt like a shock. “Beyond the sadness,” Garcia writes, “is the disbelief that such an exuberant, expansive man, forever intoxicated with life and with the travails of the living, has been extinguished.” When his mother died six years later, the sense of loss was compounded. “The death of the second parent is like looking through a telescope one night and no longer finding a planet that has always been there,” he writes. “It has vanished, with its religion, its customs, its own peculiar habits and rituals, big and small. The echo remains.” Although his parents were determined to keep their personal lives private from inquiring journalists and literary fans, Garcia recounts in sensitive detail his father’s last days. “My father,” he writes, “complained that one of the things he hated most about death was that it was the only aspect of his life he would not be able to write about.” His son sensitively completes the story, and he includes family photos.

A warm homage filled with both fond and painful memories.

THREE DAYS AT CAMP DAVID
How a Secret Meeting in 1971 Transformed the Global Economy
Garten, Jeffrey E.
Harper/HarperCollins (448 pp.)
$29.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-06-288767-2

Scratch a certain kind of old-school conservative, and you’ll hit a nerve that’s still raw over the restructuring of U.S. currency to tie it to the open market and not to the fixed exchange rate linked to a government stockpile of gold. Even Nixon himself wasn’t sold on the idea, though some of his economic advisers successfully argued that the fixed rate led to trade protectionism and discouraged international partners from developing the economic robustness that would allow them to shoulder their fair share of the burden of, say, maintaining NATO. By 1971, writes Garten, dean emeritus of the Yale School of Management, “the dollar–gold problem seemed too big and too complex, and no one was sure how to fix it without causing major global upheavals.” Hence the weekendlong secret meeting at Camp David that brought together economic strategists of varying ideological stripes. One was Arthur Burns, head of the Federal Reserve, once a strong Nixon ally who became dismayed by the president’s politicization of the economy. Though Nixon resisted Keynesian wage and price controls that some of those advisers would propound, he eventually realized “that only mandatory regulations would suffice.” While sometimes succumbing to the thick prose of the dismal science, Garten delivers incisive portraits of key players such as John Connally, secretary of the treasury; George Schultz, who “foreshadowed more than anyone else the Thatcher-Reagan revolution of extensive deregulation that was less than a decade away”; and Pete Peterson, who “captured Nixon’s attention by focusing on the decline of U.S. competitiveness and the measures necessary to reverse the nation’s deteriorating position.” In the end, although it meant that the U.S. acknowledged that it was not the sole arbiter of the world economy and surrendered some political power as well, the Camp David meeting and restructuring of the economy was “an impressive achievement.”

Fiscal and monetary policy wonks will admire Garten’s skillful narrative and thorough research.

RACING THE CLOCK
Running Across a Lifetime
Heinrich, Bernd
Ecco/HarperCollins (224 pp.)
$27.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-06-297327-6

The award-winning biologist chronicles his experiences with long-distance running.

Heinrich has two main passions: biology and running. In his latest book, similar in spirit to Why We Run (2001), he takes us back to his childhood in the woods of Maine, where his love for both began. After moving to the U.S. from Germany, running provided the author with an in to American society, allowing him to forge friendships with other running enthusiasts. Heinrich discusses his educational pursuits in the field of biology and his career as a professor at the University of California and the University of Vermont. Through his scientific research, he writes, the author became aware of similarities between humans and other animals. Throughout the book, he examines many of his theories, including concepts related to speed and endurance, temperature regulation, and the effects of body rejuvenation, exercise, and aging. Heinrich switches gears frequently, weaving details about his professional research and published works into accounts of his successful career as a runner. At age 39, Heinrich won his first marathon. Beginning with his first victory, he longed for more, aiming to increase his speed and endurance with each passing race. Heinrich went on to compete in numerous ultramarathon events, and though he experienced setbacks, like any runner or athlete, he also set numerous records. In 1986, he appeared on the front cover of Running Times, which featured an “unreal headline” that read, “Ultra-Fast: At Age 45,
Bern Heinrich Is the Best Runner in America at Four Different Distances.” Of course, as time has passed, the effects of aging have forced him to pace himself more efficiently. Fittingly, at age 80, Heinrich’s most-recent race (and last, according to him) was a 50K trail race, which offered him the opportunity to combine his love of running and nature.

Passionate meditations on the pleasures and pains of a lifetime of running, with greatest appeal to fellow runners.

**THE UGLY CRY**
**A Memoir**
Henderson, Danielle
Viking (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-525-55935-1

A Black TV writer chronicles her survival of domestic violence, sexual assault, and abandonment.

When Henderson was a child, her mother, Robin, was in an abusive relationship that ultimately destroyed their family. At the time, Robin’s boyfriend, Luke, had moved into the house and refused to leave. Henderson vividly and heartbreakingly describes her experiences with Luke’s violence, which ranged from slapping her when she locked her bedroom door to do a homework assignment without her brother’s interference to sexually assaulting her in her bedroom at night. Eventually, Luke was arrested for child abuse, and Henderson believed that her nightmare might be over. But instead of rebuilding what was left of their family, Henderson’s mother dropped her and her brother, Cory, off at their grandmother’s house and reunited with Luke, a decision that gutted her daughter. At the time, she writes, “I was living in a crevasse, pressed between anger and fear. A month later, the anger gave way completely to the fear. She hadn’t even called. What if she never came back?” As one of the only Black teenagers in her mostly White town, the author had to process her racial identity alongside the trauma of surviving an abusive relationship. Henderson writes candidly about how her unprocessed grief led to depression and suicidal ideation. Eventually, her grandmother helped her on the path to effective treatment. “The first time I felt confident and happy again at the same time,” she writes, she was 43. Henderson writes with an incredible amount of vulnerability, presenting her story with a clear-eyed compassion for her mother, grandmother, and, ultimately, herself.

A redemptive memoir about a Black woman’s victory over childhood abuse, racism, and mental illness.

**HATCHET MAN**
**How Bill Barr Broke the Prosecutor’s Code and Corrupted the Justice Department**
Honig, Elie
Harper/HarperCollins (288 pp.)
$28.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-06-309236-5

A full-throated condemnation of the recently departed attorney general.

“A tremendously timely and important study of the rhetoric of hatred in our times.”
**IT CAN HAPPEN HERE**

Rutgers anthropologist Hinton offers deep instruction for anyone seeking to better understand the bigotry that permeates American society. As the founder and director of the Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights and an expert witness in the prosecution of Khmer Rouge ideologue Nuon Chea, who was convicted of genocide in the international tribunal in Cambodia in 2018, the author is well situated to investigate the topic. Structuring the narrative around his college seminars, he uses as a point of departure the 1935 bestseller by Sinclair Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here*, which focused on a populist demagogue who advanced bigoted, dictatorial themes, just as Trump did decades later. Hinton is deeply concerned with the idea of why people hate and how that hate plays out publicly. The violent Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 plays a large role in this work, as the author shows how previously hidden White supremacist ideologies came to the fore. Hinton shows how these “ruptures” are simply one element of a long-standing systemic problem that Trump flushed into the open. “His presidency,” writes the author, “was a symptom of a long and enduring history of systemic white power in the United States, one filled with moments in which genocide and mass violence took place.” In addition to contextual background, Hinton moves methodically through specific White supremacist texts. As a committed teacher in the Socratic method, the author continually teases out answers from his intelligent, engaged students, who recognize that “it” has already happened here, many times over—from Native genocide to slavery to Jim Crow to the recent proliferation of White supremacy. As the author closes his well-researched, readable account in July 2020, one only wishes he could have included a section on the violent acts of Jan 6, 2021.

**A tremendously timely and important study of the rhetoric of hatred in our times.**
If former Southern District of New York prosecutor Honig, now a CNN analyst, has any use for William Barr, you wouldn’t know it from these barbed pages. For one thing, Barr has “never tried a single case, in the trenches, as a prosecutor.” In that, he was like many in the Trump administration, lacking the credentials required to do the job. But Barr had numerous things in his favor, insofar as securing the gig was concerned. For example, “as a private citizen,” he wrote his famous “audition memo,” in which he questioned the legitimacy of the Mueller investigation and advocated executive powers so extensive that the president was on the verge of becoming a dictator. This ties in with Barr’s virulent, theologically based fundamentalism, which, among other planks, militated against rights for gay people and other marginalized minorities. Barr politicized the Justice Department to become an instrument of power for Trump, even after his electoral loss in 2020. “As Trump cast about for some basis on which to contest the outcome,” writes Honig, “Barr instructed prosecutors that they were now free to pursue election fraud cases even while certification of election results was still pending.”

The author prefaced his damning, convincing account by enumerating characteristics “that infected Barr’s approach to his position as the nation’s top prosecutor.” He is “a liar” and “an eager political partisan” who “used the attorney general position to impose his own legal and philosophical views on how civil society ought to function.” As for his surprise resignation just before Trump left office? Self-serving self-preservation, writes Honig, with perhaps a smattering of concern for legacy behind it. Even so, Barr went out the door having accelerated the schedule for the execution of federal prisoners, one more sign of his “thirst for power, fueled by a religious certainty in his duty and right to impose order on the world.”

A resounding excoriation of an unquestionably corrupt operator.

Testosterone plays in sexual violence and aggressiveness of other kinds. Much of this boils down to the ancient question of nature vs. nurture, and Hooven walks a fine line between the two. Carefully, she notes how our now-well-developed scientific understanding of the biochemistry of testosterone does not mean that “we have to accept current levels of sexual assault, harassment, discrimination, or coercion.” The author privileges definitions of sex while not giving much breathing room for contending notions of gender. Exploring the question of why the play of boys and girls is different, “it is a remarkable and unexplained coincidence that social forces have exactly reproduced the kinds of differences in play that would be predicted from endocrinology and evolution— in every human culture where they have been studied.” As for the matter of how much testosterone figures into the appallingly high levels of violence in the U.S. and elsewhere, Hooven writes, “taking arrest rates as a rough proxy for the composition of offenders, men commit 80 to 85 percent of violent crimes in the United States.” Then the author brings socialization into the picture to allow for circumstance, personality, and other non-T factors. In the end, “it’s complicated.”

Moderately interesting popular science likely to excite academic debate on sex and gender.

The title of Hopper’s book (which revises and expands a 2015 edition) isn’t a brag but rather an air horn announcing a problem: Just as female musicians have been dismissed, marginalized, and abused by a patriarchal industry, Hopper is just one of many women music journalists who was told “it was perverse to tangle up music criticism with feminism or my personal experience.” So being “first” is as much a lament as an assertion, but the best pieces show how thoughtfully the author has used her position. Essays on Liz Phair, Kim Gordon, Miley Cyrus, and Lana Del Rey underscore how the negative “personalas applied to them are often used to obscure and undermine their talent. In one emotionally intense interview, Björk reveals how, more than four decades into her career, she’s had to prove she writes her songs. Hopper elevates underappreciated women-led acts like D.C. punks Chalk Circle and calls out misogyny in the system: Her landmark 2003 essay, “Emo: Where the Girls Aren’t,” chastised the scene for confusing sad-boy sensitivity with proactive feminism, and she reports on women country artists’ oft-futile efforts...
An acerbic and laser-focused demand for restorative racial justice from an ardent advocate.

HOW TO SURVIVE AMERICA

Hughley, D.L. & Moe, Doug
Custom House/Morrow (240 pp.)
$29.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-06-307275-6

In his fifth book, the comedian and activist continues his diatribe against the country’s “chronic illness” of systemic racism.

Throughout his latest, written in roughly the same blunt, no-nonsense style as How Not To Get Shot and Surrender, White People! Hughley focuses on the preposterous assumption that minority populations are predisposed to—and mostly to blame for—the injustices they’re forced to endure. Writing with frequent contributor Moe, Hughley combines his comedic talents with personal history and experience as a political commentator to address glaring discrepancies between White and Black populations regarding overall health, access to health care, toxic environments, educational bias, and violence. The author excoriates much of the former presidential administration, especially Jerome Adams and Ben Carson, for callously placing the blame for rising Covid-19 infections on the minority communities mostly to blame for—the injustices they’re forced to endure. Hughley is palpably exasperated by the ineffectiveness of racial equality movements and the generational trickle-down effects of systemic racism. More darkly humorous, with fewer laugh-out-loud moments than Surrender, this book, saturated with justified anger and frustration, speaks to the fact that persistent racism in the U.S. is no laughing matter.

A canny blend of punkish attitude and discographical smarts that blasts boys-club assumptions about pop music.

DISTANT FATHERS

Jarre, Marina
Trans. by Goldstein, Ann
New Vessel Press (180 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Jun. 22, 2021
978-1-939931-94-8

Midcentury European novelist Jarre (1925-2016) recalls the lifetime of dislocations that formed her changing sense of self. Originally published in Italy in 1987, the book is translated by Goldstein, known for her work on Elena Ferrante’s Neapolitan novels. Jarre’s memoir opens with Goldstein’s comments and a critical introduction by Marta Barone, who is overseeing the reissue of Jarre’s works in Italian, hoping to restore her to “her rightful place in Italian literature.” Barone aptly characterizes the author’s virtues in this lament: “Why have her extraordinary novels and her unique voice, cool and searching, yet ironic, tender, brutal, and astonishingly attentive to life and its details—why has all this, all together, not endured?” The memoir is divided into three parts: childhood, adolescence, marriage and motherhood. Born in Riga, Latvia, Jarre and her sister moved to Italy with their mother after their parents split up (her Jewish father later died in the Holocaust). They lived with their French-speaking, Protestant grandparents outside then-fascist Turin. Jarre shows how her writerly perspective emerged with this first dislocation. “Time entered my life when I arrived in Torre Pellice with my sister,” she writes. “It gave me for the first time a past...the story of my childhood was what remained to me of my preceding existence, since in the space of a few weeks I changed country, language, and family circle.” She goes on to describe the herb garden that her mother planted in their new home. One of the throughlines of the book is Jarre’s difficult relationship with her seemingly cold mother. In the third section, in which she wrestles with the writing of this memoir, we see the two conferring about the details of that very passage. Like Nabokov’s Speak, Memory, this book is more concerned with time and perspective than narrative storytelling, though Jarre is more like Ferrante in her lack of nostalgia and unflinching focus on the difficulties of relationships.

Connoisseurs of literary memoir will enjoy Jarre’s precise way of capturing emotional experiences.

RAKE’S PROGRESS

The Madcap True Tale of My Political Midlife Crisis

Johnson, Rachel
Knopf (272 pp.)
$26.95 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-0-593-31819-5

A British journalist chronicles her 2019 run for office as a pro–European Union centrist just as her pro-Brexit conservative brother took office as prime minister.
Johnson remembers two things about her distinguished political family. First, that her brother Boris wanted to be “World King” from the time he was a small boy; and second, that her Oxford-educated mother believed it was a mistake to educate girls and then “not deliver” on the implied promise of social equality. Her later experiences in the male-dominated British education and employment systems eventually led her to conclude that “statecraft” was reserved for men. And Margaret Thatcher, of course. But when a new party that merged Brexit dissenters from both the left and the right emerged at the height of the controversy in 2019, she took notice. Change UK approached Johnson, who had already gone on record as a “fervent and noisy Remainer,” and asked her to run for a position as a member of the European Parliament. She accepted and soon realized that her background as a working mother “was actually a perfect preparation for the shitshow that is dipping a toe into politics.” Work colleagues openly told her she would lose while social media detractors sniped Johnson for her “Seventies porn star” hair and other trifling matters. Many members of the media and the political establishment—as well as most of the members of her own family, including Boris, who became prime minister shortly after she lost the election in May—ignored that she was even running for office. Illustrated throughout with personal photos, this quietly feminist book not only offers humorous insight into the politics of a divided, madly competitive family. Johnson also reveals how conservative extremism and the politics of fear are not just an American issue, but are reshaping the political world as we know it.

A wittily provocative look at British politics.

WHEN THE STARS BEGIN TO FALL
Overcoming Racism and Renewing the Promise of America

Johnson, Theodore R.
Atlantic Monthly (320 pp.)
$26.00 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-8021-5785-0

Racism isn’t just a distraction, writes public policy scholar and former naval commander Johnson: It’s “an existential threat to America.”

Racism is a driver of America’s original sin, by which African people were enslaved and, in the years since, relegated to “trickle-down citizenship” status. As the author warns, if the national belief in the Jeffersonian formula that we are all created equal and hold inalienable rights disappears, “America will be dead, too.” Johnson holds Black America up as a model of a bulwark, one that by necessity has to unite in solidarity to resist racism. “Black solidarity,” he writes, “teaches us about superlative citizenship, the necessity but inadequacy of laws and policies, unity in a common cause, and how to exercise solidarity in a heterogenous society.” However, there is a more insidious aspect of racism at work: It’s not so much that individual people may harbor racist thoughts but that racism is a de facto instrument of state policy and “is more usefully understood as a crime of the state.” The conversation will never be easy; of course. As Johnson notes, Barack Obama’s ratings fell markedly among White voters when he talked about race in the context of the “beer summit,” by which many Whites concluded that he was prejudiced against them simply by virtue of pointing out the fact of racism. Meanwhile, when shown all the ways that racism manifests itself—in housing and income inequalities, differential access to education, and so forth—many Whites wonder how it is that they can be held responsible for it while Black Americans “wonder why there is such resistance to ameliorating the un-American conditions that continue to plague the parts of society where they live, work, and play.”

An impassioned denunciation of structural racism that invites a search for lasting answers.

A transcendent vision left dark shadows.

Founded in 1968, Auroville, in southern India, was “an aspiring utopia” aiming to “illuminate a new path for the planet.” Kapur, Whiting Creative Nonfiction grantee, was born there, as was his wife, Auralice. Both left for the U.S. as teenagers; in 2004, they returned to raise a family. Melding history, biography, and memoir, the author offers a sensitive examination of Auroville’s complex origins, tumultuous evolution, and, not least, “the very idea of utopia and the search for perfection.” Central to the narrative are Auralice’s mother and adoptive father, Diane Maes and John Walker, who died in 1986, when Auralice was 14: John, from a severe illness for which he refused medical care; Diane, by ingesting poisonous seeds. Their deaths, Kapur writes, “loomed huge in our lives” and in the community’s collective memory. Led in its early years by a Parisian-born woman whom spiritual leader Sri Aurobindo designated as the Mother, Auroville attracted idealistic individuals seeking to escape the “broken materialism” of Western culture—a world that Walker, pampered and wealthy, knew well. Although his family did not understand his commitment to Auroville, they amply funded his quest. Despite its spiritual underpinnings, the community suffered violent conflicts, intensifying after the Mother’s death in 1973. Utopia, Kapur reflects astutely, “is so often shot through with the worst forms of callousness and cruelty. Human beings—individuals, families—are mere sideshows in the quest for a perfect world; they are sacrificed at the altar of ideals.” Still, the author portrays with generosity the consuming faith that led Maes and Walker to endure suffering and to leave Auralice abandoned. “Who am I,” he writes, “to doubt
that there are more things in this world than fit within my limited philosophy?” Describing the book as a “shared endeavor,” Kapur underscores Auralice’s need to make sense of the deaths that traumatized her.

A discerning portrait of a storied community.

**INSIDE MONEY**

*Brown Brothers Harriman and the American Way of Power*

*Karabell, Zachary*

Penguin Press (448 pp.)

$30.00 | May 18, 2021

978-1-59420-661-0

Historian Karabell examines the long history of a financial services firm that exercised outsized power in the political sphere.

Brown Brothers, a firm as old as the nation, merged in the Depression with a smaller firm headed by Prescott Bush, whose family and fortunes were intertwined with those of Averell Harriman, “the debonair yet tight-lipped eldest son of the pugnacious railroad baron E.H. Harriman.” Brown Brothers had avoided investing in railroads in generations past, which made the merger seem unlikely, and the two firms operated very differently, the one using private resources, the other borrowing widely. Still, Brown Brothers Harriman “became a pillar of what would soon be called the American Establishment.” In the next decade, the firm would also become an agent for the exportation of American capitalism as a means of containing Soviet ambitions. Karabell digs deep into the history of the intertwined firm, sometimes revealing uncomfortable truths, such as Brown Brothers’ deep involvement in the Southern cotton economy and thus implication in the institution of slavery. In the balance, however, the more important story is the wedding of American money to global power. In the postwar era, the U.S. became a creditor and not a debtor nation, and members of the firm took political positions in diplomacy and defense and helped administer foreign-aid efforts such as the Marshall Plan.

“In a few short years,” Karabell writes, “they succeeded beyond all measure in erecting a system of laws and institutions and the primacy of the dollar that came to govern almost every country on the planet by the end of the twentieth century.” They also exhibited a form of financial conservatism that would soon give way to the wild, risky speculation of the 1970s and beyond, a conservatism that Karabell counsels would serve us well today.

A readable, unfailingly interesting study on the making of the American century.

**EMPIRE OF PAIN**

*The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty*

*Keefe, Patrick Radden*

Doubleday (560 pp.)

$32.50 | Apr. 13, 2021

978-0-385-54568-6

Richly researched account of the Sackler pharmaceutical dynasty, agents of the opioid-addiction epidemic that plagues us today.

In his latest excellent book, Keefe opens in a conference room packed with lawyers, all there to depose “a woman in her early seventies, a medical doctor, though she had never actually practiced medicine.” Kathe Sackler, thanks to the invention of a drug called OxyContin, was a member of one of the wealthiest families in the world, holding some $14 billion. The founder of that dynasty had established numerous patterns that held for generations. Though he had insisted that family philanthropy be prominently credited “through elaborate ‘naming rights’ contracts,” the family name would not extend to their pharmaceutical company, Purdue Pharma. The family would also not accept responsibility for any untoward effects that its products might have. Thus, when asked whether she acknowledged that hundreds of thousands of Americans had become addicted to OxyContin, Kathe answered, “I don’t know the answer to that.” Keefe turns up plenty of answers, including the details of how the Sacklers—the first generation of three brothers, followed by their children and grandchildren—marketed their goods, beginning with “ethical drugs” (as distinct from illegal ones) to treat mental illness, Librium and then Valium, which were effectively the same thing but were advertised as treating different maladies: “If Librium was the cure for ‘anxiety,’ Valium should be prescribed for ‘psychic tension.’ ” By Keefe’s reckoning, by the mid-1970s, Valium was being prescribed 60 million times per year, resulting in fantastic profits for Purdue. OxyContin followed in 1996—and then the opioid crisis, responsibility for which has been heavily litigated and for which the Sacklers finally filed bankruptcy even though they “remained one of the wealthiest families in the United States.” Of particular interest is the book-closing account of the Sacklers’ legal efforts to intimidate the author as he tried to make his way through the “fog of collective denial” that shrouded them.

A definitive, damning, urgent tale of overweening avarice at tremendous cost to society.
Two legal titans who have been defending abortion rights for decades catch us up on the current disaster and plot the road ahead.

In 1992, Kolbert argued Planned Parenthood v. Casey, the case credited with saving Roe v. Wade, and Kay was instrumental in the legalization of abortion in Ireland. As they note at the beginning, they were motivated to write this book “because we both knew the Supreme Court was not the place to go to protect, never mind expand, abortion rights. We were tired of our movement repeatedly banging its head against the Court’s marble walls and sought to strategize an affirmative path forward.” Then, as they were writing, the appointment of Justice Amy Coney Barrett made the conservative majority even more likely. Yet as the authors point out, abortion is a common medical procedure for women: Nearly 1 in 4 has an abortion by age 45. As such, “the abortion debate is an embodiment of the conflict between traditional and more modern concepts of gender roles.” By placing abortion in a human rights context—thus connecting it to racial inequality, homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny in general—Kolbert and Kay “offer an opportunity to dream bigger and differently and to bring in new allies.” They share the firsthand stories of their landmark cases as well as heartbreaking dramas from the front lines. These include the bribing of the original Jane Roe by conservatives to flip her position on abortion; kidnapping charges against a woman who tried to help a pregnant 13-year-old; the senseless death of a young mother who was refused a medically necessary abortion; and the incarceration of a woman who ordered abortion medication for her daughter. In the closing chapters, the authors speak directly to current and potential activists, sharing the “big dreams” mentioned earlier—e.g., the EACH Woman Act (Equal Access to Abortion Coverage in Health Insurance)—and many other practical ideas.

A knowledgeable, essential reframing of an incendiary issue based on common sense, historical fact, and simple decency.

**CONTROLLING WOMEN**
What We Must Do Now To Save Reproductive Freedom
Kolbert, Kathryn & Kay, Julie F.
Hachette (288 pp.)
$28.00 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-0-306-92562-7

**THE PREMONITION**
A Pandemic Story
Lewis, Michael
Norton (304 pp.)
$26.99 | May 4, 2021
978-0-393-88155-4

The bestselling author turns to the Covid-19 pandemic and the failure of the U.S. government to contain it effectively.

“Trump was a comorbidity,” one source told Lewis, speaking of the spread of the virus through the country. The Trump administration ignored the threat, failed to act on it, and then tried to suppress those who were advocating lockdowns, school closures, and other measures to avoid the worst-case scenarios that emerged.

As Lewis notes, the *Lancet*, one of the world’s leading medical journals, calculated that if the U.S. had followed the models of its G7 partners, 180,000 of the nearly 600,000 victims would still be alive. In an intricate background section, Lewis delivers a study of how epidemiologists and others had long predicted the pandemic. A high school student, for example, developed a model for a science-fair project in which she determined that just the opposite of the tactic later used of vaccinating older people first, since they were the ones who were interacting socially—just the opposite of the tactic later used of vaccinating older people first. Other case studies include the work of a dauntless California public health examiner who tracked the spread of hepatitis and other communicable diseases, all of which provided object lessons that were often lost to political considerations. George W. Bush emerges as a perhaps unlikely case of someone who did the right thing with respect to epidemics while Barack Obama stumbled before getting it right. As for his successor, Lewis writes, “the Trump White House lived by the tacit rule last observed by the Reagan administration: the only serious threat to the American way of life came from other nation-states.” The result was a woefully disjointed response that “got pushed down in the system, onto local health officers,” most of whom were unprepared for the challenge and lacked the means to do much about it.

An urgent, highly readable contribution to the literature of what might be called the politics of disease.

**LONDON’S NUMBER ONE DOG-WALKING AGENCY**
A Memoir
MacDougall, Kate
Morrow/HarperCollins (304 pp.)
$27.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-06-305978-8

A British freelance journalist’s story about starting a dog-walking business that took her out of a post-college rut and into the contentment of a settled life.

MacDougall was a bored sales assistant at Sotheby’s when she asked herself two significant questions: “Is this it?...This is adulthood?” After accidentally destroying clay pigeons awaiting valuation, she decided to take a chance on another career: dog-walking. People who knew about her plans to start her own dog-walking service—including her mother, who believed all the author needed was a husband—raised their eyebrows. Yet MacDougall forged ahead, thrilled to work with creatures who reveled in their “perfectly uncomplicated” lives. What she had yet to learn was that the dogs she loved were attached to owners, each with their own neuroses. Some dogs required “a full bath and a blow dry after every walk,” and one owner asked the author to use a Baby Bjorn to take the dog to the park. One
“An infectiously appealing overview of efforts to contain the potentially infectious.”

Until Proven Safe

A captivating survey of the uses and abuses of quarantines, from the days of the Black Death to the lockdowns of Covid-19.

Journalists Manaugh and Twilley meld a global view of a timely subject with vividly detailed accounts of quarantines, whether of people or hazardous plants, animals, and chemicals such as nuclear waste. The authors show how—since the emergence of “lazarettos,” the quarantine hospitals of medieval Venice and other Adriatic ports—authorities have strived to contain dreaded hazards. Among many others, these have included the bubonic plague, yellow fever, tuberculosis, Ebola, and cholera. Yet some problems resist solutions. “Although the advent of advanced contagion modeling, location tracking, and data mining offer the promise of refining quarantine, rendering it so minimal and precise as to be almost imperceptible,” the authors write, “the use of those tools during COVID-19 has demonstrated that, in many ways, effective quarantine has changed remarkably little since its origins during the Black Death.” Persistent challenges include the tedium of isolation, the architectural rigors of designing suitable facilities, and the xenophobic use of quarantine “to obstruct the passage of undesirable immigrants at the border and stigmatize those who have already arrived.” For such risks, the authors propose fresh, sensible remedies such as a “bill of rights” for the quarantined. Individuals can protect an animal kingdom in crisis. The author, a former meat eater who is now vegan, reminds readers that humans “started off being hunted by [animals] before we turned into hunters.” He argues that the notion of animal pain did not become a seriously discussed topic in ethics until philosopher Jeremy Bentham wrote about it in 1789. Taking temporary jobs at a slaughterhouse and observing a Portuguese fishery and fish market, Mance witnessed—and questioned—the taking of animals for human consumption. He also investigated meat alternatives such as the Impossible burger and went on hunting trips to help him understand when and how the killing of animals might be justified.

An urgent, humane, and exceptionally well-documented book.
The Today Show host chronicles his family’s story through dark times and great obstacles.

Melvin looks back at his upbringing in Columbia, South Carolina, during the 1980s and 1990s. Though he focuses on his relationship with his father, many other members of his large family play important supporting roles in the memoir. Melvin is in his early 40s, but he has enough experience and wisdom to be able to see his father through a very different lens than when he was younger, when his father’s absences, sullenness, and emotional distance troubled him. Gradually, he learned that his father was a severe alcoholic—and not just an alcoholic, but addiction prone in general, as when he lost himself to video poker, “the crack cocaine of gambling” (now outlawed in the state), squandering much of his paycheck. Melvin has a canny way of putting readers in his younger shoes, capably demonstrating his confusion and need for approval and how these factors shaped his personal-ity. He worked diligently to avoid his father’s fate and become a self-confident, communicative, empathetic adult. The author also fills in the background of the “soft racism” of Columbia and what it was like for a Black family to move across the river to downtown. Many members of his extended family move in and out of the narrative, each bringing their own quirks, strengths, and weaknesses. But it all comes back to his Pops, and Melvin won’t settle for a simple answer: “hindered by his own family history, his own parents’ shortcomings and dearth of resources, his lack of a good role model…the systematic and overt racism he faced…the legacy of alcoholism—and likely an undiagnosed underlying depression.”

As the author grappled with his family’s legacy, he devised his own philosophy about child rearing: “You want to make their path as smooth as possible, but without spoiling them rotten.”

An emotionally and atmospherically deep celebration of a family that has stuck together through thin and thinner.

In this brilliant and compassionate account, Miles uses “an artifact with a cat’s nine lives” to tell “a quiet story of transformative love lived and told by ordinary African American women—Rose, Ashley, and Ruth—whose lives spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, slavery and freedom, the South and the North.” The sack, originally used for grain or seeds, was passed from Rose to her daughter Ashley in 1852, when Ashley was put on the auction block, and passed by Ashley to her granddaughter, Ruth Middleton. In the early 1920s, Ruth embroidered its history on it, including its contents: “a tattered dress, handfuls of pecans, a braid of Roses hair,” also “filled my Love always.” The sack is now on display at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Like those of most enslaved people, the stories of Rose and Ashley are largely lost to history, but Miles carefully unravels the records and makes a credible case that they may have been the property of Robert Martin in coastal South Carolina. From there, the author moves outward to sensitively establish the context in which the two managed to survive, describing how South Carolina became “a place where the sale of a colored child was not only possible but probable.” By the time Miles gets to Ruth, the historical record is more substantial. Married and pregnant at 16, Ruth moved from the South to Philadelphia around 1920 and eventually became “a regular figure in the Black society pages.” With careful historical examination as well as empathetic imagination, Miles effectively demonstrates the dignity and mystery of lives that history often neglects and opens the door to the examination of many untold stories.

A strikingly vivid account of the impact of connection on this family and others.

A professor of history at Harvard chronicles the historical journey of an embroidered cotton sack, beginning with the enslaved woman who gave it to her 9-year-old daughter in the 1850s.
however, confronted with Soviet policy aimed at expelling the three Western occupiers, he disobeyed. It helped that, unlike his British and French colleagues, he was both pugnacious and enterprising. Milton devotes two-thirds of the book to shouting matches, political skulduggery, and violent confrontation that might be called “comic-opera” if it weren’t for the Soviet willingness to engage in kidnapping, sabotage, and murder. Perhaps the high note was the 1946 Berlin city council election. Free elections were never a Soviet strength, but they deluged the electorate with food, privileges, propaganda, and promises only to be horrified at their landslide defeat with less than 20% of the vote. Finally exasperated, in 1948 they cut off all supplies, resulting in the iconic Berlin airlift. Many popular histories treat that operation as a dazzling triumph, but Milton’s detailed account reveals that Berliners starved and suffered intensely before Stalin called off the Soviet blockade. The author ends in 1949, with Berlin firmly divided, an outcome acceptable to the West but a persistent drain on the Soviet Union that ultimately contributed to its collapse.

Entertaining if unedifying fireworks in postwar Berlin.

The federal government has a moral and constitutional right to regulate digital platforms.

In the latest installment of the publisher’s Inalienable Rights series, longtime Harvard Law School professor Minow offers a cogent analysis of the contemporary news ecosystem along with suggestions for much-needed reforms. Newton Minow, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission and the author’s father, notes in his preface that “two words—public interest—are disappearing from communications policy.” With the dominance of digital sources, he adds, speech has become so democratized “that no one can be heard, bad actors flood social media, and democratic deliberation is damaged.” The author identifies major problems in news access, such as the declining roles of professional journalists and news outlets; the rise of “foreign actors, bots, and manipulative interests” on digital platforms; and the turning over of editorial activity to algorithms. Without reforms, she writes, “access to information, checks on falsehoods, government accountability, and journalism exposing corruption and other abuses of power are all in severe jeopardy.” The Constitution does not preclude governmental intervention, she asserts; “the First Amendment constrains Congress from abridging the freedom of the press and the freedom of speech, but it does not bar actions to strengthen them.” At present, antitrust law, tax law, government subsidies, intellectual property law, and libel and defamation laws all coexist with the First Amendment. Minow examines a series of possible reforms, including requiring payment for news circulated on social media, to help support journalists and editors; curtailing immunity of platforms such as Google and Facebook to liability suits; regulating large digital platforms as public utilities; enforcing terms of service agreements to guard against fraud and deception; regulating and enforcing fraud protections; and supporting nonprofit consumer-protection efforts and nonprofit news sources. Acknowledging that “no one initiative would be sufficient,” Minow underscores the urgency of restoring public interest to communications policy.

Thoughtful proposals for protecting the integrity of news.

SAVING THE NEWS
Why the Constitution Calls for Government Action To Preserve Freedom of Speech

Martha Minow
Oxford Univ. (248 pp.)
$24.95 | Jul. 1, 2021
978-0-19-094841-2

The federal government has a moral and constitutional right to regulate digital platforms.

CULTISH
The Language of Fanaticism

Montell, Amanda
Harper Wave (272 pp.)
$27.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-06-299315-1

A scrutiny of the social science behind cult communication.

With the same verve demonstrated in her debut on feminism and language, Wordplay (2019), Montell explores how language can manipulate masses of people in detrimental ways. Using accessible prose, the author discusses the varied definitions of the word cult, the dangers of universally demonizing its terminology, and its murky history as society’s relationship with spirituality has evolved. Montell has always been intrigued by her father’s involvement in the Synanon movement in the 1970s, and she explores a wide range of “fanatical fringe groups with extreme ideologies.” The author compares their initial appeal to scanning the scene of an accident: The brain must assess the personal threat level and activate its “fight or flight” reaction. There is also the organic human need for communal intimacy, purpose, belonging, and organizational order. Montell intensively explores how the misleading euphemisms, politized buzzwords, mantras, and subconsciously suggestive phrasing of “cult language” can be channeled and weaponized to mercilessly exploit participants of such “organizations” as QAnon and the notorious sex-trafficking group NXIVM. The author is an engaging storyteller, sharing tales of bizarre cult behavior found in a vast spectrum of memberships and organizations, including her own hard-sell encounter with Hollywood Scientologists. She also explores the mechanics of complex, multilevel marketing schemes like Amway. She chronicles her often shocking interviews with people who have been seduced by shadowy New Age groups like the 3HO Foundation as well as survivors of suicide cults like the Jonestown People’s Temple and the doomsayers of the Heaven’s Gate group. Of course, any discussion of cult-like language would be incomplete without hard-core fitness programs, and Montell diligently examines CrossFit, Peloton, and SoulCycle. With a provocative combination of interviews, anecdotes, and scientific and psychological research, Montell
educates and empowers readers to become more aware of “the varying dialects of Cultish that imbue our daily lives.”
A fascinating, enthusiastic narrative on the loaded language of cults.

THE WOMAN THEY COULD NOT SILENCE
One Woman, Her Incredible Fight for Freedom, and the Men Who Tried To Make Her Disappear
Moore, Kate
Sourcebooks (560 pp.)
$27.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-1-4926-9672-8

The author of The Radium Girls returns with an inspiring story of the tireless 19th-century woman who fought against gender-based injustices.
The titular woman is Elizabeth Packard (1816-1897), an Illinois mother of six who took on the legal system after she was involuntarily committed to the Jacksonville Insane Asylum in 1860 by her husband’s request. Elizabeth and her husband, Theophilus, 15 years her senior, initially appeared to have a typical marriage for a mid-19th-century American couple. That all changed as Theophilus, a minister, increasingly saw his wife’s outspoken support of women’s rights as a threat. As Moore demonstrates, while he had “long been in the habit of trying to control” his wife, Theophilus became more concerned when she began to offer more liberal opinions on theology, abolition, and the role of women to parishioners at his church. That led to an ominous threat from husband to wife: “I shall put you into the asylum!” Moore details Elizabeth’s three-year involuntary confinement and the sexist system that allowed husbands to have their wives declared insane without a diagnosis or legal hearing. Despite inhumane conditions, Elizabeth was determined to be declared sane and to become an advocate for women and the mentally ill through her own writings and advocacy. The trial in which she fought to be declared mentally fit was a media sensation, and though she prevailed, “she was now homeless. Penniless. Childless. All she had to her name were the clothes she stood up in and a manuscript she’d been repeatedly told would never see the light of day.” Drawing on sources like letters, memoirs, and trial transcripts, Moore’s well-researched book paints a clear picture of the obstacles Elizabeth faced both during and after her confinement and the cruel resoluteness of both her husband and doctor, who tried to control her at all costs.
A vivid look at the life and times of a little-known pioneer of women’s rights.

CHEYENNE SUMMER
The Battle of Beecher Island: A History
Mort, Terry
Pegasus (352 pp.)
$27.95 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-64313-710-0

A history of a significant 1868 U.S.–Native clash near the Kansas-Colorado border.
A Navy veteran who has written novels and multiple books about Native history, Mort spends the majority of his latest laying out the historical and cultural background against which the Battle of Beecher Island unfolded in September 1868. In the years after the Civil War, the completion of a railroad connecting the states on both coasts was a national priority. At the same time, the railroad—and the settlements along its route—posed a direct threat to the Native way of life across the Plains. For the Cheyenne, the ideal to which young men aspired was the life of a warrior, which was incompatible with daily life in the region, and the extreme individualism of the Cheyenne lifestyle meant that treaties signed by chiefs meant nothing to most of their people. Meanwhile, the prevailing attitude of the White settlers was that the Natives should be displaced so western expansion could continue. On the frontier, the Army, drastically reduced in size since the end of the war, was charged with keeping the peace. That was the situation when, in 1868, a scouting party set out to pursue a Cheyenne war party. Maj. George Forsyth decided to seek a battle despite the misgivings of Lt. Frederick Beecher, for whom the battle is named. The troops ended up surrounded by hundreds of Cheyenne and Sioux on a small island in a narrow creek, holding off attackers with their repeating rifles. Mort bases his detailed, page-turning account largely on recollections by Forsyth and by Cheyenne warrior George Bent, creating a nuanced portrayal of a battle that epitomizes the struggle to settle the Plains. The story will appeal to readers interested in U.S.–Native conflict after the Civil War.
A rich addition to the popular military history of the late-18th-century frontier.

LEAVING BREEZY STREET
A Memoir
Myers-Powell, Brenda & Reynolds, April
Henry Holt (288 pp.)
$26.99 | Jun. 29, 2021
978-0-374-15169-0

An earnest memoir of life on the mean streets by the founder of a survivors group.
As the book opens, Myers-Powell, a former prostitute and drug addict, has just moved to Gary, Indiana, to live with her brother, who had moved from their native Chicago after he was robbed, and to
try to pull her life back together. “I left my family twelve years before as a drop-dead beauty,” she writes, “and came back a messed-up crackhead.” Her world was one of shattered families and low expectations. Raised by a mean-spirited grandmother and pregnant early in her teenage years, Myers-Powell became a prostitute simply to survive. She was frequently raped and robbed by “gorilla pimps,” who “are brutal [and] can get creative with their violence.” Throughout the author’s early life, violence surrounded her (“Nobody was left in the house alive except a three-year-old baby. Some cold-blooded shit—they killed everybody. Shot them all in the head”). One by one, her friends on the streets fell victim to a Hobbesian world, and it was the same wherever she went: New Orleans, Los Angeles, rural truck stops in Indiana, back to Chicago, and back forth. Myers-Powell sometimes expresses defiant pride (“I was the baddest ho out there”) that she managed to free herself of her pimps and run her own show: “Being a prostitute and making money meant I was in control. I bought my own shit and smoked where I wanted to.” Still, after having spent time in California prisons, “stabbed thirteen and pregnant early in her teenage years, Myers-Powell became a three-year-old baby. Some cold-blooded shit—they killed everybody. Shot them all in the head”). One by one, her friends on the streets fell victim to a Hobbesian world, and it was the same wherever she went: New Orleans, Los Angeles, rural truck stops in Indiana, back to Chicago, back and forth. Myers-Powell sometimes expresses defiant pride (“I was the baddest ho out there”) that she managed to free herself of her pimps and run her own show: “Being a prostitute and making money meant I was in control. I bought my own shit and smoked where I wanted to.” Still, after having spent time in California prisons, “stabbed thirteen times and shot five times” over the years, and finally diagnosed with bipolar disorder, she turned her life around and helped others like her, co-founding the Dreamcatcher Foundation, which fights trafficking and sexual exploitation. The author’s story, co-written by Reynolds, is consistently frank and often shocking, which may deter some readers.

A gritty and relentlessly grim survivor’s tale, certainly not for tender sensibilities.

**ON FREEDOM**

**Four Songs of Care and Constraint**

Nelson, Maggie

Graywolf (288 pp.)

$26.49 | Sep. 7, 2021

978-1-64445-062-8

A top cultural critic plucks the concept of freedom away from right-wing sloganeers and explores its operation in current artistic and political conversations.

Containing far less memoir material than her much-loved *The Argonauts* (2015), Nelson’s latest is more purely a work of criticism. In the first section, “Art Song,” the author analyzes recent blowups related to cultural appropriation, “a discourse about how and when certain transgressions in art should be ‘called out’ and ‘held accountable,’ with the twist that now the so-called left is often cast—rightly or wrongly—in the repressive, punitive position.” The author connects our exhaustion with our addiction to the “attention economy”—our 24/7 availability to 3.4 billion people using social media—to the current fate of “sex positivity.” She decries the conflict between different generations of thinkers and activists, “a totalizing script of intergenerational warfare, in which WE were brave, impressive adults seeking (and finding) pleasure and liberation, whereas YOU are pitiable, cowardly children obsessed with safety and trauma.” The author also examines Monica Lewinsky’s revisions of her personal history and Pema Chödrön’s comments on the sexual rapacity of Trungpa Rinpoche. “Drug Fugue” analyzes intriguing texts, many not widely known, about intoxication and addiction. To open the final section, “Riding the Blinds,” Nelson considers her son’s love for trains in the context of apocalyptic climate change. Acknowledging that many find the topic of global warming “too paralyzing, too sad, too frightening, too unimaginable,” she compares our situation to that of hobos “riding the blinds”—hiding between cars, unable to see where they are headed. Still, she recommends we “love all the misery and freedom of living and, as best we can, not mind dying.”

The subtlety of Nelson’s analysis and energy of her prose refresh the mind and spirit.

**DON’T LET IT GET YOU DOWN: ESSAYS ON RACE, GENDER, AND THE BODY**

Nolan, Savala

Simon & Schuster (208 pp.)

$26.00 | Jul. 13, 2021

978-1-982137-26-7

A lawyer, writer, and social justice advocate examines the intersection of race, class, gender, and body issues.

In a collection of 12 essays, Nolan processes personal dislocation as a plus-size “in-between,” a “mixed black woman” and Daughter of the American Revolution who grew up surrounded by—but not born into—privilege. Her opening essay, “On Dating White Guys While Me,” which muses on her “body-bigness” especially in regard to White men, establishes the deeply corporeal nature of the author’s intersectional musings. She speaks especially of her “bear paw” feet, which marked her “otherness” from the White elites with whom she lived, studied, worked, and, in too many cases, fell into ambiguous, unreciprocated love. In “The Body Endures,” the author remembers how, as a youth, she tried unsuccessfully to achieve White standards of beauty, thinness, and desirability as portrayed by the young Britney Spears. As she meditates on how the “Mammy” stereotype has haunted her concept of body image throughout her life, Nolan reflects on the many facets of her complex personhood. In “White Doll,” the author discusses how her White mother “sought ways for me to socialize with black adults.” Yet she only succeeded in making a daughter already too aware of her difference from other Blacks feel even “more white.” By contrast, Nolan’s Black and Mexican father, who praised his daughter for enduring the pain of hair-braiding, made her feel comfortable in a body that later become a racialized medical “spectacle” when she became a parent. White doctors dismissed the pains—later diagnosed as acute pancreatitis—that threatened both her pregnancy and her life. This fierce and intelligent book is important not just for how it celebrates
An eloquently provocative memoir in essays.

A QUANTUM LIFE
My Unlikely Journey From the Street to the Stars
Oluseyi, Hakeem & Horwitz, Joshua
Ballantine (368 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-984819-09-3

A Black astrophysicist delivers a memoir that demonstrates the unstoppable strength of intelligence and the human spirit.

Writing with Horwitz, Oluseyi chronicles his unique journey from hardscrabble early life to award-winning scientist. One of the author’s personas is James Plummer Jr., his given name, a sometimes-frightened and often misunderstood genius with a penchant for counting and dismantling things to feed his math- and science-hungry mind. Another is “Lil’ Jame,” the boy who faced numerous hardships, including a broken home and nomadic existence, dodging roaming gangs on the streets of East New Orleans, Houston’s Third Ward, and Watts in Los Angeles. While bouncing among places and families, Oluseyi constantly sought knowledge and devoured books, and he rejoiced when his mother bought the entire set of the Encyclopedia Britannica. The author instructs readers on how he constantly sought knowledge and devoured books, and he rejoiced when his mother bought the entire set of the Encyclopedia Britannica. The author instructs readers on how he artfully performed the delicate balancing act of blending his astrophysicist who has held posts at MIT and the University of California, among other institutions. Through all the twists and turns, and despite the dark side of humanity on display at times, Oluseyi keeps readers engaged as he creates a beautiful life for himself.

A sharp, relatable book about self-reinvention and a loving nod to anyone who has ever believed in the potential of another.

SINATRA AND ME
In the Wee Small Hours
Oppedisano, Tony with Ross, Mary Jane
Scribner (320 pp.)
$25.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-982151-78-2

A revealing memoir from the legendary singer’s road manager.

When it comes to celebrities as famous as Frank Sinatra, those who know don’t usually talk. That alone would make this detailed memoir from his road manager and friend special enough, but it goes beyond that. Oppedisano (b. 1951), a Long Island singer who became part of the Rat Pack’s inner circle after befriending famous club owner and Sinatra confidant Jilly Rizzo, offers plenty of eyewitness details from the legend’s final years. He also recounts Sinatra’s side in various famous relationships and disagreements. Was Sinatra part of the mob? Did he have an affair with Marilyn Monroe? Is he secretly Ronan Farrow’s father? Oppedisano tackles all these open questions and more along with showing us the inner workings of the Sinatra family and the Rat Pack. While some of the author’s answers may seem a little too simple when compared to other more complicated accounts of Sinatra and his actions, Oppedisano does seem to reliably report what he has seen, including the occasional angry outburst or unexpected surrender. “All his secrets are hidden in plain sight,” he writes. “The real man reveals himself: his strengths, his weaknesses, his loves, his regrets, and his humor, all in his music. Frank was an autobiographical singer.” Whether doting conclusions like that are true or not, it is hard to question the author’s access to Sinatra, especially in his final years. He was the Chairman of the Board’s loyal companion, and when they weren’t on the road together, they spent plenty of time at Sinatra’s home. Oppedisano was with Sinatra and his wife, Barbara, when the legendary entertainer passed away in 1998, and he reveals those moments and the final family battles that followed.

A must-read for Sinatra fans, this lovingly written, sweetly devoted account may even solve some pop-culture mysteries.

THE HERO’S WAY
Walking With Garibaldi From Rome to Ravenna
Parks, Tim
Norton (352 pp.)
$27.95 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-393-86684-1

The British author and Italian culture expert retraces Italian resistance fighter Giuseppe Garibaldi’s fight toward freedom for a contemporary audience.

Parks set himself a daunting task in this travel memoir, challenging both his physical stamina and literary gifts. In the summer
The author does an exemplary job weaving together different historical accounts of the march, and he brings Garibaldi’s charisma, determination, and desperation to vivid life. He is less successful at interpreting the present. His descriptive passages of the Italian countryside sing, but he provides little context for the politics and economy of contemporary Italy. After eavesdropping, he re-creates the overheard conversation without follow-up or amplification. Italy’s beautiful old villages, he notes, have been wantonly transformed into “centres of upmarket culture,” and his overheard speakers seem to agree. Is there a counterpoint to this argument? Not in this book. Students of historic and contemporary Italy will enjoy the author’s vivid revival of Garibaldi’s ordeal, but the narrative may be limited by the author’s inability to put it in context for the reader.

An account that ably retraces the flight of a revolutionary leader but offers limited insights into Italy’s present.

THE EXTENDED MIND

The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain

Paul, Annie Murphy
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (352 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-544-94766-5

A look at the science behind the parts of our consciousness and ideation that lie outside the body.

Marshall McLuhan famously called media “the extensions of man.” Science writer Paul updates this notion to battle what researchers have called neurocentric bias “and our corresponding blind spot for all the ways cognition extends beyond the skull.” We acquire much information via the processing of the senses into mental furrows and synapses, but we also have other avenues of thinking: for instance, what Paul describes as a well-developed “interceptive sense.” This involves teaching ourselves how to become more aware of what’s happening in our bodies through an exercise called the “body scan,” imagining that breath occurs elsewhere in the body than in the pulmonary tract. Mindfulness meditation also extends awareness of the parasympathetic nervous system, itself a source of information. Paul examines the well-known effects of walking on mind improvement and the use of gesture to both build memory and to pull words out of the air (or mental databanks, more properly) as we speak. The author uses recently deceased Zappos founder Tony Hsieh as a model for someone who strived to forge “a sense of unity and cohesion among the firm’s employees,” re-creating the as-oneness he experienced at drug-fueled raves. The mind can be expanded, and not necessarily by drugs, by compartmentalizing it so that others store information for us. Intriguingly, Paul explores an experimental learning technique in which students are divided into groups and then assigned to learn a segment of a topic, later combining the information they’ve mastered in an example of “a transactive memory system.” Though less fluent than other popular-science writers such as Malcolm Gladwell and Elizabeth Kolbert, Paul does a good job of drawing together the many extensions of mind that surround us, exhorting readers to “re-spatialize the information we think about.”

It helps to have a brain to think with, but Paul capably shows that there’s much more to the process than all that.

NONBINARY

A Memoir

P-Orridge, Genesis with Mohn, Tim
Abrams (352 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-4197-4386-3

A posthumous memoir from the multimedia artist, a “transgender icon” who transcended more than mere gender categories.

P-Orridge, who died from leukemia in 2020, was born Neil Andrew Megson in Manchester, England, in 1950. Considering their birth name a “temporary tag,” P-Orridge believed that a name change was “a really potent form of magic.” Their overriding goal in a lifetime of art- and music-making was to “short-circuit control,” a directive given to them by William Burroughs. The author’s early years in British schools, where they suffered from verbal and physical abuse from classmates and authority figures alike, “taught me who my enemy was.” Their early experiments in performance art set the tone for their career: “Does anything have to exist just because it did before?...Who does it serve?” Throbbing Gristle, the seminal industrial band P-Orridge founded, used “the tools and the toys of the military-industrial complex” as musical instruments to subvert “their original intent, which was, of course, control.” Confounding expectations, the author’s next band, Psychic TV, aimed to “seduce the audience rather than alienate them.” Using esoteric rituals, fetish objects, sacred figures, and shamanic tools, their music conjured spiritual states and aimed to “make the occult trendy again.” For another conceptual art project, P-Orridge served as one half—with dominatrix and partner Lady Jaye Breyer—of a “pandrogynie” fusing male and female beings into a “third being,” a further breakdown of the binary model. They erased differences between them with body modifications and medical...
techniques, applying cut-up methods to “our problematic bodies.” They considered this project the “egalitarian integration of two artist explorers, this third being Breyer P-Orridge,” a proposed “end of either/or” that is “essential to the survival of the species.” As much a manifesto as a memoir, this wild life story is dedicated to the breakdown of categories: “End gender. Break sex. Destroy the control of DNA and the expected. Every man and woman is a man and woman.”

An entertaining and thoughtful book about a remarkable life that consistently embraced transformation.

**THE WEIGHT OF AIR**

**A Story of the Lies About Addiction and the Truth About Recovery**

*Poses, David*

Sandra Jonas Publishing House (250 pp.)

$26.95 | Jul. 6, 2021

978-1-954861-99-2

A journalist and activist recounts his years battling the opiates that helped quiet a lifelong, deep-running depression.

In this painful, haunting memoir, Poses takes us on a roller-coaster ride: bouts of heroin abuse mixed in with periods of sobriety, which will give readers hope for his prospects—only to have them dashed. Throughout, the author is a sympathetic guide to what it’s like to be addicted and seemingly hopeless. He is soulful, achingly honest, and often deadpan, portraying a battered innocence beset by a neurological illness, and he ably conveys his existential struggle: “Will my body ever learn to shut down? Will my brain ever shut up?” Poses keenly expresses his gyroscope of emotions, showing a psyche that is seemingly never at peace. In one scene, the author sits at an airport bar, thinking about how he doesn’t like to drink alcohol. “If the bartender had said ‘We have morphine on intravenous drip, Percocet and Dilaudid pills, and transdermal fentanyl patches,’ I’d be high right now. I don’t know how else to feel okay in my own skin. And I don’t see God or AA changing that or helping me accept or forget it.” After college, the author took jobs in advertising and finance (he disliked both; he wanted to write) and then tumbled from the wagon once again. Poses vividly portrays the epic, agonizing pain of his withdrawals, most of which were spent “drenched in sweat and freezing cold, sitting on the toilet with my head in a plastic trash bin, a miasmic stew of shit and piss and puke.” Ultimately, some form of redemption arrives, and the author concludes with a concise, well-informed chapter on fundamental recovery, which “heals the wounds that led you to use drugs in the first place,” and the persistent problems associated with shame, poverty, and misinformation. Readers will cheer for Poses.

A potent addition to the literature on drug addiction and recovery.

**DISRUPTION**

**Why Things Change**

*Potter, David*

University of Michigan history professor Potter delivers expert accounts of significant historical transformations, including the rise of both Christianity and Islam and the (in retrospect) ephemeral course of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, all of which illustrated three features: disruptive ideas that already existed in the society but in fringe movements; “reputation” of principles of the old system; and a “group tightly organized around a charismatic leader who saw himself as creating a new political order.” Potter points out that mass misery often produces anarchy, but it takes organization to make a revolution. Thus, the teachings of Jesus sustained Rome’s Christian minority for three centuries until Constantine established it as the dominant force in the empire. Muhammad inspired fellow Arabs with revelations from God that superseded those given to Jews and Christians, but it was only after his death that Abd al-Malik bureaucratized his teachings to allow for Islam’s massive expansion. Marxists would have remained obscure 19th-century reformers if Lenin and his followers had not taken advantage of the disintegration of czarist Russia. According to Potter, the American Revolution succeeded because its chief figures, led by George Washington, knew what they wanted—not to destroy their government but to regain liberties enjoyed by earlier generations. Because its leaders lacked wide appeal and political acumen, the French Revolution succeeded only in exchanging a king for an emperor. Potter believes that today’s global retreat of democracy in favor of jingoism and autocracy is another transformation, but readers expecting to learn how this obeys his ongoing theme will be disappointed. The author holds a low opinion of both Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, noting that they lack the charisma of great leaders—although he has little doubt that they represent the wave of the future.

An insightful thesis on how history works, perfect for big picture buffs.

**THE SUNSET ROUTE**

**Freight Trains, Forgiveness, and Freedom on the Rails in the American West**

*Quinn, Carrot*

Running from pain and yearning for shelter.
“Unlike what we see in old movies,” Quinn writes in a graceful memoir of life on the rails and on the run, “it’s not a good idea to get on or off a moving train. That’s called ‘catching on the fly,’ and it’s dangerous as hell.” Very little in the narrative evokes the romance of old movies or even of pilgrimage tales such as Eat, Pray, Love. Raised by a schizophrenic mother in Anchorage, Alaska, the author’s childhood was marked by physical abuse (her mother once tried to strangle her), hunger, and poverty so extreme that she often lacked bus fare to get to school. When she was 14, Quinn went to Colorado to live with her coldly judgmental grandparents, who had already taken in her older brother. Even though she finally had enough to eat, she hungered for love, beset by “a loneliness that feels like anemia.” At school, she watched other children and their “easy way of speaking to each other, their warm smiles. I can copy their mannerisms, and this seems like a useful skill to have.” Still, she was constantly fearful and felt like an outsider, knowing that “humans are wildly unpredictable.” Quinn interweaves memories of growing up in the late 1980s and ’90s with her adult life on the edges of society: working part-time gigs, living in squalid communes, dumpster diving, shoplifting, hitching rides, and riding the rails to assuage recurrent restlessness or escape haunting memories. In Portland, Oregon, where she first arrived in 2001, at age 19, she saw, for the first time, “another way of being. I am finding good things in the world. Ideas that enchant me. There are moments of possibility.” But her stay in Portland was short-lived, and soon she was hiding on freight cars headed east, longing to learn “how to be a person in the world.”

An intimate memoir of loneliness and hope.

THE COLUMNIST
Leaks, Lies, and Libel in Drew Pearson’s Washington
Ritchie, Donald A.
Oxford Univ. (456 pp.)
$34.95 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-19-006758-8

Biography of a significant voice in 20th-century journalism.

When newspapers were the primary source of news, nearly everyone read Drew Pearson (1897-1969), whose daily column and weekly radio broadcasts expressed strong opinions and revealed government secrets. Though they were often scurrilous and occasionally wrong, they were never ignored. Recent historians have been less than kind, but Ritchie, historian emeritus of the U.S. Senate, draws a more favorable portrait than any during Pearson’s lifetime and brings to life one of the golden ages of investigative journalism. The bestseller Washington-Merry-Go-Round, a spicy political exposé written by Pearson and a colleague, appeared in 1931, and both veteran reporters were fired. Already aggressive self-promoters, they sold the idea of a daily column, which debuted in 1932 as “a mix of important news, amusing events, brisk style, realistic reporting, and crusading spirit.” Before long, the “Washington-Merry-Go-Round” column was a massive success. Until Pearson’s sudden death from a heart attack, the column’s combination of rumor, punditry, and scandal made him a household name. As the author notes, “the columnist took credit for the indictment, imprisonment, censure, and expulsion of a half dozen members of Congress, and the defeat of many more.” A small army of loyal leg men trolled for dirt, but Pearson’s massive audience proved irresistible to elected officials and even presidents, who leaked information even as they denounced him in public. Although generally liberal, he was despised by FDR, Truman, and Kennedy no less than Eisenhower and Nixon. The column continued with his younger collaborator, Jack Anderson, before fading at the end of the century with the rise of the internet. Readers may weary of Ritchie’s relentless stream of half-forgotten scandals, but they will be intrigued by his portrait of a time when muckrakers raked whatever muck they found. Today, with politics polarized into near immobility, commentators still attack government malfeasance, but hard evidence is increasingly irrelevant to their audience, to whom truth is whatever conforms to their ideology.

An entertaining and mostly admiring life of the legendary columnist.

THE SACRED BAND
Three Hundred Theban Lovers Fighting To Save Greek Freedom
Romm, James
Scribner (288 pp.)
$28.00 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-5011-9801-4

A vivid portrait of ancient Thebes. In 1880, archaeologists discovered a mass grave, dug by Thebans in 338 B.C.E., containing 254 skeletons laid side by side. The discovery was never published, the grave covered up. Thankfully, a researcher for this book located the chief excavator’s notebook, containing drawings of each skeleton—several reproduced in this volume—that document in meticulous detail the unique features of the burial site. As Bard College classics professor Romm reveals, the skeletons composed “a unique infantry corp” of male lovers, fighting in pairs, known to Greeks as the Sacred Band. The Age of the Sacred Band spanned four decades, 382 B.C.E. to 335 B.C.E., during which Thebes enjoyed victories against Sparta and Athens, the two cities most prominent in histories of ancient Greece. The author offers a corrective to that view by focusing on democratic Thebes, which had founded Messene, “a city that sheltered Sparta’s escaped slaves”; defeated Sparta at the Battle of Leuctra in 371; and remained undefeated until, in 338, it confronted the ruthless Alexander the Great. Decades of war saw decisive shifts of power: Sparta occupied Thebes and invaded Boeotia; Thebes invaded the Peloponnesse and nearly captured Sparta. “Athens had aided Thebes when Sparta was winning,” Romm writes, “then allied with weakened Sparta against Thebes.” Romm weaves into a brisk narrative of
A spirited, informative classical history from an expert on the subject.

THE STORM IS UPON US
How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and Conspiracy Theory of Everything
Rothschild, Mike
Melville House (320 pp.)
$27.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-1-61219-929-0

An investigation into the shadowy QAnon movement, which brought us the Capitol invasion of Jan. 6, 2021. Journalist Rothschild, a specialist in conspiracy theories, states his thesis early on: “No conspiracy theory more encapsulates the full-throated madness of the Donald Trump era than QAnon.” Though Trump may have had only a dim understanding of the movement that regarded him a messiah, the violence of Jan. 6 was part of a continuum that included numerous incidents of domestic terrorism, including at least one attempt to assassinate Joe Biden. Its premises are bizarre: Democrats, according to the QAnon canon, are deeply implicated in an international system of pedophilia, milking their victims for the superdrug called adrenochrome. Rothschild, who draws on a large body of interviews with family members and a few apostates, delves into the origins of such beliefs, which hark back to antisemitic screeds of centuries past. He also suggests that dismissive attitudes toward true believers that peg them as brainwashed cult members aren’t helpful. QAnon supporters are seeking meaning in a bewildering world and have simply chosen a weird path that suggests that John F. Kennedy Jr. faked his death and is going to reclaim his father’s crown or that lizard people are doing their business in advance of an alien invasion. All that said, though, Rothschild also warns that “while most Q believers are just misguided people looking for a good answer to a difficult question,” they are capable of significant acts of violence—and are almost certainly destined to commit it: Jan. 6 was one manifestation, but all over the country, there have been innumerable instances of acts such as a drunken Texas woman who tried to run cars off the road to help Trump battle “the cabal and the pedophile ring.”

SMASHING THE LIQUOR MACHINE
A Global History of Prohibition
Schrad, Mark Lawrence
Oxford Univ. (736 pp.)
$34.95 | Jul. 20, 2021
978-0-19-084157-7

A wide-ranging, thoroughly revisionist history of the effort to ban alcohol from the public sphere across the globe. “Both in the United States and around the world,” writes Villanova political science professor Schrad, “the true target of prohibition—the liquor traffic—was overwhelmingly the purview of powerful, white, self-identified Christians.” These purveyors of liquor found opponents in men and women who viewed the matter differently: Enslaving people to the addiction of alcohol helped the ruling class maintain control, subjugated colonial and marginalized peoples, and otherwise served the interests of both the wealthy minority and the state. Proclaimed Carrie Nation, tellingly, as she smashed the mirrors and glassware in saloon after saloon. “You wouldn’t give me the vote, so I had to use a rock!” Yet, as Schrad observes, Nation wasn’t above a glass of beer, even as a certain prohibitionist named V.I. Lenin, who denounced the imperial monopoly on liquor as the prop of a feeble and failing state, liked to quaff a brew himself from time to time. The author clearly and engagingly shows how the enemy wasn’t alcohol as such, but instead “the exploitative selling of addictive substances.” Activists, he writes, argued that propping up “moneyed elites upon the misery and addiction of society was no longer appropriate.” In this comprehensive, wholly convincing study, Schrad examines a number of famous prohibitionists, including Tolstoy, Gandhi, William Jennings Bryan, and even Theodore Roosevelt, the last of whom tempered his temperance leanings with the view that prohibition should be a local rather than federal affair. The author also links the prohibition movement to abolitionism, civil rights activism, anti-colonialism, and feminism, and he attributes the view of that movement as a collection of party poopers to our changing views of liberty, which have devolved to a kind of me-first, you-can’t-tell-me-what-to-do ethic as opposed to the notion of entire peoples living without chains.

Readers won’t look at temperance the same way once they take Schrad’s inventive and persuasive thesis into account.

subculture, read this one alongside Pastels and Pedophiles by Mia Bloom and Sophia Moskalenko.

Given the odds that someone you know buys into QAnon doctrine, Rothschild’s rabbit-hole dive is a valuable guide.
THE TINY BEE THAT HOVERS AT THE CENTER OF THE WORLD

Searcy, David
Random House (208 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Jul. 20, 2021
978-0-593-13364-4

Mapping the geography of longing. “We are lost,” essayist Searcy writes in his luminous collection of meditations and explorations. “We’re neither here nor there. There’s you, and there’s the you that knows there’s you. And in that gap between the two—and we are always in that gap—we’re migratory.” The author’s migrations take him from his backyard telescope to the massive Lowell Observatory, from his childhood in Dallas, where he roamed the alleys around his house, to Arizona, where he traveled to Arcosanti, Paolo Soleri’s earthy, futuristic village. A few miles from the Meteor Crater—a “mere exhilaration,” in his estimation—he visited from his own subconscious, from air and overlapping images of the sun? Not just the wash of light, but that gap—we’re migratory. “The air, the empty air, is full of meaning,” he writes. “Did you know that the dapples of sunlight under a tree are blurred and overlapping images of the sun? Not just the wash of light, like water, leaking through. But actual photographic images—a repetitious murmuring.” Telescopes, cameras, and the strange instrument known as the Claude glass become propitious devices for discovery. The Claude glass, a tinted, slightly convex mirror popular among late-18th and early-19th-century tourists, was designed “to have you turn away from what you wish to study. A device precisely for averted vision” that seemed to make nature’s sublimity “more acceptable, more picturesque.”

Searcy, that magical stillness can emerge itself. “The air, the empty air, is full of meaning,” he writes. “Did you know that the dapples of sunlight under a tree are blurred and overlapping images of the sun? Not just the wash of light, like water, leaking through. But actual photographic images—a repetitious murmuring.” Telescopes, cameras, and the strange instrument known as the Claude glass become propitious devices for discovery. The Claude glass, a tinted, slightly convex mirror popular among late-18th and early-19th-century tourists, was designed “to have you turn away from what you wish to study. A device precisely for averted vision” that seemed to make nature’s sublimity “more acceptable, more picturesque.”

Seeing slant, for Searcy as for Emily Dickinson, can be revelatory. In lyrical, tender prose, Searcy recalls cherished friends, family memories (a troubled daughter haunts some pieces), and capricious travels through place and time in search of wonder. Memorable, melancholy, elegiac journeys.

MERCURY RISING

John Glenn, John Kennedy, and the New Battleground of the Cold War

Shesol, Jeff
Norton (400 pp.)
$28.95 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-324-00324-3

A gripping, exhaustively detailed chronicle of America’s initial sprint in the space race seen through the eyes of the first American to orbit the Earth.

Feb. 20, 1962, was the climax of John Glenn’s storied career as a decorated Marine fighter pilot, astronaut, and, later, senator from Ohio. His journey to the Friendship 7 spacecraft from New Concord—a “town that defined him but threatened to trap him”—serves an apt representation of the mythic American dream. In his latest, historian Shesol, a former speechwriter for Bill Clinton, relates how Glenn got there by navigating the politics of a young world populated by experienced generals (Dwight Eisenhower), political operators (Lyndon Johnson), young Turks (the Kennedys), and cautious NASA administrators (T. Keith Glennan and James Webb) and bureaucrats caught up in the Cold War and a space race that was often less about science than “the outward projection of power” and “a reflection of the American character.” Similar to his first two books, Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, and the Fiend That Defined a Decade (1998) and Supreme Power: Franklin Roosevelt vs. The Supreme Court (2010), this one is steeped in historical detail that enlivens the major politicians and the first cohort of NASA astronauts, clearly illustrating how they all both shaped and responded to an American society in transition. The author makes a compelling case that Glenn was a central figure in this transition, noting how his combination of arrogance, drive, and down-home folksiness made him a “flesh-and-blood” example of American ideals. Though Shesol could have tightened the narrative by shaving around 100 pages, this is a welcome retelling of a significant piece of the Cold War saga and the opening of the space frontier.

A good choice for readers interested in the Cold War, the space race, and the 1960s American political landscape.

A TRUE HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES

Indigenous Genocide, Racialized Slavery, Hyper-Capitalism, Militarist Imperialism, and Other Overlooked Aspects of American Exceptionalism

Sjursen, Daniel A.
Truth to Power/Steerforth (672 pp.)
$19.95 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-58642-254-7

An engaging warts-and-all history of the U.S. meant to better educate those who fight for it.

Examining the country’s history from its European “discovery” through Trump, Sjursen, a retired U.S. Army major and history instructor at West Point, expands on the course he taught there to help close “the gap between what scholars know and what students learn” about American history. Describing his approach to the original course, he writes, “exposure to the historical myths and flaws—in addition to the well-worn triumphs—of the country they might very well die for seemed appropriate. Anything less would have felt obscene.” Sjursen divides the book into 37 largely chronological chapters, many with provocative titles such as “Andrew Jackson’s White Male World and the Start of Modern Politics,” “Lies We Tell Ourselves About the Old West,” “JFK’s Cold War Chains,” and
“The Obama Disappointment.” Throughout this fluid, readable history, the author provides illuminating comparisons between elements of American history and the modern world. “The Massachusetts Bay Colony,” he writes, “may indeed have more in common with modern Saudi Arabia—executing ‘witches’ and ‘sorcerers’—than it does with contemporary Boston.” These comparisons help readers better understand and contextualize the topics discussed. In each chapter, the author breaks down the positive and negative aspects of the subject, allowing readers to reconsider our shared history with each chapter building on the previous one. Though mostly based on previous works, Sjursen’s book serves as an ideal overview of American history and a study guide to many of the events and figures that have been misrepresented in standard historical narratives. “The stories we tell about ourselves and our forebears,” writes the author early on, “inform the sort of country we think we are, the public policy we craft, and even what we imagine possible.” Sjursen tells those stories with aplomb.

Strongly written and thought-provoking—a must read for nonhistorians seeking a firm grasp of accurate American history.

**GERMAN JERUSALEM**

*The Remarkable Life of a German-Jewish Neighborhood in the Holy City*

Sjursen, Thomas

Trans. by Brown, Stephen

Haus Publishing (220 pp.)

$24.95 | Jun. 30, 2021

978-1-912208-61-6

Rehavia, an Israeli neighborhood in the holy city of Jerusalem, is the central focus of this historical survey. Sjursen, publisher at large for German publisher Suhrkamp, tells Rehavia’s story by way of its most notable 20th-century inhabitants and visitors. These include well-known figures like Gershom Sholem, Hannah Arendt, and Martin Buber but also lesser-known figures such as Anna Maria Jokl and Mascha Kaléko. “The history of this city district may be told through its geography, architecture, urban planning or chronology,” writes Sjursen. “But the decisive thing is the biographies of its inhabitants, who moulded the history of the neighbourhood over decades, just as Rehavia shaped the paths of their lives.” In the years before and after the Shoah and the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Sjursen contends that Rehavia (Hebrew for “the vastness of God”) endured not only as a refuge for German-Jewish hybrid culture, but as a site of major spiritual, intellectual, and artistic contributions to world history. While ably translated from the original German by Brown, the prose isn’t likely to win any awards. Sjursen’s style is straightforward, and the author sometimes breezes past fascinating moments that could have garnered deeper study. The author’s main strength is his ability to weave the many strands he’s gathered into a nuanced braid of history from a variety of perspectives. However, such nuanced history is almost exclusively written by and for the victors; readers looking for insight on contemporary Arab-Israeli issues should look elsewhere. Some may wish that Sjursen had endeavored to make more connections between traumas endured by the German-Jewish settlers of Rehavia and the experiences of those mostly Arab civilians who were displaced by their arrival. The author instead focuses on intersectionality within Rehavia, privileging as his subject those Jews of German descent who gave the neighborhood its unique character and offered the world its most brilliant minds.

A mostly compelling chronicle of an oft-overlooked piece of 20th-century European history.

**THE FLORENTINES**

*From Dante to Galileo: The Transformation of Western Civilization*

Strathern, Paul

Pegasus (400 pp.)

$28.95 | Jul. 6, 2021

978-1-64313-732-2

Novelist and historian Strathern returns to Renaissance Florence to survey the graces and disgraces of the city and its people.

If *Vanity Fair* magazine had existed during the Renaissance, every issue might have brought tales of Florentine A-listers and their power plays, artistic triumphs, sexual exploits, and financial chicanery. Strathern aims to show how such Florentines paved the way for a global humanism focused on people’s lives on Earth instead of on the medieval view that existence was only preparation for an afterlife. The author begins with Dante’s boldness in writing in a Tuscan dialect, rather than Latin, and ends with Galileo’s trial for heresy, which spared him the fate of an earlier heliocentrist who was burned at the stake—“naked, upside down, and with his mouth gagged so that he could not make public his beliefs.” Between the two events, Strathern gives a no-frills, nuts-and-bolts account of the era in which Leonardo painted the *Mona Lisa*, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*, Michelangelo created David, Brunelleschi designed the world’s largest brick-and-mortar dome, and Savonarola planned his “bonfire of the vanities.” Never far from the action were Lorenzo the Magnificent and other Medici bankers whose patronage of artists vastly enriched the city’s glories. This story will be broadly familiar to readers of Strathern’s *Death in Florence*. The author slightly overstates Florence’s impact on the world when epochal upheavals were also occurring elsewhere: the Reformation, Columbus’ voyages, Gutenberg’s printing press. But Strathern is an intellectually agile writer who covers four centuries briskly—an approach well suited to first-time visitors to Florence, if not to scholars—and serves up occasional surprises. Other authors have argued that Leonardo and Michelangelo were gay, but Strathern adds context by noting that
Army Corps of Engineers conduct the complete environmental review that Trump officials had dispensed with—a review that is ongoing under a new administration and that may close another until he eventually found himself in some of California's most infamous prisons. From the darkest depths of incarceration, Trejo made a commitment to sobriety and began living repentantly so that similar protests could not be mounted again. Yet, as Todrys writes in this wide-ranging account, the legal wheels turn slowly. In March 2020, a federal judge demanded that the Dakota Access Pipeline, and Environmental Justice

Todrys, Katherine Wiltenburg
Bison/Univ. of Nebraska (352 pp.)
$24.95 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-4962-2266-4

Searching account of Native resistance to the oil pipeline that has steadily invaded their homelands.

Dakota Access, a company specializing in transporting oil from the vast Bakken fields of North Dakota and points beyond, had long had its way in securing easements for its pipeline across multiple states. Then, writes human rights lawyer Todrys, they ran into the Standing Rock Sioux, "who would not be bought off." Indeed, the leadership of Standing Rock had allowed an escrow account meant to compensate the tribe for the loss of the Black Hills to reach $2 billion and go untouched: "The Sioux don't want the money; they want the Black Hills." Todrys examines the paths by which Native "water protectors," they ran into the Standing Rock Sioux, "who would not be bought off." Indeed, the leadership of Standing Rock had allowed an escrow account meant to compensate the tribe for the loss of the Black Hills to reach $2 billion and go untouched: "The Sioux don't want the money; they want the Black Hills." Todrys examines the paths by which Native "water protectors," many of them teenagers, and non-Native allies came together to resist Dakota Access' legal onslaught. Not all of the Native people in the pipeline's path joined in that resistance: She portrays one politician who made a fortune with an energy subcontracting firm of his own, which secured jobs for "oil companies that ostensibly operated under his tribe's regulation" but pretty much did what they pleased. Those companies scored an early victory with the Trump administration. As it greenlighted the Dakota Access Pipeline and environmental regulations and cheered the arrests of some 600 water protectors. Many Republican-led states, meanwhile, promulgated bills "aimed at restricting the right to peaceful assembly" so that similar protests could not be mounted again. Yet, as Todrys writes in this wide-ranging account, the legal wheels turn slowly. In March 2020, a federal judge demanded that the Army Corps of Engineers conduct the complete environmental review that Trump officials had dispensed with—a review that is ongoing under a new administration and that may close the pipeline, which has since leaked nearly 600,000 gallons of crude oil across the Dakotas.

An important work of environmental and legal reportage on a contest that will likely continue for years.

Florentines had a “relaxed” view of homosexuality evident in their startling proverb: “If you crave joys fumble some boys.” A book that will have greater appeal to educated travelers to Florence than to specialists in the city.

BLACK SNAKE
Standing Rock, the Dakota Access Pipeline, and Environmental Justice
Todrys, Katherine Wiltenburg
Bison/Univ. of Nebraska (352 pp.)
$24.95 paper | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-4962-2266-4

“A raw and deeply engrossing salvation story.”

TREJO
My Life of Crime, Redemption, and Hollywood
Trejo, Danny with Logue, Donal
Atria (388 pp.)
$27.00 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-982150-82-2

As one of the most easily recognizable cinematic bad guys, Trejo (b. 1944) has made a career of being mauled and maimed across dozens of films, from Desperado to Con Air to Grindhouse to Machete. As the author shows, his real life has been as tumultuous and eventful as any action story. Raised in a large Mexican American family oozing with “macho Chicanismo,” Trejo fell under the influence of Uncle Gilbert, who mentored him in life on the streets. Gilbert taught him how to rob, box, take drugs, and pass a prison sentence. Trejo was 12 when he first tried heroin, and his battle with addiction would land him in one correctional facility after another until he eventually found himself in some of California’s most infamous prisons. From the darkest depths of incarceration, Trejo made a commitment to sobriety and began living by a mantra of service, which showed him that “everything good that’s ever happened in my life has come as the direct result of helping someone else and not expecting anything in return.” Unwavering in his pledge to remain clean and help others do the same, Trejo continues to battle with lingering challenges involving his roles as a devoted husband and loving father. The author chronicles his battles with personal demons alongside his spectacular rise to stardom and impressive success in the entertainment industry and with a Trejo’s Tacos and Trejo’s Coffee & Donuts in L.A. Throughout, the author expresses himself in an informal yet consistently thoughtful manner. In the collaborator’s note, co-author and fellow actor Logue writes, “Nearly everything he said was gold: wise, funny, pithy, at times, clairvoyant. I gained more insight on life in those first few days... with Danny than I had in my previous thirty-two years.”

“A raw and deeply engrossing salvation story.”
women's movements in Brazil, China, Egypt, Tunisia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Sweden. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have proved indispensable to this powerful wave of activism, allowing women to share their experiences, support one another, and organize to address their concerns. Although sometimes inciting severe backlash for participants, the movements, the authors show, have generated positive results: More women have been elected to government, beneficial laws have been enacted and enforced, and policies have been reformed. For each country represented, the authors create vivid profiles of activists who have spoken out against cultural norms that discriminate against women and that condone abuse. In Latin America, for example, harassment and violence “are endemic to machismo culture, and Brazilian women are particularly at risk,” facing the highest incidence of femicide in the region. In China, although the constitution recognizes equal rights for women, with no specific legal prohibitions against sexual harassment and gender discrimination, women can face personal and professional retribution by protesting. In Egypt, feminist activism is suppressed by an authoritarian government, causing women to risk constant surveillance, house arrest, exile, or imprisonment if they dare to organize and speak out. In contrast, in nearby Tunisia, the nation’s constitution, ratified in 2014, contains provisions for guaranteeing women’s safety and equality. Even in a country as socially progressive as Sweden, “staggering numbers of women” have testified to sexual harassment and discrimination. The authors suggest an agenda for change that includes meaningful redress, legal reform, women’s equal representation in all areas, fair allocation of resources, and recalibration of the social norms that allowed abuse. #MeToo founder Tarana Burke provides the foreword.

A fresh perspective on continued challenges to women’s lives.

**PERSIST**
Warren, Elizabeth
Metropolitan/Henry Holt (320 pp.)
$27.99 | May 4, 2021
978-1-250-79924-1

The Massachusetts senator and financial reformer recounts several of her good fights over the years. Famous for being chided for “persisting” on the Senate floor, Warren is nearly a byword for the application of an unbending, if usually polite, feminism to the corridors of power. Though she has a schoolmarm-ish air—and indeed taught school for much of her life—she gladly owns up to liking a beer or two and enjoying a good brawl, and she’s a scrapper with a long memory. In 2008, when she shopped a proposal to found a federal agency that “could act as a watchdog to make sure that consumers weren’t getting cheated by financial institutions,” she encountered a congressman who “laughed in my face.” She doesn’t reveal his name, but you can bet he crosses the hall when she’s coming the other way. Warren does name other names, especially Donald Trump, who, with Republicans on the Hill, accomplished only one thing, namely “a $2 trillion tax cut that mostly benefited rich people.” Now that the Democrats are in power, the author reckons that the time is ripe to shake off the Trump debacle and build “a nation that works, not just for the rich and powerful but for everyone.” She identifies numerous areas that need immediate attention, from financial reform to bringing more women into the workplace and mandating equal pay for equal work. Warren premises some of these changes on increased taxes on the rich, happily citing a billionaire well known for insider trading, who complained of her, “This is the fucking American dream she is shitting on.” The author reverts to form: “Oh dear. Did I hit a nerve?” Warren’s common-sensical proposals on housing, infrastructure development, and civil rights merit attention, and her book makes for a sometimes-funny, sometimes–sharp-tongued pleasure.

**BELIEVERS**
Making a Life at the End of the World
Wells, Lisa
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (352 pp.)
$27.00 | Jul. 20, 2021
978-0-374-11025-3

Seeking new ways to live on Earth. Reflecting on the fragile state of the environment, poet and essayist Wells melds memoir, history, psychology, and philosophy as she recounts her ongoing struggle to define her role as “an average, well-meaning person who daily participates—however grudgingly—in a system that is bringing the planet she loves to the brink of destruction.” With a growing desire to learn about ways “in which human beings not only thrive but also repair damage and even increase the biodiversity and beauty of the planet,” the author traveled around the country to find people—including eccentric activists, urban gardeners, botanists, and Native Americans—who have devoted themselves to honoring the Earth. In Oregon, she met the irascible Finisar Medrano and her queer band of Prairie Faeries, who range around fields and woods, living on and replenishing wild plants. In New Mexico, Wells lived among the “earth-honoring” Taos Initiative for Life Together, who work to transition from the fossil fuel economy by growing their own food, sourcing their own water, and bartering services within the community in order to generate no waste and repair the local ecosystem. During her visit to the Simple Way intentional community outside of Philadelphia, the author discovered “a multiracial group of radical disciples who’d fixed up several blocks of foreclosed and condemned houses” and set up a farm in an effort to heal a broken urban neighborhood. At the Tactical Tracking Intensive school, Wells learned that tracking humans and animals creates an intimate knowledge of the environment. “If you were estranged from your own ecosystem,” she writes, “tracking was
a refreshingly straightforward practice for overcoming that estrangement.” Wells offers no pat prescriptions for nurturing “lived relationships with water and plants and soil”—only an ardent hope that humans will persist in “fighting and reconciling and reaching across the divide of mutual misapprehension” to save their world.

An urgent message gently conveyed.

CACK-HANDED
A Memoir
Yashere, Gina
Amistad/HarperCollins (288 pp.)
$26.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-06-296171-6

Brazen, emboldening tales of the author’s arduous childhood and journey to success as a comedian.

Throughout, Yashere, writer and producer of the CBS show Bob Hearts Abishola, is by turns disarmingly funny, inspiring, and disjointed. The meaning of cack-handed, she explains, is “left-handed, which I am, and also clumsy and awkward, which I am. It also represents the unconventional track my life and career have taken—including writing this book myself.” Moving chronologically, the author begins with what she’s been told about her Nigerian maternal grandmother; Yashere’s mother believes she was killed by her husband’s other wives. Sent to live in England for protection, the author’s mother is the most intriguing character in the book. Overprotective and sometimes mean, she inadvertently inspired Yashere to use humor to defuse stressful and threatening situations. Being subjected to overt racism while working as an elevator engineer made the author want to learn more about Black culture, which led her to meetings of the Pan-African Community Enterprise. After writing and performing her first sketch, by 1995, she writes, “I had become one of the hottest young comics on the circuit.” Yashere used to be convinced that White audiences wouldn’t connect with Black culture, which led her to meetings of the Pan-African Community Enterprise. After writing and performing her first sketch, by 1995, she writes, “I had become one of the hottest young comics on the circuit.” Yashere used to be convinced that White audiences wouldn’t connect with Black experiences, yet it wasn’t until she began performing authentically in front of all crowds that she really became famous. After seeing her daughter on TV, Yashere’s mother stopped pressuring her to get a proper job. The author describes coming out to her mother as a lesbian and her mother’s reaction: “My daughter is a gay clown.” Yashere replied, “You could say that, yeah.” The author also includes memories of her abusive stepfather and her experience, as an adult in Nigeria, meeting her biological father for the first time since he left the U.K. when she was 3. Though Yashere isn’t the most appealing stylist on the page, her voice is consistently candid and unique.

By virtue of her raw honesty and acerbic wit, Yashere makes it easy to root for her.

PESSOA
A Biography
Zenith, Richard
Liveright/Norton (1,020 pp.)
$40.00 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-0-87140-471-8

A deep examination of an acclaimed literary figure.

Award-winning translator, literary critic, and Guggenheim fellow Zenith draws on the published work and vast unpublished archive of Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) to produce a capacious, perceptive biography of the enigmatic Portuguese writer. Among Zenith’s many sources is Pessoa’s semi-autobiographical The Book of Disquiet and some 25,000 manuscript sheets of poetry, plays, prose, philosophy, and literary criticism, many attributed to the multitude of invented authors that Pessoa created throughout his life. His desire, he said, “to enlarge the world with fictitious personalities,” began in childhood and proliferated until he had imagined more than 100 distinct individuals. He imbued these personalities—he called them heteronyms—with complex biographies and often starkly different opinions and views of the world. Zenith prefaces the book with capsule biographies of dozens of the most significant heteronyms and offers an appendix featuring a detailed chronology of each one’s appearance. In 1904, poet Charles Robert Anon emerged as a predominant alter ego; soon he was joined by Horace James Faber, a writer of detective stories. One heteronym was French; another, British. One was a psychiatrist whose client was Pessoa; others included a monk undergoing a crisis of faith, an astrologer, and a promoter of neopaganism. Among the most well known was Ricardo Reis, a poet immortalized by novelist José Saramago in The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis. Pessoa, born in Lisbon (Zenith is a longtime resident), lived with his family in Durban, South Africa, until he was 17, when he returned to Portugal for college. He never married and “almost certainly died a virgin.” A brief romantic relationship ended when Pessoa lost interest after about a year. Zenith delivers careful readings of Pessoa’s works and examines with sensitivity his varied intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic proclivities as well as his longing for posthumous fame, which he amply accrued.

Impressive research and evident enthusiasm inform a definitive biography.
Nautical misadventures transform a ship in this moderately embellished version of a paper-folding tale best known as “The Captain’s Shirt.”

Following simple directions given at the beginning, readers can fold a paper boat and voyage along as Capt. Skip enlists a crew and sets sail into a succession of storms and other disasters that rip off the ship’s bow, stern, and upper mast. This leaves a wreck that Skip and her crew must abandon, hopping into life-boats as the ship sinks with a “glub, glub, glub, glub.” During the adventure, various onlooking birds and animals issue instructions to readers to, for example, “tear off the top part of your paper ship,” so that at the end, when the damaged paper boat is pulled as the inserted diagrams show, it suddenly turns into a shirt. In bright and bouncy illustrations that appear to have been done in a mix of silkscreen and paper collage, Moreno pays close attention to diversity, as each member of the five-person crew is differently clad and colored (including blue). While one sports a beard and two (one with a wooden prosthesis) seem to present as women, the others are gender ambiguous. The brown-skinned skipper, who is likewise ambiguous as to gender presentation, is referred to with the female pronoun in Ross’ translation but is “el capitán Marco” with the same art in the original Spanish edition, which publishes simultaneously in the U.S.

A laudably inclusive version of a literally ripping yarn. (Picture book. 6-8) (El increíble barco del capitán Marco: 978-84-18133-15-2)
My colleague Laura Simeon helped kick off Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month with a roundup of recent middle-grade titles that celebrate the richness and diversity of the Asian diaspora in the U.S. Now I’d like to pick up the baton to highlight some great recent picture books that do the same.

In *Amira’s Picture Day* (Holiday House, April 13) Reem Faruqi and Fahmida Azim capture the storm of feelings the title character experiences when Eid and school picture day coincide. Of course, she’s looking forward to going to the masjid and celebrating the holy day in community—but she also doesn’t want to miss out on being in the class picture. With exquisite empathy, both art and text honor this South Asian Muslim girl’s conundrum, and readers will cheer to see her solution.

Huy Voun Lee draws on her own childhood experience as a refugee immigrant from Cambodia in *Like a Dandelion* (Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins, May 18). Delicate, emotive illustrations introduce readers to the unnamed narrator as the child and adult caregiver leave a refugee camp to board an airplane. Drawing on the titular simile, the child describes putting down roots in winter, blossoming in springtime with new friends, and welcoming new seeds—a newly arrived immigrant child in a hijab and their older sibling—in fall.

A child uprooted from life in Korea forms an unlikely bond in *My Tree*, by Hope Lim and Il Sung Na (Neal Porter/Holiday House, May 4). Recalling a tree left behind, this backyard presence becomes both a physical refuge and a means to connect with the life the narrator misses dearly. Na’s use of perspective and space both emphasizes the role the tree plays in the child’s adjustment and extends Lim’s tender metaphor for the immigrant experience.

In *Hair Twins* (Little, Brown, May 4), Raakhee Mirchandani and Holly Hatam present an Indian American father and daughter who both wear their hair long, according to Sikh tradition. This opens the door to a loving, mutual hair-care ritual in which Papa oils, combs, and styles his daughter’s hair; in return, she will hand him an elastic when he needs it and sometimes even pick out the color of his turban. It’s clearly a source of joy for both.

Every year, summer really begins *When Lola Visits* (Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins, May 18). The unnamed narrator of Michelle Sterling and Aaron Asis’ tale of an intergenerational and international bond describes the smell of the foods Lola prepares when she comes from the Philippines—mango jam, sisig, kalamansi pie—mingling with chlorine, a newly opened can of tennis balls, sunscreen. It’s a heady, evocative mix.

Mui’n Thi Vân’s spare, lyrical string of *Wishes* (Orchard/Scholastic, May 4), expressed by the night, a bag, the sea, and more—even a dream—becomes the textual scaffolding for Victo Ngai’s powerful illustrations describing the flight of a Vietnamese family from their home to a new life across the ocean. It is hard, and it is scary, and it is inexpressibly sad, but this family has one another, and that’ll have to be enough. It is.

Finally, Andrea Wang and Jason Chin’s *Watercress* (Neal Porter/Holiday House, March 30) offers both narrator and readers a powerful insight when Mom and Dad pull the car over by the side of the road to gather watercress. It’s a scene that the narrator finds intensely humiliating until Mom shares a painful memory of her own childhood in China, a story that transforms the weed into a sacrament. Wang’s verse is as luminous as Chin’s watercolors.

These only begin to touch the robust diversity of Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage—but they are a good start.

*Vicky Smith is a young readers’ editor.*
have brought with them to their new home. D is for Dreamers (and dreamers), dumplings, diversity, and Day of the Dead. H is for holidays, heritage, hijabs, Holi, Hanukkah, and hope. Y is for yucca, yoga, yogurt, Yiddish, yearning—and “you.” By including both the tangible and the intangible, Alko reinforces the idea that the U.S. is more than just a conglomeration of cultures; it’s a quilt of shared values. The text is hand-lettered in varying sizes, incorporated into the overall compositions, and the accompanying images are painted and collaged with verve, emphasizing a folk-art–like artistic sensibility with saturated colors, bold brush strokes, and found objects. In the concluding author’s note, Alko shares her own immigration story and reiterates that “America isn’t any one thing”—that it is both magnificent and complex. Readers from all backgrounds with have a blast looking for references to their own heritages and finding commonalities. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Vibrant, vigorous, and multifaceted—just like America.
(Picture book 3-7)

BERTA’S BOXES
Alvisi, Dario
Illus. by Graux, Amélie
Trans. by Ross, Cecilia
nubeOCHO (40 pp.)
$16.95 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-84-18133-19-0
Series: Inglés

What should a child do with strong feelings?

Years ago, Molly Bang modeled a child finding peace in nature in When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry… (1999), but some readers have complained that Sophie was running away from her problems. More recently, in The Color Monster (2018), Anna Llenas recommended sorting emotions into jars of different colors. Italian bookseller Alvisi’s protagonist Berta follows that latter path. She tidies up regularly, sorts her toys by color, and uses red, yellow, green, and blue boxes to contain her strong feelings. Grown-ups admire her good behavior. But that technique is not enough when someone at school calls her a “red gloop monstreepy” and adults in her life are too distracted by other things.

Another offering for the emotional intelligence shelf. (Picture book 4-7) (Las cajas de Berta: 978-84-18133-26-8)

ALMOST FLYING
Armstrong, Kelley
Illus. by Daumarié, Xavière
Puffin/Penguin Random House Canada (352 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-7352-7015-2
Series: Royal Guide to Monster Slaying, 3

A 13-year-old Long Island girl thinks she has her summer plans figured out—until her life turns upside down.

With the end of summer looming, Dalia has one goal: to finally ride an actual roller coaster instead of living vicariously through point-of-view videos. Then she learns about Vanessa, her father’s secret girlfriend. And that they are engaged and his fiancee has a college-aged daughter named Alexa. Anxious about this news that comes only a year after her mother left them, Dalia turns to her new swim-team friend, Rani, whom she’s eager to get to know better. As the adults want the soon-to-be stepsisters to bond, Dalia, with Rani for company, is allowed to go off with Alexa and her college friend Dhruv on their weeklong amusement park road trip. Along the way, Dalia keeps some of her own secrets—including growing and confusing feelings for Rani that have her brain spinning. This first-person present narration quickens and slows just like the roller coasters Dalia obsesses over. Many readers will identify with the feelings of uncertainty around changing family dynamics and budding first crushes. While this book contains many elements that are widely relatable, the storyline around exploring sexuality is especially resonant. Dalia and her father are Polish American Jews; Vanessa is Colombian American, Rani is Persian American and Muslim, Dhruv is Indian American, and other characters default to White.

A heartwarming, queer-affirming story. (Fiction. 8-13)

THE SERPENT’S FURY
Armstrong, Kelley
Illus. by Daumarié, Xavière
Dial Books (352 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-593-11293-9

Princess Rowan and her friends find trouble and monsters in equal measure in Armstrong’s latest installment.

Though it seems like Rowan and her close-knit hunting party only just left the Dunnian Woods, they have returned for yet another monster mission—or rather to finish the last one. As royal monster hunter, this responsibility is part of Rowan’s heritage; as a nearly 13-year-old monster and science enthusiast, it is a thrilling opportunity to put her growing knowledge and skills to the test. But something isn’t right. A mysterious catalyst has caused a change in migration patterns as monsters of every type flee an unseen terror—and they’re headed straight for Rowan’s home of Tamarel. Rowan, Dain, Alianor, and some old
and new friends make a perilous journey deep into the woods to figure out what could have frightened so many powerful creatures. As the terrible answer steadily becomes clearer, Rowan is faced with the truth that monsters do not have a monopoly on monstrosity. Through Rowan’s first-person narration and natural attention to details, Armstrong immerses readers in her ever deepening external and internal worlds. The effect teeters on disorienting as Rowan’s thoughts flood the pages, but intricately choreographed battles, weighty encounters with politics, and introductions to new monsters (enchantingly rendered in the accompanying illustrated field guide) pace what would otherwise feel frenzied. Characters in this world have a range of skin tones; the citizens of Tamarel are brown-skinned.

The fourth book cannot come fast enough. (Fantasy. 9-12)

CURSE OF THE FORGOTTEN CITY
Aster, Alex
Sourcebooks Young Readers (352 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-4926-9723-7
Series: Emblem Island, 2

Tor, Melda, and Engle embark on an adventure miraculous and precarious to save Estrelle from the dreaded Calavera. Following the Night Witch’s demise, which led to her cursing (and perhaps blessing) Tor with her prodigious powers, her wide-reaching curses and spells have been broken. The Calavera, a band of fearsome, malicious pirates, now seek the Pirate’s Pearl, a powerful orb that grants its possessor the power to control the mighty seas. To halt the Calavera’s looming assault on Estrelle, Tor, Melda, and Engle set sail on the Night Witch’s ship before the gruesome pirates can reach their beloved village. Aided by newcomer Vesper, a feisty silver-haired waterbreather with her share of secrets, as well as the Book of Seas, Tor and friends gain new friendships, face fearsome creatures and foes, and traverse the ferocious seas in their quest for the Pearl. Aster’s brisk, lyrical prose weaves rich, intriguing worldbuilding details and wrinkles into this engrossing series that encompasses tales indebted to Latin American myths. A few slower middle chapters introduce new characters that expand the world’s scope; this entry showcases the author’s profound strides in maturing her characters, the series’ true strength. As Tor grapples with his newfound power and role as the Night Witch’s successor, the trio also slowly explores the still-fresh wounds and traumas from their previous adventure. A cliffhanger ending thankfully promises even more adventures. Characters have a range of skin tones.

A mightily marvelous sequel. (Fantasy. 8-12)

CHILL, CHOMP, CHILL!
Ayala-Kronos, Chris
Illustrated by Sordo, Paco
HMH Books (42 pp.)
$17.99 | Jul. 20, 2021
978-0-358-41098-0

Dinosaur preschoolers demonstrate compromise, anger management, and other socialization skills.

What should little Chomp do when classmate Camara takes the last purple building block? When Rio puts party invitations into every cubby except his? Or, at last, when he beats everyone back inside after recess and finds snacks laid out? For each scenario Ayala-Kronos poses rhetorical questions—“Should Chomp ROAR? Should Chomp STOMP? Should Chomp… CHOMP?”—then offers the titular strategy. It turns out to be savvy counsel, as Sordo demonstrates in his simply drawn cartoons by following scenes of the overall-clad Chomp acting out with more-harmonious alternative views: of smiling dinos using the purple block to link their two constructions, of Rio personally delivering an extra-special invitation with a hug, and like cozy outcomes. It all culminates in a final observation that sometimes a CHOMP! is the right move (so long as there’s enough for everyone). In both concept and the styling of the title character, this book can’t help comparison with Bob Shea’s Dinosaur Vs. series, but it’s considerably tamer. And as prehistorical guides to better behavior go, the droll and venerable How Do Dinosaurs… series from Jane Yolen and Mark Teague offers a far broader set of prescriptions, but younger beastlings may be tempted to give this a nibble. A bouncy song based on the story (written and performed by Jonathan Dean) is available for free from the publisher’s website. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Unapologetically agenda driven, but the behavioral advice is valid enough. (Picture book. 3-6)

THE STARS OF WHISTLING RIDGE
Baldwin, Cindy
Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-06-300641-6

Ivy’s impulsive, defiant act has profound consequences for her family and a small town in trouble.

Twelve-year-old Ivy and her two younger sisters live on the road with their father, a travel writer, and mother, one of three sisters—fallen stars—who tend the world’s magic. Along their travels, Mama helps visitors to their Winnebago camper, using the fireflies she’s trapped to grant their wishes. Shy Elena, 10, and annoyingly precocious Sophie, 8, are contented travelers; creative writer Ivy is not. Longing to have privacy, put down roots, and make friends, she steals and releases all her mother’s fireflies, making her own wish for
a permanent home. Soon after, Ivy has a severe asthma attack that requires resting somewhere near a hospital, and Mama senses that her sister Agatha needs her. The family heads to Whistling Ridge, North Carolina, where they find Agatha ailing and the town's apple orchards hit by a mysterious blight. Intrigued by a local legend, Ivy wonders if it’s linked to the deepening crisis. Ivy’s a believably conflicted tween on an emotional roller coaster. While realistic elements—the setting especially, from the family's cramped RV to the town and countryside—are detailed and evocative, the underdeveloped fantasy element of the story is not. Sophie’s astrophysics factoids only highlight this disconnect. Characters default to White.

A warmhearted family tale wrapped in a lackluster fantasy. (Fantasy. 8-12)

ON THE WAY HOME
Benjamin, A.H.
Illus. by Vasko, Anne
nubeOCHO (40 pp.)
$15.95 | May 4, 2021
978-84-18133-22-0
Series: Somos8

Coming back with Grandpa from a pre-dinner walk, a child gets some unexpected help working up an appetite.

First it’s a monkey swinging in a tree. “Can we do that too?” “Of course!” says the monkey. After a puddle-jumping alligator, a tap-dancing zebra, a tiger on a trampoline, and a weightlifting hippo extend similar invitations, appetite is no longer an issue… but credibility is. “What a wild imagination, sweetie!” says Grandma, upon hearing the tale. But then comes a knock at the door, and in troops a crew of animal dinner guests: “Surprise!” Along with select words in boldface to provide read-aloud guidance, the narrative features lots of sound effects (“SPLISH! SPLASH!”; “BOING! BOING!”) for young audiences to chime in on. They’ll be happy to yell them out when they’re not giggling at the sight of gray-bearded Grandpa gamely swinging by his knees, jumping, splashing, and pumping iron along with his apple-cheeked companion in Vasko’s big, exuberant paintings. Closing, fittingly enough, with a double-page animal rumpus, this high-energy outing offers rousing surprises with nearly every page turn. Both black-mopped child and silver-haired grandparents have pink skin. The book publishes simultaneously in Spanish, with a translation by Luis Amavisca and a title that’s far more suggestive of the interior than the original: Una tarde súper increíble.

Tailor-made for storytimes large or intimate. (Picture book. 3-6) (Una tarde súper increíble: 978-84-18133-21-3)

WE LOVE PIZZA
Everything You Want To Know About Your Number One Food
Beretta, Elena with Wilson, David Henry
Illus. by the authors
Little Gestalten (40 pp.)
$19.95 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-3-96704-705-9

A fact-filled introduction to the popular food.

After boldly asserting that pizza is “the world’s favorite food,” the author explains how pizza originated in 1738 in Naples, Italy, where the first pizzeria later opened in 1830. Italian immigrants subsequently transplanted pizza to the United States in the late 19th century. Today, “Pizzas can be round or square, / In different shapes and sizes, / And sometimes what is in or on them, / Is full of big surprises,” with international variations. Norwegians consume the most pizza, per capita; Brazilians and Germans
love it too. One of the most famous pizzas, the Margherita, was originally cooked for the queen of Naples in 1889, and “Chef Charlotte,” from a contemporary Naples pizzeria, provides a detailed recipe, including the proper ingredients and helpful tips to create perfect pizza dough. Suggestions for various ways to eat pizza (folded, from the box, knife and fork), record-breaking pizza facts (world’s largest, world’s longest, largest collection of pizza boxes), descriptions of different pizzas from around the world, and unusual pizza deliveries add to this eclectic, entertaining collection of pizza information with an international flavor. Topical spreads are introduced with verse, with prose details captioning colorful, humorous illustrations. These use simple shapes and flat patterns, enhancing the data with step-by-step diagrams of pizza preparation; vignettes featuring pizza fans, history, and events; and close-ups of the subject.

A fun-filled, obvious must for pizza lovers. (Informational picture book. 8-12)

MEMORY JARS
Bros gol, Vera
Illus. by the author
Roaring Brook (48 pp.)
$18.99 | May 11, 2021
978-1-250-31487-1

A young girl learns that she can store all sorts of things in jars—but should she? It’s summer, and Freda and her gran, who are both Black, are out picking blueberries. There and on the journey home, Freda stuffs herself silly with blueberries but wails, “I can’t do it! I can’t eat them all!” Gran tells her not to worry because they’ll make blueberry jam—a favorite of Freda’s deceased grandpa—so they can enjoy blueberries, even in the winter. If blueberries can be kept for later enjoyment in jars, Freda wonders, what else can be saved? Freda starts small (with a warm cookie) and soon graduates to items significantly larger than that (the moon) and even the nonphysical (music). After Freda puts Gran in a jar (with conscious consent) she finally begins to see that it may be better to enjoy some things in the moment. Maybe. Bros gol’s accomplished line-and-color art is bright and engaging, and it neatly pairs with the text, giving the illustrations space to tell the story not expressed in words. In close-ups, however, Freda’s drawn with wide eyes and prominent reddish lips, a depiction that’s uncomfortably reminiscent of caricature. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A charming concept undermined by unfortunate visuals. (recipe) (Picture book. 4-8)

A TOTAL WASTE OF SPACE-TIME!
Brown, Jeffrey
Illus. by the author
Crown (244 pp.)
978-0-553-53439-9
978-0-553-53440-5 PLB
Series: Space-Time, 2

A black hole, unfamiliar galactic destinations, and new extraterrestrial acquaintances make this second adventure on the asteroid/ spaceship Potato a wilder ride than the first.

Previously, young astronauts Jide and Petra were selected for a space mission led by clone Tobey and Cmdr. G. The crew visits the home planets of the alien students who inhabit this orbiting school: X’s Techola, where the equator consists of computer parts; Jonny’s Fabrocal, where her moms and relatives greet the crew warmly and serve them ratulark toenails; Nedu, the planet of Sheila, a reptilian Lizarar, where an egg hunt is underway that determines who will parent the hatchlings who were buried 17 years prior, and Petra’s refusal to forgive Tobey for an elaborate prank on his planet, T o bey land. Although Brown invents details like the planet Brigtz, where they play hrbblbl with random rules, and creatures like migrating gliblark, he also includes real scientific details like coprolite. Brown’s handwritten text and loosely sketched landscapes give this graphic novel a sense of spontaneity and fun. To follow the story fully, readers should first pick up Once Upon a Space-Time! (2020). The main human cast is visually diverse.

An imaginative flight of fancy for aspiring astronauts. (excerpt from sequel, author’s note) (Graphic science fiction. 8-12)

THE TRIPLETS GET CHARMED
Brown, Laura & Kramer, Elly
Illus. by Mestina, Sarah
Pixel+Ink (128 pp.)
978-1-64595-014-1
978-1-64595-015-8 paper
Series: Trillium Sisters, 1

An origin story for mysterious, magical triplets.

Eight-year-old triplets Emmy, Clare, and Giselle celebrate Founding Day—the day their veterinarian father, Dr. J.A., found them—instead of a birthday. Each girl has a baby animal pet (bear cub Claw, wolf pup Fluffy, and eaglet Soar), feels a special connection to trillium flowers for their three petals, and is indistinguishable from her sisters aside from occasional telling-not-showing characterization and illustrations that render Giselle as a girl of color while the rest of the family presents White. On their eighth Founding Day, their father, upset
to see that the trillium patch where he first found his daughters has been uprooted, diverges from their traditions to replant the flowers and to reveal that there’s more to the original Founding Day story than he’s told them. Back then, a large trillium flower glowed before bursting into sparkles and leaving trillium petal charms behind that Dr. J.A. now gives to the girls. Later, when Emmy and their younger brother, Zee, go to pick strawberries, Zee falls into a river. The triplets work together to try to save him, but it isn’t enough until the charms activate, giving the girls super-powers and new outfits, and making their pets huge. Although the woody setting (especially their treehouse home) and animals charm, the blandness of both characters and plot falls short of magical. In the simultaneously releasing sequel, Bestie Day, freed from the burden of expository backstory, the plot (a White bully and her subservient, Asian-presenting best friend endanger bees by cutting too many wildflowers) gets moving faster but offers only marginal improvements.

_Hopefully future installments will carry some substance._

(Fantasy 7-9) (Bestie Day: 978-1-64595-016-5, 978-1-64595-023-3 paper)
Thanks to Sonja Cherry-Paul, readers of all ages can now engage with Ibram X. Kendi’s history of racist ideas

BY JOSHUNDA SANDERS

Stamped (For Kids) (Little, Brown, May 11) is a helpful distillation of the anti-racist themes and concepts brilliantly laid out by Ibram X. Kendi in his bestselling, National Book Award–winning 2016 book for adults, Stamped From the Beginning. There’s already a young adult “remix” of the book—Stamped: Racism, Antiracism and You, Kendi’s 2020 collaboration with bestselling author Jason Reynolds, the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature. Now there’s a remix to the remix, aimed at readers ages 10 to 14, which is beyond what Kendi could have foreseen when he wrote the book, he explains via email.

“How could anyone imagine [three versions of the book]? I surely did not. It has been quite the journey.” Kendi adds that the importance of having a version for young readers is simple: “The earlier kids learn about the history of racist ideas, the earlier kids learn about anti-racist ideas, the earlier they can learn anti-racist ideas and protect themselves against dangerously racist ideas. We protect kids from racist ideas by pointing them out.”

That sentiment comes through in Stamped (For Kids). One reason for that is the anti-bias, anti-racist pedagogy that has shaped its author, Sonja Cherry-Paul, a veteran educator and consultant who co-founded the Institute for Racial Equity in Literacy. Cherry-Paul was tapped to write this version because she authored the educators guide to the Reynolds and Kendi iteration of Stamped.

“I was humbled and frightened,” Cherry-Paul says by phone. “Like, did you call the right number?”

Much of Cherry-Paul’s previous writing experience had been centered on academic and curriculum writing. “This is a really high-stakes way to dip my toe in this area,” she says, laughing. And she also developed the book in the midst of a lot of societal tumult.

“The backdrop to my work was the pandemic, which has disproportionately touched the lives of Black people, while Black Lives Matter movement protests were happening and the election was underway,” she says. “It was a lot of noise, heaviness, and pressure to navigate.”

She managed to complete the project by working early in the morning before the sun came up, or, as she puts it, “Before I got burdened and beat down by the world.”

To complete Stamped (for Kids), she would stop by 1 p.m., take a break, print chapters out and read them aloud, imagining how she would tell this story in a classroom on the rug with students gathered around her.
The result is a middle-grade text that combines the revelatory depth of Kendi’s original with the measured levity of Reynolds’ version. “Jason does this beautiful pausing in the piece,” Cherry-Paul says. “I’ve taught for 20 years, and there’s always that moment when kids will be like, ‘Wait, hold up.’ They want to take a moment to process and breathe, or repeat back what you just said, which is a form of processing. I tried to think about giving them a beat to summarize something challenging they just read.”

While each version of *Stamped* is illuminating, this version is perhaps the most digestible, with beautiful illustrations by Rachelle Baker, a helpful timeline for reference, and a glossary to deepen understanding. That’s particularly helpful because there are heavy topics in the book that even adults don’t usually talk about—lynching, the death of Emmett Till and its significance, the more recent deaths of Black people at the hands of police.

It took a bit of courage—and permission from Reynolds—for Cherry Paul to feel free in shaping Reynolds’ text so that it worked for a younger audience. “At first I was paring it down and trying not to change it too much,” she says. “He said, ‘Don’t be intimidated about changing things to make it work.’ There were multiple drafts, to not completely disrupt Jason’s genius.”

She landed there by intentionally making a map of possibility for young readers. “I thought deeply about how I could help young readers understand the truth: That there was never a plan for Black people to truly be free, but there was still reason for hope. I thought a lot about how there was always resistance, even if the fight wasn’t won. I also hope that educators and caregivers will see this text as not the only experience for readers to have, but one of many.”

Reynolds puts it this way in an email: “To me, it’s simple. We teach our young people the mechanics of arithmetic so that they’ll begin to understand how language functions in them and around them. *Stamped (For Kids)* is just another building block. A kind of technology through narrative meant to introduce them to the way history affects the present, and how they can change the future.”

As has been the case for all of her work as an educator, Cherry-Paul’s greatest dream and vision for what this book will do is to deeply empower young people. “*Stamped (For Kids)* means they don’t have to wait for the adults in their world anymore to help them understand these important concepts,” she says. “They’ll have access to language and lenses to look at racism. They’ll be able to identify it in their own lives and interrogate it.”

Joshunda Sanders is the author, mostly recently, of *I Can Write the World*. *Stamped (For Kids)* received a starred review in the May 1, 2021, issue.
finds that even when she’s hearing one again, there’s “always / something in that story / that was more.” Her grandfather tells her “that all the old stories / are so alive / that even when you hear / one of them again, / that story may decide / to show you / something new.” Bruchac (Abenaki) tenderly braids traditional Wabanaki stories and, via Malian’s family history, stories of atrocities visited on Native nations into Malian’s lockdown experience. As early spring turns to summer and Malum makes himself part of the family, she turns these stories into a school presentation, a process that helps her realize that, like her grandparents and the big dog, she’s “a rez dog too.”

Hidden throughout this moving novel in verse, old stories are discovered like buried treasures. (Verse fiction. 8-12)

**THE GHOUL NEXT DOOR**

*Bunn, Cullen*

*Illus. by Farris, Cat*

*HarperAlley (200 pp.)*


978-0-06-289610-0

978-0-06-289609-4 paper

A cemetery-obsessed kid finds himself in ghoulish company.

On his way to school with his friend Marshall, Grey splits off to take a shortcut through the cemetery. Grey trips, accidentally dropping his school project—a diorama of the cemetery—into an open gravesite. Before he can get it back, a clawlike hand drags the diorama into the shadows with a “HssSSSSss.” Grey high-tails it out of there and goes to school empty-handed. That night, that very creature visits Grey in his room and disappears when spotted. Grey finds the diorama on his doorstep not only intact, but improved. Next comes a series of strange gifts. When accosted, the gift giver—a young ghoul named Lavinia—warns that the “cemetery’s not safe” for “surface-dwellers.” But when the other ghouls threaten people important to Grey, Grey must brave his new “ghoul-friend” gotten themselves into? More macabre than spine-tingling, this fast-paced blend of humor and horror is essentially an against-the-odds friendship story. Though the quality of Farris’ watercolor art alone distinguishes it from other full-color graphic novels, her skeletal, shadowy silhouettes are wonderfully (and unforgettably) nightmarish. Bunn’s ghoul lore offers a fresh, alternate post-Salem witch trials narrative. Visual cues code Grey as biracial, with a mom of color and a White dad; Marshall presents White. A sequel will follow.

A fun story with art that’ll knock readers dead. (Graphic horror. 8-12)

**BREAKING WAVES**

*Winslow Homer Paints the Sea*

*Burleigh, Robert*

*Illus. by Minor, Wendell*

*Neal Porter/Holiday House (40 pp.)*

$18.99 | Jun. 1, 2021

978-0-8234-4702-2

Emphasizing 19th-century American artist Winslow Homer’s love of painting the ocean.

Winslow Homer was a successful American artist in his lifetime, and when he was 47, he left New York City to move to a southern Maine peninsula jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean. Here, in his converted carriage house/studio, he spent his time observing the sea and painting its moods. Rather than a biography, this book presents a contemplation on the fascination Homer felt for the Atlantic and the rocky shore—the inspiration for his well-known seascapes. Interspersing Homer’s actual words with imagined daily activities, Burleigh’s text brings readers into the artist’s sensibility and creative process. The watercolor-and-gouache illustrations (a medium that Homer also employed) stay within Homer’s palette in their color choices and are rendered in a loose, sketchy style. Both the style and the palette choice are effective creative decisions, delivering to the story a cumulative ambiance of an artist at work indoors and out, sketching, planning, seeing, and trying. Limiting the storyline to Homer in Prouts Neck effectively encapsulates Homer’s fascination with painting the sea while underscoring his dedication to his art. Extensive backmatter gives further detail about Homer’s life and travels, taking care to note his paintings that include African Americans (subjects not usually included in 19th-century American fine art).

*Quite authentically Homer.* (Informational picture book. 6-10)

**THE EDGE OF STRANGE HOLLOW**

*Byrne, Gabrielle K.*

*Imprint (384 pp.)*

$18.99 | May 18, 2021

978-1-250-62466-6

Most villagers in the Hollows fear the Grimwood, with good reason. Poppy’s parents tried to change that until they disappeared; now it’s up to her.

Separated from the outside world by the mostly impenetrable fog, the Hollows’ human residents farm the rich land encircling the Grimwood and shun Poppy’s family, whose home was grown for them by the Grimwood. While her parents work hard to understand the forest and neutralize the maledictions it sends, Jute, a loyal hob—one of the hearts of trees who hatch and then seek homes—looks after Poppy and Dog, her three-headed cerberus. Poppy’s only friend, elf Mack, joins her search, though with reservations, as...
“ÓHora’s signature boldly outlined acrylic paintings present very expressive characters, dogs and humans alike.”

DOGS AT WORK

does Nula, an effervescent, shape-shifting pooka who shows Poppy how to undo the blood ward that’s prevented her from exploring the Grimwood. Nula talks Poppy into going to the faeries for help, overriding Mack’s sound objections, but when courageous, headstrong Poppy discounts threats and complications to her quest, bigger problems ensue. The fascinating forest’s lethal dangers include thorn trees, trolls, wisps, and—at its center—the Holly Oak, which just might hold the key to the Grimwood’s mysteries. Poppy’s likable, but the Grimwood’s nonhuman inhabitants are enchanting: Scary, droll, and delightfully strange, they transform the classic hero’s journey into a sparklingly original adventure featuring assorted elements borrowed from British folklore. Poppy reads as White; the human cast has a range of skin tones.

Spookily thrilling with superlative worldbuilding. (Fantasy. 9-13)

DOGS AT WORK
Good Dogs. Real Jobs.
Cardillo, Margaret
Illus. by ÓHora, Zachariah
Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-0-06-290631-1

Children lament time apart from their hardworking dogs.

“There they go. Off to who knows where. / What do they do all day? And how could they leave us behind?” So lament a Black child with Afro puffs and a White child with braids looking out their window at dogs on their way to work. All of the dogs stand on their hind legs, looking very much like adult humans (complete with briefcase, purse, or headphones) on their way to work. The illustrations respond to the children’s lament by chronicling dogs’ many jobs (jobs that dogs actually have in real life): therapy dogs, lobster-diving dogs, guide dogs, service dogs, rescue dogs, a small-town mayor, and

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Middle-Grade Graphic Novels To Pick Up Now

It’s no wonder that graphic novels are catnip to readers of all ages. By marrying art and text, these books become something far greater than their individual parts. Art can vividly and economically communicate more than paragraphs of text, and the shapes and layout of panels, the color palette chosen, and the illustrator’s style similarly contribute to the overall reading experience.

Middle-grade readers of graphic novels are in luck: Recent months have brought an abundance of offerings that cater to a broad range of interests. While more titles in translation would be most welcome, it is nevertheless heartening to see a greater range and number of primary characters—not just sidekicks—who get to appear in stories in which their identities, whether they are biracial or Deaf, are just part of who they are, not made into issues to be solved. Here are just a few new graphic novels to look for:

If you enjoy a bit of suspense, three great choices are Secrets of Camp Whatever written and illustrated by Chris Grine (Oni Press, March 2), a delightfully spooky summer camp story; The Night Marchers and Other Oceanian Tales edited by Kate Ashwin, Sloane Leong, and Kel McDonald (Iron Circus Comics, April 20), a collection of traditional stories from around the Pacific; and Shark Summer written and illustrated by Ira Marcks (Little, Brown, May 11), a dramatic story about young filmmakers exploring an old mystery.

Animals are perennially popular subjects, and three new books feed young people’s passion for our furry, feathered, and scaled friends. The protagonist in Allergic by Megan Wagner Lloyd, illustrated by Michelle Mee Nutter (Graphix/Scholastic, March 2), will tug at the heartstrings of every child facing obstacles in getting a pet of their own. In Aster and the Mixed-Up Magic by Thom Pico and Karensac, translated by Anne Smith and Owen Smith, and illustrated by Karensac (Random House Graphic, March 2), the protagonist and her talking dog come across a flock of rebellious sheep, among other adventures. A lonely girl meets a clever dog in Pawcasso, written and illustrated by Remy Lai (Henry Holt, May 25), and through him finds a path—if somewhat fraught with emotional land mines—to friendship and belonging.

History lovers should check out Robert Smalls written and illustrated by Joel Christian Gill (Chicago Review Press, May 3) and Turtle in Paradise by Jennifer L. Holm, illustrated by Sava vanne Ganucheau (Random House Graphic, May 18). The former, a great crossover read for teens and adults, is the latest in the Tales of the Talented Tenth series; it introduces readers to the heroic exploits of an enslaved man during the Civil War. The latter is a charming adaptation of Holm’s 2010 Newbery Honor title set during the Depression, which follows a girl making a fresh start after her mother sends her to live with relatives in Key West, Florida.

Graphic novels, with their emotional immediacy, are perfect for realistic fiction about navigating life and all its challenges. A young environmentalist eager to expose the truth about the pollution she finds in a local lake learns about journalism in The Leak by Kate Reed Petty, illustrated by Andrea Bell (First Second, March 16). Just Pretend (Little, Brown, May 18), is a memoir about author and illustrator Tori Sharp’s middle school years, which featured stressful turbulence in her family life as well as the comfort she discovered in creating stories about a fantasy world. Girls’ basketball forms the backdrop for The Fifth Quarter, written and illustrated by Mike Dawson (First Second, May 25), as well as being a catalyst for learning about risk-taking and looking past first impressions.

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
more (further information is given in the “barkmatter” at the end of the book). The inclusion of “mom dogs” as a dog job is wonderful. There is great ambiguity in who is speaking in the accompanying text—is it the dogs who need to cuddle, eat, and so forth, or the children?—which may lead to some confusion for readers. OHora’s signature boldly outlined acrylic paintings present very expressive characters, dogs and humans alike, and are charmingly whimsical. The joy in the illustrations is palpable, and seeing the many ways dogs help humans will be especially touching to dog lovers. Many dog breeds are represented along with children of different races and abilities. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A solid choice for dog lovers and those who want to better appreciate how dogs help humans. (Picture book. 3-6)

CURSE OF THE PHOENIX
Carter, Aimée
McElderry (304 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-5344-7844-2

Following their mother’s sudden passing, a brother and sister must contend with a family curse.

Twelve-year-old twins Zac and Lu grew up in Chicago hearing their mother’s stories about the Wildewoods, a fantastical forest full of magic creatures. One month after her death, their grieving father sends the siblings to England to spend the summer with maternal relatives they’ve never met: their great-aunt Merle and her wife, Rowena. It’s in the family’s enormous manor house and surrounding forest that they discover that the Wildewoods and its creatures—unicorns, mermaids, centaurs, and other supposedly mythological beings—are not only real, but also part of a curse their family has endured for centuries. From the age of 13, each descendant is required to become a caretaker of the Wildewoods and its inhabitants. Carter’s latest offering is a harmonious mix of lighter fantasy elements and the more somber portrayal of the family’s grieving process. Lu and Zac share the narrative in alternating chapters that reveal their inner troubles, particularly Lu’s worries about Zac’s health and anger over their father’s emotional abandonment and Zac’s trauma over losing their mother and his struggles with asthma and life-threatening allergies. This thoughtful story also shows how their sibling relationship has changed over the years and the difficult choices they must make regarding the curse they have inherited. All characters are assumed White.

An imaginative adventure with emotional depth. (Fantasy. 8-12)

WE WANT A DOG
Cole, Lo
Illus. by the author
Sourcebooks Jabberwocky (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-7282-3817-3

In this playful, rhyming ode to dogs and dog lovers, Cole explores a variety of canine characteristics, from the mirthful to the mischievous.

“We want a dog.” This loaded demand heard by parents throughout the ages is the opening volley for the pro-pooch crew. Next to the text (printed in cream, sans-serif type against black) lies a peaceful, slumbering dog curled up on a red, circular bed, a blissful image to accompany the request. To which the respondent blithely returns, “What kind of dog?” They want specificity: “One that races? One that chases? / One that digs in muddy places?” The clever questions continue in a seeming effort to discern what type of dog is most desired—but taken
all together, they encapsulate the active, messy, unpredictable fun that dog ownership can be. Lively, rhyming text is perfectly paired with expressive, energetic artwork. The bold digital illustrations, done in a minimal palette of black, white, and red, are full of spontaneity and ingenuity; a delightful gatefold allows for an ordinary spotted dog to become extraordinarily long, accompanied by the also-expanding question “One that grows...and grows...and grows?” The simple but sophisticated graphic style is reminiscent of Michael Hall and Craig Frazier. Together, text and art will garner giggles for this perfect read-aloud with a surprise twist ending!

For dog owners, pet lovers, and parents of children clamoring for a dog: an absolute delight. (Picture book. 3-8)

HARLEY THE HERO
Collins, Peggy
Illus. by the author
Pajama Press (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-1-77278-195-3

Harley has a special job at school—he helps Ms. Prichard feel safe.

Her students know that even though they can’t play with him while he’s wearing his service-dog vest, he can still lick their feet if they let him. Little Amelia, who often wears her- protection earmuffs, loves Harley, but she doesn’t want him near her feet. Just as Harley keeps Ms. Prichard safe, Amelia’s friend, the narrator, keeps her safe. He knows that “loudb noises, weird smells, or too-close things” might upset her, so he’s extra vigilant. When there’s a fire one day, the students run to the door—everyone but Amelia. Her friend alerts Ms. Prichard, Harley tugs her too, and together they get Amelia outside. Harley’s a hero! Collins’ tale of neurodiversity, based on a true story, is really about Harley’s job as a service dog—from the title to the front endpapers to the ending. The charming and likable toe-licking Harley eclipses the subtle mentions of neurodiversity—what it is and why it’s important to “normalize” it, as the flap copy states. The illustrations are inclusive, from the progress pride flag flying over the school under the Canadian maple leaf to the diverse classroom, which includes a child who uses a wheelchair. (The narrator and Ms. Prichard present White, and Amelia presents Asian.) However, the lack of information about neurodivergence may hinder the intended message.

A lighthearted introduction to service dogs and their grateful partners. (author’s note, biographical note) (Picture book. 4-7)

RIDE THE WIND
Davies, Nicola
Illus. by Rubbino, Salvatore
Candlewick (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-5362-1284-6

A boy rescues an albatross after it is hooked by a fishing line. Javier is out at sea with his fisherman father, Tomas, and Uncle Felipe, helping with the fishing lines, when he sees an albatross has become hooked. Uncle Felipe unhook the bird and throws it onto a corner of the boat, ignoring it. But Javier sneaks the still-alive bird into the boat’s hold and later, when they reach their home port, hides the bird in the storeroom behind the house. Caring for the bird with the help of neighbors, Javier hopes to have the bird healed by the time he goes back out to sea in two weeks. But he comes home one day to discover that his father, having found out about the bird, has sold it to a fairground manager. Javier’s already-tenuous relationship with his father since the death of his mother boils over. Javier finds the bird and runs off with her to the cliff’s edge, reckless of his own safety, as he is determined to convince the bird to fly away. The assured storytelling has a crispness that feels fresh and immediate, and the colorful illustrations echo this immediacy and confidence in their spontaneous-looking execution. All human characters are illustrated with beige skin and dark hair and eyes, and the honorifics (Señor, Señora, Señorita) probably indicate, due to albatross range, a South American setting.

Taut and heartwarming. (author’s note) (Picture book. 5-9)

RACE CARS
A Children’s Book About White Privilege
Devanny, Jenny
Illus. by the author
Ed. by Gordon, Charnaie
Frances Lincoln (40 pp.)
$17.99 | May 4, 2021
978-0-7112-6290-4

An automobile race as metaphor to explain White privilege to young children.

Transparent collaboration between a White author/illustrator and a Black editor bespeaks the book’s dual purposes: “to support...[Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] children in resisting social messages of racial inferiority and to support white children in developing a positive self-concept” that does not require a sense of superiority. In the text, intentional spacing disrupts the compound word racecar to introduce two race cars, Chase, who is black, and Ace, who is white. They enjoy racing, and Chase is exceptionally fast. He ends up being the first black car to ever win a race. The all-white car “race committee” decides “to change a few of the rules” to maintain white cars’ advantage. Ensuing pages show Chase blocked from a route open only to white race cars and then stopped by a “race officer,” metaphorically showcasing systemic and institutional
Life doesn’t always go smoothly. Sometimes, the wind may blow, but remember: you can do hard things.

This stunning picture book celebrates every parent’s wish for his or her child in the face of life’s challenges. With peek-through pages and gentle, lyrical text, this is a book to share and treasure.
“Ripe and ripening blueberries abound, meticulously rendered in exquisite detail.”

**BLUEBERRY CAKE**

![Image](blueberry_cake.jpg)

Dillard, Sarah  
*Illus. by the author*  
Aladdin (32 pp.)  
$17.99 | Jul. 13, 2021  
978-1-5344-5134-6

Step aside, Sal. There’s a new blueberry lover in town. A hopeful bear cub sidles up to the grown-up of the house to ask, “Blueberry cake?” A red bucket is produced with the one-word instruction “Blueberries,” and off the cub skips to collect the delicious fruit. At first all goes well. A massive field filled with blueberry bushes extends as far as the eye can see. But little bears have little attention spans, and next thing you know, the area is filled with blueberry bushes extending as far as the eye can see. The little bear makes amends the next day? Yes! The cake is baked to order, and the cub plays with the flowers. “No blueberries,” the cub admits. “No blueberry cake” is the straightforward reply. Can the little bear make amends the next day? Yes! The cake is baked and devoured, and then the little bear utters a single word: “Applesauce?” Tapping into the enthusiasm of small children and infused with a laconic humor, this book is bound to prove a rollicking read-aloud for all that it has a minimal text that mostly consists of repetition of the critical words: *blueberry cake and blueberries*. Ripe and ripening blueberries abound on the page, meticulously rendered in exquisite detail. Such details extend to other elements of the bucolic setting, such as the black-eyed Susans, Queen Anne’s lace, and even a passing monarch butterfly. A note from the author and a recipe for blueberry cake round out this deeply satisfying story. (*This book was reviewed digitally.)*

A thoroughly delicious (and practically wordless) charmer.  
*(Picture book. 4-8)*

**HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS**

Dodd, Emma  
*Illus. by the author*  
Templar/Candlewick (24 pp.)  
$14.99 | Jul. 6, 2021  
978-1-5362-1712-4  
Series: Emma Dodd’s Love You Books

A kitten and cat parent explore the concept of home and their close relationship. “What is it that makes our house / a special place to be? / Let’s think about this place called home / and maybe we will see.” Their house is a place to snuggle and to be themselves. They leave for adventures (through the cat door) but always return home. Their house is where their good stuff is and where they play and snooze. During scary storms, it’s the place they feel safe and dry and warm. Though the parent kitty may need to be away sometimes, home is where the kitten can wait for the parent to return. “So this I will remember / my whole life through: / Home is where the heart is. . / and my heart is with you!” With this small volume, Dodd adds another sweet, simple, and short title to her list of picture books in which adorable animals stand for humans and impart reassuring sentiments. Her smudgy-lined art features a huggable duo of smiling kitties just being cats in a clean, pink house that’s clearly inhabited by humans, though none ever appear. Though it’s unquestionably sentimental, Dodd keeps it just this side of syrupy. Toddlers, whether cat lovers or not, will identify with the small, white kitten.  

Appealing but not saccharine.  
*(Picture book. 2-5)*

**EVEN AND ODD**

Durst, Sarah Beth  
*Illus. by the author*  
Clarion (288 pp.)  
$16.99 | Jun. 15, 2021  
978-0-358-35038-5

Two sisters gain new appreciation for magical abilities and ordinary wits—but only after they utilize both in an unexpected heroic quest.

Living in a mundane Connecticut town near the gateway to magical Firoth, Emma and Olivia, aka Even and Odd, are unusual among magical beings. They share their magic, each possessing it on alternating days (thus, their nicknames). Even eagerly practices her magic, hoping to heroically protect the magic world from danger. Odd is less disciplined, preferring everyday pleasures like volunteering at the animal shelter. After some uncomfortable, even odiferous, magical mishaps, they learn that the gateway is malfunctioning. When they investigate along with Jeremy, a flighty, talkative unicorn, they get stuck in Firoth, where they find entire hills and lakes have shifted, endangering many animal species—the collateral damage of Lady Vell, a villain who is extracting magic to fuel her inventions. As they journey through the land—on a yellow brick road, no less—they meet
many colorful characters. But to right things, the threesome must depend on their own strengths, learning much about themselves and the workings of Firoth in the process. They each embrace skills they previously undervalued: for Even, ordinary smarts; for Odd, magical practice. The pace is brisk; the rapport between the default White sisters is charming; and central themes, while familiar, are handled with great originality. Humor abounds as Jeremy provides comic relief.

**Whimsical fun.**  
( fantasy. 8-12)

**THE NEW KID HAS FLEAS**  

*Dyckman, Ame*  
Illus. by Kaban, Eda  
Roaring Brook (40 pp.)  
$16.99 | Jun. 15, 2021  
978-1-250-24524-3

A story intended to encourage warm welcomes to newcomers.

Dyckman is no longer a newcomer to picture books, but she uses her dedication to thank those who helped her when she was. Unfortunately, the latest offering from this picture-book veteran falls short of delivering a satisfying story due to the cartoon-style illustrations’ literal interpretation of the text. The first-person narration follows an elementary-age student who regards a new kid in class with some trepidation. She has curly, red hair and light skin (like the narrator’s), and her behavior seems downright animalistic in the illustrations. The other kids in the diverse classroom ostracize her, with one child echoing the title to say she has fleas. The narrator is concerned when the teacher pairs them for a project, and here’s where the interaction between art and text goes seriously awry. The narrator goes home with the girl only to end up at a cave and find out that she is a feral child raised by wolves. Yes, this explains her behavior in the art, but any real-world application of the bighearted message of the story is derailed by this odd turn of events even though the narrator enjoys the time spent with her and they seem to be friends by the book’s end.

**This new book has flaws.**  
(Picture book. 4-6)

**THE SECRET STARLING**  

*Eagle, Judith*  
Illus. by Rioux, Jo  
Walker US/Candlewick (256 pp.)  
$16.99 | Jun. 8, 2021  
978-1-5362-1365-2

Ballet intrigue and a neglected manor in the wild Yorkshire moors take center stage in a tale of who am I and whodunit. It’s 1974, and Clara has been raised by her authoritarian uncle in falling-apart Braithwaite Manor with governesses and Cook as her only companions. Then Cook is suddenly dismissed and Uncle disappears. Cook’s grandchildren and an orphaned boy from London named Peter suddenly show up, and the old house, which has been put up for sale, is suddenly filled with fun. But Clara wonders about her dead mother, a ballerina, and the identity of her father, about whom her uncle refused to speak. After she and Peter find an old ballet shoe, they travel to London together to research her mother in archival newspapers. While there, they uncover critical information about Peter’s neighbor and why Uncle disappeared. Events unfold quickly, with Rudolf Nureyev’s defection from the Kirov Ballet a key plot element. Rioux’s atmospheric, full-page, black-and-white artwork lends a nostalgic feel to the work. Unfortunately, some of the characters’ connections and motivations are not sufficiently explained, and the text lacks the humor and humanity that would elevate it above the credulity-straining plot. The characters default to White; two of Cook’s grandchildren read as Black in the illustrations.

**Family mysteries are solved thanks to a ballet slipper.**  
(Fiction. 10-14)
EXTREMELY GROSS ANIMALS
Stinky, Slimy and Strange Animal Adaptations

Eamer, Claire
Kids Can (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-593-19331-0

From poop-eating dung beetles to wasp larvae in zombified worms, animals survive and thrive in ways humans may find gross.

After reminding her readers that definitions of gross can be cultural as well as innate, Eamer digs right into her disgusting subject, framing her examples to show how what appears to us as distasteful can serve as an animal’s survival skill. Spread by spread she shows how a wide variety of animals might eat, use, or mimic poop, slime and snot, spit, and bad smells. She introduces creatures that discard parts of their bodies and others that attach themselves to and use others’ bodies. Each page opens with an amusing headline, the narrative text describing examples in two or three short sections, each also with a header. The lively design includes captioned stock photographs, often annotated with comments. A fulmar chick vomits a smelly red oil, and the speech bubble says “Blech!” The discarded tails of chameleon geckos squeak. In some cases, such as the ability of velvet worms to spit glue, animal skills have inspired scientific research and practical applications in the human world. Readers are reminded that scientists must move beyond the grossness and ask further questions. There’s plenty of factual information here, but the appeal is the eww factor. Perfect for middle-grade fans of Jess Keating’s Gross as a Snot Otter (2019). (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Put this on your middle-grade menu. (glossary, sources, index) (Nonfiction. 7-10)

WHAT IS GOD LIKE?
Evans, Rachel Held & Turner, Matthew Paul
Illus. by Tan, Ying Hui
Convergent/Crown (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-593-19331-0

Popular progressive Christian memoirist Evans’ posthumously published children’s picture book encourages children and families to explore the attributes of God.

It’s a big question to ask. What is God like? Many people have asked across time and around the globe, and there have been many answers, too. Here, a Black brother and sister and their diverse group of playmates explore both what God is like and how we can know. From God’s revelation in nature to the stars in the sky, and above all through love, God is depicted as an omnipresent yet benevolent mystery. Throughout the text God is given male, female, and nonbinary pronouns and attributes. While many of the characteristics described come from Scripture, especially Psalms, belief in the Bible as Scripture is not a requirement to enjoy this book. Indeed, though the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is very lightly alluded to and the author self-identified as Christian, this is not an explicitly Christian text. It is well suited for diverse theistic audiences with varied beliefs about the creator, their nature, and identity. Tan’s bright illustrations employ soft, rounded shapes and swirling compositions to emphasize the comforting and all-encompassing nature of God’s presence. Notably when the text compares God to three dancers, their grace and precision are interpreted by figures who are not stereotypically skinny and do not hew to conventional U.S. standards of beauty. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A colorful and diverse exploration of God's character, with an emphasis on love. (Picture book/religion. 4-7)

ISOBEL ADDS IT UP
Everington, Kristy
Illus. by Ford, A.G.
Random House Studio (40 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Jun. 29, 2021
978-0-593-17810-2

When the noise from next door threatens to keep quiet-loving Isobel from completing her math homework on time, she gets serious about resolving her noisy-neighbor situation.

Isobel, who presents as Black, listens to the loud thumps and bumps made by her new and noisy neighbors and imagines that there must be acrobats on the other side of the shared wall. As the noise continues, Isobel thinks that the neighbors must be a marching band or even a basketball team! After a failed attempt to get back at the neighbors by making some noise of her own, Isobel comes up with a new plan. She and her father bake peanut-butter cookies and deliver them with a note asking the new neighbors to be quiet. To her surprise, she receives a note back from her new neighbor, Bernadette—an elephant. Bernadette also has math homework due Monday, and it turns out the two make a winning pair of study partners. Not only is it refreshing to read a story about a little girl who loves math, but it is also exciting to read a book in which a child learns to establish boundaries in a way that is kind and fair. Ford illustrates Isobel’s reality in full color, with skewed angles to emphasize the disruption to her routines; both the equations she’s trying to work and her imagined scenes are represented as monochrome, white-space–filling cartoons.

An adorable story about friendship and learning how to state your needs. (Picture book. 4-7)
BLINK AND BLOCK MAKE A WISH
Fang, Vicky
Illus. by the author
HarperAlley (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-0-06-304945-1
Series: Friendbots, 1

One treasure of a penny + one wish =
two new friends.

Robots are childhood favorites, and
Blink (round and blue) and Block (square and purple), each
equipped with pipestem limbs and a sensor, are remarkably
expressive. In the beginning, a frowning Block sits alone on a
bench along the path to school when an optimistic Blink wanders
by scanning for gold, silver, and gems. The more-knowledgable Block doubts Blink will be successful, especially when
Blink finds only a bottle cap and a chewing-gum wrapper—with
gum in it. “Ewww.” Still, Blink perseveres and finds a penny,
crowing that a penny “can turn into a wish!” There is no wishing
well or fountain nearby; so a resourceful Blink throws the penny
in a (wishing?) puddle. Block can’t understand Blink’s joyful
dance that follows. Blink’s wish couldn’t have come true; after
all, Block doesn’t see any gold, silver, or gems. “That’s because
I didn’t wish for those things,” explains Blink. Instead, Blink
wished for a new friend. With a handshake, the new friendship
is sealed, and the two smiling friends set off to find more wishes.
Two to four uncluttered but colorful panels per spread create a
clear and easy-to-read format, and graceful, unobtrusively repet-
titious text supports new readers. An info page on sensors con-
cludes the book. (*This book was reviewed digitally.*)

Amply demonstrates the values of a positive attitude and a
little creative thinking. (*Graphic early reader. 5-7*)

Two to four uncluttered but colorful panels per spread create a
clear and easy-to-read format.
For years, longtime friends Sasha Quinton and Thomas Hegbrook talked about collaborating on a picture book about resilience. But living an ocean apart and raising young sons alongside high-profile day jobs—she’s the president at Scholastic Book Fairs, he’s the director of U.K.–based independent publishing group Little Tiger—prevented the project from taking wing. That is, until 2020.

“It was the worst, best kind of serendipity,” says Hegbrook, who spoke with Quinton and me from his home in England via Zoom. He’s talking, of course, about the coronavirus pandemic, the effects of which required many parents—and children—to tap their reserves of resilience.

“For my own little guy, we had just sold the house that he had lived in his entire life,” says Quinton, speaking from New York. “His dog had just died, he was in a lockdown. So there was tremendous change in this little soul’s life, and I didn’t have something that could help to teach him—I was looking at Mister Rogers videos about how to talk to a child about death, and those sorts of things, but, the softer, more social, emotional side of [coping with loss], I didn’t have something that could help me to articulate, we’ll be OK, you’ll be OK.”

The Wind May Blow, to be published by Tiger Tales on Aug. 3, is a gorgeous and compelling 36-page picture book that will fortify readers of all ages who experience tough times. Featuring lyrical writing by Quinton and layered acrylic artwork by Hegbrook—with peek-through pages emphasizing key words of painted-in text—it tells the story of a child in a red....
hooded sweatshirt who finds the inner strength to triumph over adversity.

“On the day you were born the sun rose brilliant and bright and beautiful,” the story begins, accompanied by a picture of the child in his crib, being minded by an attentive gold-and-white puppy. The child and his canine companion, who live by the sea, grow older, healthy and strong. “Time flew and you grew while roses bloomed,” Quinton writes, “but one day the sun may go, the wild wind may blow / your heart may not be still, the wild wind may blow you low.”

Fat raindrops from a furious storm pelt child and dog; the sea swells, and their yellow umbrella blows inside out. (“Into each life some rain must fall,” quoth Longfellow, but this is next level.) Drawing strength from lessons imparted by a narratorial guardian—“Know that...you are strong enough. / Know that...you are smart enough. / Know that...you have all you need to make it through”—the child and dog build a raft, sail the squalling sea, and arrive safely on the other side of the storm.

“Everything was considered on the basis of Is this universal enough?” says Hegbrook, who drew inspiration from Max’s journey in Where the Wild Things Are, “and does it become too lonely? which is why, partly, we made the dog a feature. Obviously, the focus was to make sure the message is there for children, but [we did hope] it could speak to adults as well.”

Communicating primarily through WhatsApp, Quinton and Hegbrook exchanged innumerable text messages, photos, and files to ensure their words and images blended seamlessly in service of the book’s hopeful message.

“I think, for myself, it was almost a surprise the first time when life didn’t go well,” Quinton says. “When things came along that were hard—and it is a 100% guarantee that every one of us will go through something that’s incredibly difficult, whether it’s the death of a parent or a pet or the loss of a job, etc.—it was something I almost felt unprepared for.

“You have to find that skill to move through it with strength,” she says, “and also know that it’s not forever, that it will pass. Part of what [The Wind May Blow] is about is to help to teach children that yes, something will come that is incredibly difficult, but you will get through it, and there will be a brighter day ahead. No storm in the history of the world has ever lasted forever.”

“I couldn’t put it better than that,” Hegbrook says. “Comfort is probably the key for me when it comes to my hope [for readers of this book].

“The only other thing I would add is that it’s all relative,” he says. “The storm in the book is relative to what is a storm to you. I think that’s the point. It need not be some huge life event if it’s something that’s [troubling you]. So, for me, a family should be able to read this book anytime, not just in case of pandemic.”

*Editor at large Megan Labrise hosts Kirkus’ Fully Booked podcast.*
A skunk tries to track down the source of a foul odor.

“Pee-yew!” says Skunk, nose pinched, jaw clenched, and eyes squinting against the “something [that] STINKS” in the air. Breaking the fourth wall, Skunk asks readers directly if they can smell it, too, then tells them they “sure are LUCKY” not to be able to smell it. In answer to a rhetorical “How stinky is it?” Skunk—with the help of a stink-loving fly—makes comparisons to other smells: rotten sandwiches, moldy cheese, and even “sweaty, dirty, crusty socks.” This “terrible stench” is the smelliest of all, but Skunk assures readers that their “good friend Skunk” will get to the bottom of things. But as the skunk looks “in every corner” and “crack” (pulling a pair of tighty whities from the gutter), the smell gets “WORSE.” What—or who—could possibly be the culprit? (Hint: It wasn’t the undies.) Fenske’s boldly outlined cartoon characters pop off the page, especially when he expertly plays with depth of field to break the fourth wall. The simple white backgrounds help draw attention to the amorphous, brown cloud of stink that lingers on just about every page. That the cloud remains invisible to Skunk will make readers feel like they’re in on the joke (along with the deadpan fly). Though Skunk’s investigation lacks resolution from their point of view, the slightest hint of Skunk’s butt cheekily confirms readers’ suspicions. This metafictive title engages multiple senses and is comedy gold. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**Side-splittingly smelly. (Picture book. 4-8)**

**THE SHELTER AND THE FENCE**
**When 982 Holocaust Refugees Found Safe Haven in America**

Finkelstein, Norman H.
Chicago Review Press (176 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-64160-383-6

Primary sources enliven this history of the New York state refugee camp that housed nearly 1,000 people displaced by the Nazis.

In 1944, a U.S. Navy ship brings 982 displaced people from Italy to New York's Fort Ontario in Oswego. The vast majority—874—are Jews, the rest are Christians, and all are refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe. They're the beneficiaries of a far too limited American program to help some victims of horrific persecution. Augmented by photographs and drawing on first-person accounts and government records, this is a history of European refugees, many of whom are death-camp survivors, who exist in a middle ground between immigrant and prisoner.

They've signed agreements acknowledging that they're "guests" who aren't allowed to work and who'll be returned to Europe at the war's end. But it's still upsetting that they're confined in the camp. In creating the camp, the War Relocation Authority drew on its expertise in running the Japanese concentration camps (called "internment camps" in the text) in the U.S.; after pointing this out, the history doesn't ask any of the uncomfortable questions thus raised. The judgment of the government's treatment of the White (by American standards, if not by German) refugees is mostly positive. A brief introduction to nativism and "America First" policies yields to praise of the friendships between New Yorkers and the refugees. Quoted primary sources aren't always well-contextualized in the text.

**Interesting anecdotes mitigate the missed opportunities in this history. (epilogue, timeline, bibliography) (Nonfiction. 9-11)**

**DARCY'S FIRST SLEEPOVER**

Fortenberry, Julie
Illus. by the author
Christy Ottaviano/Henry Holt (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-1-250-75590-2

Darcy loves her bedtime routine.

Every night, she brushes her teeth with strawberry toothpaste right after she gets into her polka dot pajamas. Then her father reads her a picture book while she snuggles with Little Cat, her favorite animal and the hero of her favorite bedtime story. Finally, she falls asleep to the comforting sound of her father doing the dishes. When Darcy and her dad go to cousin Kayla’s house, the two girls have so much fun that Kayla asks if Darcy can sleep over. Darcy says yes, but it’s her first time sleeping away from home, and everything is just a little bit different. The nightgown she borrows from Kayla is scratchy, and if Darcy can sleep over. Darcy says yes, but it’s her first time sleeping away from home, and everything is just a little bit different. The nightgown she borrows from Kayla is scratchy; and the toothpaste is peppermint. The house is full of strange, new sounds. In this strange new place, will she ever be able to fall asleep? This gentle story is full of specific details that are both lyrical and comforting in their familiarity. Darcy’s conflicting feelings about her first sleepover feel authentic and are recognizable. In the end, Darcy is the one who solves her own problem, thereby modeling actions that children can take to soothe themselves. The illustrations use a cool palette and smudged lines that make the text feel intimate and cozy. Darcy, her dad, and her aunt all have brown skin and black hair; Kayla has pale skin and red hair.

**A sweet, well-paced tale about a common anxiety. (author’s note) (Picture book. 3-6)**
"The clean, bright artwork is enhanced by panels of varying shapes and clear, easy-to-follow speech bubbles."

**WEDNESDAY WILSON GETS DOWN TO BUSINESS**

Galbraith, Bree  
Illus. by Goble, Morgan  
Kids Can (144 pp.)  
$15.99 | Jun. 1, 2021  
978-1-2551-0327-2  
Series: Wednesday Wilson, 1

All Wednesday August Wilson needs is one good, moneymaking idea.

Problem is that even with two self-employed moms providing advice and an allowance, Wednesday can’t seem to make progress. But if necessity is the mother of invention, desperation is the mother of half-baked, just-might-work business plans, and after an unfortunate incident puts Wednesday in the crosshairs of her classroom’s queen bee, the only way to save herself is to launch a Secret Keeper business overnight. Miraculously, an amazing team and the small sacrifice of a few problematic library books see the plan fall into place, and everyone loves the product—except the teacher. Turns out destruction of library property and breaking school rules aren’t the most sound business decisions, but with apologies, restitution, and volunteering on a new committee to choose materials without stereotypes, Wednesday is free to pursue her next big business idea. Galbraith packs a lot of energy into a relatively small package. Frank background and vocabulary details provide rich depth to Wednesday’s world, and Wednesday herself is a detail-oriented, enthusiastically scattered narrator. Despite teeing up expectations with a multiracial cast, plotlines about stereotypes, Wednesday is a color-blind story rather than exploring how the characters’ names and physical appearances indicate a broadly diverse cast starting with brown-skinned Vega and her two dads.

A classic story of outsiders making friends—with a little something more. (Fiction. 7-9)

**LONG DISTANCE**

Gardner, Whitney  
Illus. by the author  
Simon & Schuster (320 pp.)  
$19.99 | Jun. 29, 2021  
978-1-326-19085-7

After moving to a new city, a girl attends a wilderness camp to help her make new friends.

When astronomy-obsessed 9-year-old Vega’s dad Wes gets a new job, the family moves from Portland to Seattle. Vega is not happy about this change and doesn’t want to leave her best friend behind, worrying they will grow apart. Vega’s dad Javi thinks making new friends will help her adjust, so he signs her up for Camp Very Best Friend, which is designed to help introverted local children build new friendships. Vega is not exactly eager to go but makes a deal with Wes, agreeing to try out camp as long as he tries to make a new friend too. It quickly becomes clear that this is no ordinary outdoor adventure, and Vega and her fellow campers try to figure out what is really going on. The story smoothly incorporates STEM facts with insets on the page to define and highlight terms or tools. An unexpected twist toward the end of this fast-paced adventure that reveals the truth behind the camp will surprise readers. The clean, bright artwork is enhanced by panels of varying shapes and clear, easy-to-follow speech bubbles. Race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are not explicitly addressed; characters’ names and physical appearances indicate a broadly diverse cast starting with brown-skinned Vega and her two dads.

A meandering but agreeable introduction to modern Cuba. (Fiction. 8-10)

**TRAVELS IN CUBA**

Gay, Marie-Louise & Homel, David  
Illus. by Gay, Marie-Louise  
Groundwood (128 pp.)  
$15.95 | May 4, 2021  
978-1-77306-347-8  
Series: Travels With My Family, 5

When Charlie’s parents tell him and his brother, Max, that they will be heading to Cuba for vacation, they think of beautiful beaches and resorts. What they find off the beaten path is a very different Cuba.

When Charlie’s mother is invited to Cuba to work with local schoolchildren, the whole family goes with her to explore, learning that Cuba is a bit more complicated than they anticipated. As their tour guide begins to take them around Havana, it becomes apparent that some places are for turistas only, which doesn’t seem fair to young Charlie. “That was the point of all the rules, I decided. They were there to keep Cubans and us from talking to each other.” As they leave the city and find their way to Viñales and Trinidad, they discover the kind people, delicious food, and infectious music of Cuba. But they also encounter the poverty, hunger, fear, and rules that come with living in a communist country. As with her previous books in the Travels With My Family series, Gay tries to paint a portrait of Cuba from the perspective of children. She does a lovely job of highlighting Cuban culture while also addressing directly the very real issues that come with over 60 years of communist rule. However, the story itself is somewhat slow and lacks clear direction, jumping from place to place near the end.

A meandering but agreeable introduction to modern Cuba.
Maya, a devoted nature lover, plans to build the perfect tree fort all by herself. She wants an “incredible and wonderful” place where she can play and read. She researches ideas, makes carefully detailed plans, and sets off to find just the right spot in the forest. First she must gather and move large branches, but in spite of much pushing and lifting, she just can't cope. There is a brief moment of despair, and then her determination kicks in. She applies for help from the beavers, who provide a large pile of wood. It needs to be moved, so she asks some moose, who gladly accommodate. Other appropriate animals join the team, bears for lifting and framing, and birds for weaving the branches together. A rain delay causes fears for the safety of the fort, but in the end it is perfect, especially when her animal friends join her in that special place. Gilbert’s syntax is direct and perfectly captures Maya’s bright intelligence, creativity, and enthusiasm. The text is scattered throughout well-paced vignettes and spreads. Maya’s descriptions of her envisioned fort and its completed sense of light, depicting the forest in both sunlight and rain. The animals display a great deal of personality. Maya, who has pale skin and straight, black hair in pigtails, is a strong, independent female and a complete charmer. Perfectly lovely. (Picture book. 4–9)

Introducing a complicated and astounding natural computer. The science of the human brain and nervous system, and its myriad connections and functions, is addressed in a visually appealing format along with suggestions for experiments requiring little equipment. Clear diagrams and extensive vocabulary accompany an introduction to the mechanics of neurotransmission, structure of neurons, and architecture of the brain. Simple instructions show how to use play dough to construct a model of the brain that can be bisected to reveal the arrangement of the various lobes and parts. There are slightly less clear instructions for constructing a model of a neuron from pipe cleaners. Frequent brain diagrams throughout reinforce an understanding of how this organ is structured. Gill’s conversational, mildly humorous text is comprehensible and memorable. Several scientists are featured, discussing their work in relation to brain function, learning, and neurobiology. Unfortunately, the sole scientist of East Asian descent is also the only human figure in an overall diverse array whose depiction evokes racial stereotypes, with slanted lines for eyes. Gill explains the complex mechanics of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling and introduces the nerves and systems that are deployed in a variety of experiences, including learning to use language, riding a bike, feeling pain or fear, and remembering things. The book concludes with a look at the biomechanics of concussion, physical therapy, stroke, and rehabilitation.

At once entertaining and remarkably informative. (glossary, index) (Nonfiction. 10-14)
Despite hoping for better treatment in a predominantly Muslim country, they must live outside the camp, are banned from formal employment, and find that some locals resent their presence. Samira misses her family back home and her best friend, whose whereabouts are unknown. She makes friends with a group of Rohingya and Bangladeshi surfers, and the announcement of a surfing contest with a cash prize motivates her to prove to her family that girls, like boys, can change their families’ fortunes. Azim’s charming illustrations bring Samira’s world to life, showing the beauty of the natural surroundings and her childlike enthusiasm. This novel is peopled with layered, fully formed characters who experience trauma and triumph in equal measure. Samira’s internal growth and changing relationships are well plotted, and her narratorial voice is earnest and bold.

A compassionate and well-rounded picture of refugee life.

(author’s note, further reading) (Verse novel. 9-14)

**THE SOCCER MYSTERY**

Gumpaw, Felix
Illus. by Glass House Graphics
Little Simon/Simon & Schuster (144 pp.)
978-1-338-7870-1
978-1-338-7869-5 paper
Series: Pup Detectives, 3

Pawston Elementary’s dog detectives return for the case of a sabotaged soccer match.

With the Pawston Dynamos facing off against the Catskills Cougars in the soccer championship, Ziggy and Rora argue who will be named MVP. Ziggy hacks Pawston’s own David Geckom while Rora predicts it will be Cougar Lion L. Messy. Rider, not a soccer fan, watches their fanaticism with bemusement. Readers who don’t follow international soccer will relate to his obliviousness, and they don’t need the references to enjoy the lizard and feline character designs. Before the game, mysterious acts of sabotage threaten it—starting when a giant soccer-ball monster abducts Pawston’s beloved mascot, Dynamo Dog! The pup detectives search for clues and suspects while the saboteur tries to stay a step ahead. There’s also a supernatural red herring played for laughs. In the climax, the soccer-ball monster returns, and the pups fight it, accidentally disrupting the unlikely true culprit, who delivers a deliciously villainous monologue (complete with flashbacks) to explain motives and methods. Although the heroes end up stumbling onto their answer (leaning heavily on deus ex machina inventions), the fast pace, expressively funny illustrations, and action sequences—both soccer and fighting—will keep readers moving from joke to joke.

An emotionally perceptive book about grief, identity, and change. (Fiction. 10-14)
THE DIRT BOOK
Poems About Animals That Live Beneath Our Feet
Harrison, David L.
Illus. by Cosgrove, Kate
Holiday House (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-8234-3861-7

Sixteen playful poems excavate soil and its symbiotic life-forms, targeting the subterranean habits of 12 animal species.

A tongue-in-cheek “Dirt Recipe” lists ingredients that serve “a host of hungry fungi / and at least a billion germs.” Some poems focus on how and what critters eat. The doodlebug’s earthen funnel can catch ants while the trapdoor spider’s ingenious hinged snare captures others. Harrison’s accessible verse frequently employs rhymed couplets: “A thousand ants, without a sound, / build a city underground.” Elsewhere, he explores poetic forms: “Doodlebug” is a funnel-shaped concrete poem; “Gopher Tortoise” is a villanelle. Cosgrove’s pictures expertly exploit the clever vertical orientation, with double-page spreads depicting both aboveground and subterranean realms. Above the gutter, “Yellow Jacket Wasp” depicts two, one flying, another climbing from a small hole in the ground. Below, another 15 emerge from a nest whose dark opening ominously captures others. Harrison’s accessible verse frequently employs rhymed couplets: “A thousand ants, without a sound, / build a city underground.” Elsewhere, he explores poetic forms: “Doodlebug” is a funnel-shaped concrete poem; “Gopher Tortoise” is a villanelle. Cosgrove’s pictures expertly exploit the clever vertical orientation, with double-page spreads depicting both aboveground and subterranean realms. Above the gutter, “Yellow Jacket Wasp” depicts two, one flying, another climbing from a small hole in the ground. Below, another 15 emerge from a nest whose dark opening ominously promises more. Occasionally, the artist extends a poem’s meaning by presenting two views. For “Bumblebee,” a queen is shown among autumn leaves, then burrowed into a cozy winterized home. Two kids of color appear occasionally. The color palette combines naturalistic and fanciful hues: Wasps and bees sport their black and yellow stripes amid woodland scenes in seafoam, teal, and dusty lavender. Harrison includes additional notes for the poems’ 14 subjects, with at least one overgeneralization. (Not all grubs are “baby Japanese beetle[s].”)

An appealing mix of lively poems, engrossing pictures, and smart bookmaking. (web citations) (Informational picture book/poetry 5-9)

MARCUS MAKES A MOVIE
Hart , Kevin with Rodkey, Geoff
Illus. by Cooper, David
Crown (208 pp.)
978-0-593-17914-7
978-0-593-17915-4 PLB

Marcus, obsessed with making comics, finds new ambitions for his superhero character Toothpick when he joins an after-school filmmaking club.

Always-working comedian Hart enters the children’s-literature world with this middle-grade novel uplifting one of the profound life lessons that helped catapult him to global stardom. It’s certainly not a biography, but one can see the shades of reality with a young Black boy who’s short and funny making his way into film. Marcus’ gift for storytelling is nurtured by his love of making comics (represented visually throughout by Cooper). Readers come to understand how these creative acts help process stress and grief via striking conversations between Marcus and his loving father that also show the critical importance of developing emotional language. After an inspiring first day of film class, Marcus declares that he will make the most awesome movie ever—but there’s a gigantic difference between making comics and making a movie: You can’t make a movie alone. He’s going to have to work with peers who challenge him. Through Marcus’ experiences, young readers will learn about the many different concepts, tools, and techniques that are part of the behind-the-camera filmmaking endeavor. Unfortunately, lumping Toni Morrison in with William Shakespeare as just another “dead author” is a distasteful moment in an otherwise enjoyable read. The book adheres to a Black default.

A charming read that demystifies the work of making a movie and celebrates the gifts of authentic friendship. (Fiction. 8-12)

ANIMAL RESCUE FRIENDS
Hashimoto, Meika & Loveless, Gina
Illus. by Kote, Genevieve
Andrews McMeel Publishing (160 pp.)
978-1-5248-6734-8 paper
978-1-5248-6806-2
978-1-5248-6734-8 paper

In five interweaving stories, local suburban kids bond with pets and gain social-emotional skills thanks to Animal Rescue Friends, their local shelter.

In Chapter 1, brown-skinned, fluffy-ponytailed Maddie bonds with a stray dog only to surrender him to Animal Rescue Friends when her landlord reminds her mom of their apartment’s no-pet policy. In Chapter 2, a family of ferrets helps type A shelter volunteer Bell, a White-presenting girl with glasses, learn her limits and know when to ask for help. In Chapter 3, Mikey Ramirez, a brown-skinned Latinx boy, is anxious about the crowds at ARF’s Adoption Day, but a feisty bunny helps him stand up to bullies. Chapter 4 sees Noah, who presents Black, win over an ornery stray cat, reassert his priorities, and model kinder ways to have fun for his friend and neighborhood bully Jimmy, a White boy. The final chapter unites the whole crew as Maddie learns that the owner of her favorite shelter pup has been searching for him and her plans for a final special afternoon with him go awry. Characters have a uniform (thin) body type, but their skin color, hair texture, and implied racial and ethnic identities vary. Clear lines, bright colors, and asemirealistic cartoon style exude friendliness and combine with adorable animals to make a highly appealing read. An extensive behind-the-scenes introduction to how comics are made, written by Whitney Matheson, profiles some comics creators for kids and outlines different creative roles and processes with straightforward enthusiasm.

Cute critters, compassionate kids, and community—what’s not to love? (glossary) (Graphic fiction. 7-10)
Heisel takes readers on a high-octane mouse-eye view of a daring rescue. The pressures of the chattering extended family crowding into the burrow in anticipation of a new baby lead Tobin, a junior weather scout mouse, to take breathers to check on a looming rainstorm. He does not realize that a greater escapade will follow, foreshadowed by descriptions of ominous clouds and references to a previous family tragedy. Despite being familiar with the Rules of Rodentia, which are peppered throughout the story, Tobin breaks many of them—but when he does, he does not brave the consequences alone. His confident, sociable younger sister, Talia, and happy-go-lucky best friend, Wiley, join him as they band together, first as aspiring weather scouts wishing to see a green sky, and ultimately, chasing down giant spiders who kidnap the newborn. The story's rich details create a magical imaginary world, and the fast pace builds suspense, conveying the wisdom of the rules of the natural world around predator-prey dynamics, the acceptance of death as part of the order of things, and the importance of careful observation and reliance on instinct. Ultimately, the story offers powerful morals for what to do when rules stand the test of time, when they must be bent, when none exist to offer guidance, and all the gray areas in between.

A delightful, detailed adventure in which a trio of mice become heroes. (Fiction. 8-12)

When Nai Nai declares it's time to make bao, grandchild Lili is thrilled! Bao is Lili's favorite food, and thanks to Nai Nai, Lili knows the eight secrets to making delicious baos. But Nai Nai doesn't have the cabbage leaves she needs for secret No. 8 (a discovery that elicits the Chinese expostulation "Zao gao"), so Lili visits a neighbor to ask for some. Nearly every grandmotherly neighbor also needs an integral ingredient to make dumplings from their respective cultural cuisines. Lili helpfully runs about the building taking ingredients from one person to another. Finally, plates and steamers and bowls of dumplings are brought outside to celebrate the arrival of Lili's new baby brother, swaddled in blankets like a "little dumpling treasure." Like a good dumpling, the elements of this story are well known yet the combination is reassuring. Lili's narration tells a linear story filled with cheerful interactions with kindly neighbors. The textured, brightly colored illustrations exude warmth. Depictions of characters and items in their homes match the cultures of their names. For instance, pierogi-cooking Babcia has pale skin and white hair, and her apartment is adorned with Eastern European objects and patterns. A detailed recipe for Nai Nai's baos is appended, and all the various dumplings are highlighted and named on the endpapers.

This celebration of the universality of cooking to convey love is both familiar and satisfying. (Picture book. 4-8)
On winding, twisting Cattywampus Street, anything can happen, and magic is in the air.

The diverse children who live on and around the street are constantly getting in and out of scrapes. Rodney, a White-presenting child with two mothers, makes a pet out of a rock that just might return his affection. Jamal, who appears Black, saves his money to buy a magical ball with a star on it. Charlotta, a White girl, conjures a dollhouse big enough for her whole family to live in simply through the power of her wishes. A homeless, apparently orphaned boy named Bob finds a family when he turns into a frog (he is never depicted in human form), and a hungry White boy named Hans is tricked by an evil stranger posing as his mother who feeds him so many waffles that he turns into one. “A Very, Very, Very Sad Story” lives up to its title when Asian-presenting Evelyn’s entire family dies on the same day (fortunately, it is only temporary). In their strongest moments, these short stories are whimsical and surprising, with twist endings that are sometimes silly, sometimes spooky, and sometimes both. Throughout, the author addresses readers directly. At times, the intimacy of this voice makes the tales feel even more enjoyable. Unfortunately, more often, the asides break the flow of the stories, interrupting the magic of the well-rendered world.

An uneven story collection about kids with big imaginations. (Fiction. 7-10)

RAT FAIR
Kessler, Leah Rose
Illus. by Hilsaca, Cleonique
POW! (36 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-5768-7984-9

Cuddly rats get creative around rearranged letters on a sign.

When a letterboard advertising an art fair falls into disarray, a group of rats organizes a rat-sized fête, complete with pennants, popcorn, and carnival rides. Hilsaca’s sweet, pastel-hued cartoon illustrations drive the story, which is almost entirely devoid of text. They depict rats who are clever, smartly dressed, and fluffy, with anthropomorphic smiles and large ears evocative of the manga character Hamtaro. Under softly glowing string lights they paint, juggle, and twirl in teacups until a custodian brushes away their stalls and replaces the letters—but never fear, a child attending the humans’ art fair above saves the Ferris wheel and stalls. The child returns the next day to help with the new-and-improved rat art fair, as under cover of night the rats have painted, knitted, and sculpted away to continue the festivities. The tale comes to an end with one talented rat gifting a portrait to the child, who has brown skin and dark hair. Other humans pictured are diverse in skin tone and hair textures and styles. The child’s father (also brown-skinned) uses a wheelchair, and when the family is pictured eating tamales at home, a chair lift features unobtrusively in the background. The child’s mother presents White.

An inviting and inclusive story for all—even rats. (Picture book.4-8)

Josie, a young Ojibwe girl, looks forward to dancing in her first powwow, but she needs some special things before she’s ready.

This intergenerational story reveals the extensive preparation undertaken by the fancy dancer’s entire family to get ready for the biggest event of the year. Josie practices her dance steps for many months while the women in her family devote long hours to creating the regalia she will wear. She asks her mother to sew “a fancy shawl outfit.” She asks her aunty to bead her cape and her grandmother to bead her moccasins and leggings. Most importantly, she asks Grandma Greatwalker, “Will you dream my spirit name?” Each time, her elders respond in Ojibwemowin using the name appropriate to their relationship to her, a pattern that continues throughout. (A glossary is appended.) She practices all winter long, continuing when the “spring birds returned, and Juneberries ripened.” The day of the powwow finally arrives. Her excitement grows as she listens “to drummers practicing, the happy cries of visitors seeing family.” After Josie is dressed and ready, she receives her special honor. From Grandma Greatwalker’s dreams, Josie receives her spirit name: “Migiziinsikwe, Young Eagle Woman!” Colorful illustrations rendered in watercolor show the beauty and intricate patterns of traditional beadwork, birchbark baskets, and fine regalia. Both Lajimodiere and Erdrich are citizens of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa.

Sweetly demonstrates how this traditional dance links the generations. (map, author’s note) (Picture book.4-8)
MISCHIEF AND MAYHEM
Born To Be Bad
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins
(56 pp.)
$12.99 paper | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-06-297075-6
Series: Mischief and Mayhem, 1

First exploits of a would-be superhero and her doughty side-cat.

Missy Go’s mother works outside the home and supports the family financially while her father runs the household. Rafi, her little brother who is adopted, is a straight-A student, unlike Missy. Afflicted with a mischievous streak but yearning to be a superhero, young gadgeteer Missy and her orange tabby cat Gizmo hie off to superhero boot camp—where, alas, she falls in with fellow camper Melvira, who uses her superpowers (or does she?) to make Missy think she’s a good friend, gets them both kicked out, and persuades her that it’s more fun to be a villain. The two have very different ideas about what constitutes villainy, though, and when pranks like stealing all the toilet paper in town don’t float her boat, Melvira trots out both a giant robot and a weapon that sucks the powers out of superheroes. At this, Missy, suited up as “Mischief,” with costumed kitty “Mayhem” attending, reluctantly switches sides. Framed mostly as a flashback, the action hurtles along through irregular panels of hypberkinetic cartoon action and snarky banter to a climactic face-off featuring epic robot battles, lots of slime and toilet paper, and, at the end, the drawing lessons and space to create your own characters. Missy and her parents appear Asian; Rafi reads as Black, and the supporting cast is broadly diverse.

A rousing kickoff for the Captain Underpants crowd. (Graphic fantasy. 7-10)

DREAM RESCUERS
Lloyd, Jennifer
Simply Read Books (88 pp.)
$16.95 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-927018-92-7

Ruby has failed at her job as a tooth fairy. She flies away at the slightest perception of danger, unable to complete her tooth pickup mission. Now she must start anew somewhere else. Her only option is an advertised position as a Dream Rescuer, which sounds even scarier. While waiting for her interview, she meets the other two candidates. Ralph is a reindeer, demoted by Santa because he can’t keep still, causing the sleigh to overturn. Mighty is a tiny man who was bullied by colleagues in the Super Hero Rescue Service. Oscar, the head of the Department of Dream Rescue, accepts this triumvirate as a Dream Rescuer, which sounds even scarier. While waiting for her interview, she meets the other two candidates. Ralph is a reindeer, demoted by Santa because he can’t keep still, causing the sleigh to overturn. Mighty is a tiny man who was bullied by colleagues in the Super Hero Rescue Service. Oscar, the head of the Department of Dream Rescue, accepts this triumvirate

An otherwise charming work with a flaw too serious to make it wholeheartedly embraceable. (Fantasy. 6-9)
UNDER A MELODY
Londoño, Carolina Marín
Illus. by the author
Simply Read Books (48 pp.)
$17.95 | Jun. 29, 2021
978-177229-061-5

This wordless picture book follows a group of musicians and dancers as they embark on a transformative, fantastical journey.

The characters—mostly adult and all White—are nameless. After walking across the title page in the iconic Abbey Road pose, a quartet (double bass, acoustic guitar, flute, and vocals) enjoys a jam session in a gray outdoor area until color floats into the frame behind white bubbles that emanate from the flute. The people enter a colored-pencil–and-watercolor Technicolor world, and, à la an improvisational story, become in turn merfolk, monkeys, cats, birds, dogs in outer space, and multicolored fireflies with human heads. The backgrounds change like curtains until a final colorful spread depicting every iteration of form in the original setting, now in full color, with blue grass and green trees and shrubbery. The fireflies now appear to be emanating from the flute that began the adventure. Confusingly, the characters put down their instruments before the dream sequence begins, which renders the theoretical, vague ode to the power of music silent. Strange uses of proportion and a short depth of field make for a storyboard-style sequence devoid of motion, and without a clear musical genre as inspiration, the story—or lack thereof—falls flat on the page. It is notable that, when in human form, several of the characters are fat, and none adhere to conventional Western standards of beauty.

Trippy but incoherent. (Picture book. 4-8)

WE’RE ALL FAMILIA
Loud House Creative Team
Illus. by the authors
Papercutz (64 pp.)
$12.99 | $7.99 paper | May 4, 2021
978-1-5458-0622-7
978-1-5458-0623-4 paper
Series: Casagrandes, 1

Make way for the familia; there’s a lot of them.

The Nickelodeon animated series makes a jump to join the Loud House graphic novels with the first installment of a collection of vignettes focusing on the lives of the Mexican American Casagrande family and their friends. The Santisagos—Ronnie Annie, her brother, Bobby, and their mom, Maria, née Casagrande—have a learning curve when it comes to living with their extended family. Recently arrived at the Casagrande home, Ronnie Annie and Bobby now get to help out at the family mercado and babysit their younger cousins. Although they enjoy helping out, they sometimes come up with creative ways to avoid missing out on the fun to be had elsewhere. The rest of Ronnie Annie and Bobby’s world is populated by a racially diverse cast. While the stories incorporate some tropes on Mexican customs and Mexican families, like the abuelita with traditional home remedies and the love for everything spicy, they are portrayed as celebrations of their cultural diversity. The graphic novel’s frontmatter provides the lyrics to the show’s theme song along with four pages of useful character description, giving some brief background information on relationships among the characters and their personalities. The backmatter includes an editor’s note and a series of Q&As with some of the #ownvoices showrunners and voice actors of the TV show.

A silly, enjoyable read. (Graphic fiction. 7-12)

DRAGONS VS. ROBOTS
Mancusi, Mari
Little, Brown (384 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-0-7595-5518-1
Series: Dragon Ops, 2

An avid gamer and his sister enter an apocalyptic virtual reality world to rescue their imprisoned friend.

After getting trapped and nearly killed in Dragon Ops, a fantasy augmented-reality theme park, Ian Rivera has sworn off the internet. He’s haunted by visions of Atreus, a vicious AI dragon who escaped from the game. When Ian and his sister receive a plea for help from their friend Ikumi, a digitized copy of the Dragon Ops creator’s deceased daughter, Ian must face his worst fears to set her free from Mech Ops, a virtual reality game about robots and zombies. A troubling theme touting video games as a glorious “equalizer” runs throughout, clearly positioning disability as negative and its elimination in the virtual environment as a positive. Starr, a Black woman whose role seems to be to teach Ian about coping with trauma, uses a wheelchair but plays the most physically mobile character (without a wheelchair) in the game, stating, “We may not be able to run in real life. But we can fly in his games.” When Ian learns that the Mech Ops chimpanzee beta tester uses sign language in real life but is able—and prefers—to speak inside the game, he thinks, “This was so awesome. It was really hard to see it as a castle of evil.” The book follows a White default; the Riveras’ surname may be intended to cue them as Latinx.

A fast-paced adventure that promotes harmful messages around disability. (Science fiction. 8-12)
“The unusual, immersive second-person narration allows readers to immediately empathize with Meixing’s fears and heartache.”

**A GLASSHOUSE OF STARS**

**Marr, Shirley**

Simon & Schuster (256 pp.)

$17.99 | Jun. 29, 2021

978-1-5344-2727-3

A seemingly ordinary greenhouse provides a gateway to hope and resilience in this moving tale.

Meixing and her family, who are cued as Chinese, have immigrated to a strange place she calls the New Land. She names the overwhelmingly large house that is now her home “Big Scary” because of its eerie lights and labyrinth of rooms. The house feels alive, and its peculiarity unsettles Meixing, who already feels out of place with her braided black hair, raggedy hand-me-downs, and skin that is darker than that of people in this new place. Meixing finds solace when an exploratory trip to her backyard reveals an enchanted orchard inside a greenhouse.

When she retreats to this fantastical space, worlds of possibility and hope open up. She brings Kevin and Josh, two friends who are also outsiders at school with their respective Vietnamese and Middle Eastern backgrounds, to the greenhouse. Together they discover their inner strength and the power of friendship. The unusual, immersive second-person narration allows readers to immediately empathize with Meixing’s fears and heartache. This style also helps modulate the pace so that the gentle unfolding of the greenhouse’s secrets feels like being enveloped in a warm hug while the urgency of an unexpected crisis is felt swiftly and intensely. The story feels universal, like it could take place anywhere and at any time, although textual clues point to the 1980s.

A tender, touching narrative about facing challenges by embracing the magic we hold within ourselves. (Fiction. 8-12)

**THE POISONOUS LIBRARY**

**McLachlan, Brian**

Illus. by the author

Imprint (128 pp.)

$19.99 | Jun. 8, 2021

978-1-250-26829-7

Series: Complete the Quest, 1

A bright, colorful comic kicks off a series by introducing readers to role-playing games and interactive storytelling.

The questmancer (a big-eyed creature in a hooded cape) leads players through the rules of the game and the collaborative story. After picking heroes from a list of options, the questers follow maps of Chimeria, defeating monsters, solving puzzles, and picking up items on a mission to save the queen’s life. The player characters have specific abilities: Coran, a brown-skinned human priest, wields a mace and a healing spell while Zix, a nonbinary dragonfolk wizard (scaled, horned, and bipedal, with humanlike hands), reads languages and casts lightning bolts. While some puzzles are designed to be solved by precisely these skills, the majority of this quest demands creativity rather than strict rule following. Readers are encouraged to come up with backstories for their traveling party, personal touches that may or may not play into their puzzle solutions. Multiple play-throughs are possible, and either several players or a single dedicated reader can enjoy the adventure. Players within the book (illustrated as an Asian girl, a Black boy, a White boy, and a brown-skinned hijabi girl) are invited to tell stories of side characters or create their own maps. Experienced RPG players will recognize this as a classic game module: a stand-alone story with plenty of room for creativity. A clear message of fighting intolerance and racism offers a wholesome frame for a magical world-saving mission.

This is a warm, welcoming introduction to RPGs and collaborative storytelling. (Graphic fantasy/game. 10-14)

**THE ISLANDERS**

**Monroe, Mary Alice & May, Angela**

Illus. by Bricking, Jennifer

Aladdin (304 pp.)

$17.99 | Jun. 15, 2021

978-1-5344-2727-3

Eleven-year-old New Jersey boy Jake spends the summer with his grandmother on Dewees Island, South Carolina. Jake’s Air Force mom must remain with his dad, who was severely injured while serving in Afghanistan, leaving Jake with no other options. He narrates his own tale, admitting his all-consuming fears for his dad. Grandmother Honey appears somewhat unkempt. She is easily tired and lives in a messy house with a refrigerator containing spoiled food, a result of a long depression after being widowed. Despite the lack of internet, Jake grows to love his loft bedroom surrounded by his dad’s childhood books and nature journals. Honey gives him chores and insists that he spend his time outdoors exploring the island and recording his observations in his own journal. Saving his writing for descriptive letters to his dad, Jake prefers to draw what he sees, and his pencil sketches enhance the sense of place. Jake’s new friends, Lovie and Macon, share his adventures, and the friends encourage each other, providing comfort and understanding when needed. With guidance from a newly energized Honey, they even become absorbed in protecting loggerhead turtle nests. Monroe and May seamlessly incorporate fascinating nature facts into a tale of Jake’s adventures and near disasters. Readers will admire Jake’s compassion, perseverance, and strength and find themselves moved to laughter and tears as his summer unfolds. Most major characters are assumed White; Macon is Black.

A tender, warmhearted tale in a memorable setting. (sources) (Fiction. 8-12)
**ARELI IS A DREAMER**

**A True Story by Areli Morales, a DACA Recipient**

*Moore, Johnny Ray*

*Illus. by Uribe, Luisa*

Random House Studio (40 pp.)

$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Jun. 8, 2021

978-1-084893-99-4

978-1-084894-00-7 PLB

ARELI IS A DREAMER

An admirably crafted third-person memoir that deeply resonates thanks to keen details that conjure moods with a few choice words. Morales, a DACA recipient, spins an admirable third-person memoir that deeply resonates thanks to keen details that conjure moods with a few choice words. Morales, a DACA recipient, spins an admirable third-person memoir that deeply resonates thanks to keen details that conjure moods with a few choice words. Morales, a DACA recipient, spins an admirable third-person memoir that deeply resonates thanks to keen details that conjure moods with a few choice words.

In her debut children's book, a Dreamer recalls her journey from Mexico to New York and the subsequent reality of living as an undocumented immigrant.

Areli's tale begins at Abuela's house, where days brim “with family and sunshine,” delicious “mounds of tortillas and pollo con frijoles for supper,” and calls from Mamá and Papá from America. It's an idyllic life, but it's undercut when Areli's big brother, Alex, born in America, returns to Nueva York, leaving Areli behind. Though Mamá and Papá work hard for “a better life,” the days pass—Areli's birthday, Día de los Muertos, Navidad—with Areli separated from her family. Then one day Areli must leave Mexico and head to New York with a family friend. It's a time of difficult goodbyes for Areli, and in the span of a few wordless pages, Areli's in the midst of the “bigger and faster and noisier” bustle of New York, reunited with her family. In scene after scene of Areli's life, Uribe's colorful yet muted artwork depicts the young Dreamer's voyage from Abuela's house to America with a lovely sense of restrained appreciation.

Moore's brisk verse sets the pace. Stanza structure and rhyme fly a kite under heavy drops of rain. Summer radiates warmth, flower patch while birds sing in the corner of the page. Worried Navidad—with Areli separated from her family. Then one day Areli must leave Mexico and head to New York with a family friend. It's a time of difficult goodbyes for Areli, and in the span of a few wordless pages, Areli's in the midst of the “bigger and faster and noisier” bustle of New York, reunited with her family.

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When problems arise in science or technology, nature often provides the solutions.

Nordstrom offers eight case studies as evidence. Among them are the observations of diving kingfishers that led Nakatsu Eiji to redesign the noses of the Japanese Shinkansen bullet trains for better aerodynamics, of serrated humpback whale fins that inspired Frank Fish to develop quieter wind turbine blades, and of tree leaves that led Yueh-Lin (Lynn) Loo to flexible, more-efficient solar cells. Other insights are derived from sources as diverse as Namibian beetles, shark skin, and gecko feet. Invention/inspirations are presented in four-page subsections, the invention presented in the first double-page spread, with its backstory explained economically but clearly in the second. The real inventors and fictional invention users populating Boston’s stylized, cleanly drawn illustrations, including one figure who uses a wheelchair, are likewise diverse in age, race, and gender presentation. The author brings her debut to a strong finish with an overview of the study of biomimicry and helpful suggestions for activities and further reading. Of particular note is the section that introduces each inventor (all of whom Nordstrom interviewed) with a photograph; when appropriate, the inventor’s surname is placed before their given name, along with a parenthetical explanation.

A salutary reminder to young naturalists and would-be Edisons that not all wheels need to be reinvented. (Informational picture book. 7-10)
A gentle representation of a mindfulness exercise. On a tough day, one thought—a cranky sort of one—appears over Izzy the mouse’s head. It’s represented as a scribble, suspended in a bubble. As the days go by, more scribbly thoughts appear. “They cast a shadow on Izzy’s day. A super shadowy shadow.” They bubble up, all colors and sizes, crowding and bumping. So many appear that they push Izzy right off the page! With eyebrows furrowed, Izzy, normally a pale blue, is in a deep, red rage. She decides to go to her “secret spot,” which for her is the beach. The beach is wide open; the bubbles lift a little and are not as pressing. Then, Izzy takes a deep breath. Readers are invited to help Izzy by blowing on the bubbles. The scribbly thoughts drift away. The bright illustrations are uncluttered, allowing space for the bubbles to push in and then lift. Readers will feel the squeeze and release. A final, wordless scene depicts Izzy from behind as she gazes out at an orange sunset over the water. Other coping techniques and exercises are appended. This is the first in the Books of Great Character series, which features guests from the Silly Street suite of character-building games and promotes social-emotional growth.

Who knew bubbles could be so light and heavy at the same time? (Picture book. 3-6)

Sometimes, no means no. Period.

A child out with an adult asks for ice cream. Amid expansive white space, the book’s minimal colors appear only in the title type, the scoops of ice cream, the child’s shirt, and the solid-colored backgrounds as the child progresses from happy, expectant, and hopeful to all the other emotions that progress toward a meltdown when a guardian won’t budge. Gender-neutral and drawn only with thick black outlines, the child wears a top that changes colors to match the backgrounds and the shifting moods: yellow for happy, green for envy (because everybody else has ice cream!), blue for tears of sadness, gray for obstinate, red for angry. As readers vicariously experience this child’s eventual acceptance of no, they may intuit that they, too, can manage difficult emotions, even when compromise seems increasingly unlikely. Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are and Molly Bang’s When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry... take a more nuanced and creative approach to helping children manage conflicts and emotions, but this story does center the child. As in “Peanuts” comics, the adult, appearing only from the waist down, looks the same on every page while the dynamic child contrasts with the static adult. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Simple lines, simple colors, simple story but a useful tale about complex emotions that often seem too big to contain. (Picture book. 3-7)

In this third graphic installment, something is disturbing the peace in Classroom C at Sunnyview Elementary: A shiny new electric pencil sharpener has been installed over Super Turbo’s cage in Ms. Beasley’s room. While the students are delighted by the novelty of quickly sharpened pencils, the noise and intrusion of shavings into his cage are making the hamster miserable. He calls a meeting of the Superpet Superhero League, his team of neighboring class pets with superpowers. They deduce that this sharpener must be the work of evildoer Pencil Pointer. As they investigate, it is apparent that a second mystery is also occurring: An undefined “trial” in the cafeteria has emptied it of their favorite sugary snacks. Could past nemesis Whiskerface be responsible for all these crimes? Unsurprisingly, the classroom pets realize that perhaps they may have made an error by jumping to conclusions too quickly; readers will be able to solve the case long before Super Turbo and his pals do. While the bright colors and adorable animals are quickly recognizable to those familiar with earlier installments, this volume manages to feel both rushed and bland, and its resolution comes across as disappointingly saccharine. A two-page teaser for the next adventure is included. Human students are diverse, but the only two named human characters are White. A disappointing slump. (Graphic fantasy. 7-10)
THE GOLDEN COMPASS

Pullman, Philip
Illus. by Wormell, Chris
Knopf (304 pp.)
$37.99 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-0-593-37771-0
Series: His Dark Materials, 1

In this illustrated 25th-anniversary edition of the 1996 classic, Lyra and her daemon leave their home in Oxford bound for the North, magic, and dark secrets.
Lyra Belacqua and her animal-shaped daemon, Pantalaimon, have been raised by Jordan College’s scholars while exploring the rooftops and making war with the children in town. But whispers of Dust and missing children herald changes in Lyra’s rough-and-tumble life. With new illustrations by Wormell, Lyra’s journey north to find the kidnapped children and uncover the mysteries of Dust comes alive for another generation of readers. Wormell’s art highlights classic elements from the story, such as Lyra’s golden compass, the truth-telling alethiometer. Other abiding images drawn from scenes in this first book in the series—gyptian canal-boats, witches, the Aurora, armored bears, and the ever present daemons—appear both as spot art and in full-page illustrations, dramatically enhancing but never overpowering the text. Dark lines underscore the dynamic movement and emotions of the depicted moments while the colors, drawn from a limited but vibrant color palette, convey the magic Lyra sees in the world and the great mysteries she has yet to unravel. Lyra and most other characters read as White.
Sure to evoke nostalgia in existing fans and instill wonder in those new to the series. (Fantasy. 10-16)

THANK YOU, DR. SALK!
The Scientist Who Beat Polio and Healed the World
Robbins, Dean
Illus. by Dutton, Mike
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-374-31391-3

An unconventional hero puts his skills to work. Clear, straightforward text and bright, appealing pictures featuring a multiracial cast tell the story of Jonas Salk, Jewish American creator of the polio vaccine, in this timely selection. From childhood, young Jonas saw the effects of polio, and, inspired by the Jewish concept of tikkun olam—translated here as “healing the world”—he set out to make a difference by extensive study and experimentation, even testing his vaccine on himself and his family prior to releasing it to the general population without ever selling it or claiming ownership. Children will easily draw a parallel to Covid-19 and so will be interested in the history as well as the mechanics of vaccines. They may be surprised to see that participating in a vaccination program can inspire pride and a feeling of accomplishment (Salk’s vaccine was initially provided to American first, second, and third graders in a pioneering clinical trial) and be comforted by evidence that an epidemic can be addressed and controlled. A hardworking title, this is a great choice for allaying vaccination fears, communicating the importance of science and medicine, showing that heroes come in many forms, and explaining that education, creativity, resilience, and dedication can lead to achievements and concrete results.
An engaging blend of history, biography, science, and epidemiology that is sure to inspire and inform. (author’s note, timeline, resources) (Picture book/biography. 4-8)

ROSETOWN SUMMER
Rylant, Cynthia
Beach Lane/Simon & Schuster (96 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-5344-9471-8
Series: Rosetown Books

Following Rosetown (2018), Flora makes summer memories with her friends while dealing with more changes in her small town.
It’s 1973 in Rosetown, Indiana, and Flora Smallwood has survived fourth grade and a year of significant changes. Now it’s August, and Flora and her friends have been busy. Her parents opened a new print shop, and Flora’s been helping there ever since school ended. Yuri, a Ukrainian immigrant and her newest friend, has been taking his puppy to obedience training, and Nessy, her longtime friend, has been busy with piano lessons and her pet canary. Everything is excellent in Rosetown, but more change looms as Flora learns that Miss Meriwether, owner of Flora’s beloved bookstore, Wings and a Chair Used Books, may move away to Montana. The bookstore is where she and Yuri built their friendship, finding respite and relief from the changes in their lives. As summer comes to an end, Flora makes fun memories with her friends, family, and community and learns to take each change in stride. In Rylant’s sensitive, fluid third-person narrative, Flora expresses the thoughts and feelings of an introverted child. This sequel has the same quaint feel as its predecessor, giving a deeper look into this small town’s simple way of life. The book assumes a White default.
A gentle, pleasant daily-life narrative. (Historical fiction. 8-12)
A boy bargains with menacing wolves so that his soldier brother can heal from the effects of World War II.

Eleven-year-old Charlie is thrilled when his older brother, Theo, comes home to London in February 1945. Drafted when he turned 18, Theo’s only been gone 18 months, but he returns wounded in body and mind. Their father died in the Blitz, and Charlie’s been counting on Theo to lift some of his feelings of responsibility and anxiety. But Theo can’t, and Charlie begins to see mysterious wolves everywhere he goes—war wolves with names like Dishonor, Wrath, and Remorse. They tell Charlie they’ve eaten Theo’s heart—and that Theo will never recover. Charlie embarks on a quest to prove them wrong, picking up unexpected sidekicks in his battle-scarred grandfather, an eccentric neighbor woman who feeds pigeons, and another convalescent soldier.

Joyce’s world is “replaced with the colors of gone.” Judy lives in Joyce knows her sister is “perfect just the way she is.” To help Scott reminisces about her twin sister, an artist with Down syndrome, and that Theo will never recover. Charlie embarks on a quest to prove them wrong, picking up unexpected sidekicks in his battle-scarred grandfather, an eccentric neighbor woman who feeds pigeons, and another convalescent soldier. Two parts history, one part allegory, and one part fabulism, Sandstrom’s debut story, one part allegory, and one part fabulism, Sandstrom’s debut impresses with its sympathetic characters and smooth, evocative writing. In parts, the pacing slows under the weight of the rhetoric, but patient readers will be well satisfied with the realistic and thoughtful ending. Occasional full-page illustrations show a city damaged by war and add to the somber, haunting mood. All characters read as White.

A worthwhile exploration of the emotional costs of war. (Historical fantasy. 8-12)
An insightful and fresh addition to the story of an iconic figure. (notes, bibliography) (Graphic nonfiction. 10-14)

ALL KETCHUP, NO MUSTARD!
Tharp, Jason
Illus. by the author
Simon Spotlight (64 pp.)
978-1-5344-8463-4
978-1-5344-8462-7 paper
Series: Nugget and Dog, 1


One day, (chicken) Nugget and (hot) Dog, best friends since preschool, search for “cool old stuff” in Great-Grandpa Frank Furter’s attic and find a picture of Gramps as a K.E.T.C.H.U.P. Crusader. K.E.T.C.H.U.P. stands for “Kind / Empathetic / Thoughtful / Courageous / Helpful / Unique / Powerful,” and, many years ago, K.E.T.C.H.U.P. Crusaders saved Gastropolis from Mayo Naze and her evil mold. Nugget and Dog adopt the motto “less mean, more K.E.T.C.H.U.P.” and decide to revitalize K.E.T.C.H.U.P. Crusaders. But Dijon, Mayo Naze’s great-grandson, has a different idea and launches his “greatest evil plan yet”: G.R.U.M.P.S., or “Giant Real Ugly Monsters with Perfect Scowls.” Dijon’s first monster, Stomp, terrorizes Gastropolis, but no one knows what the monster really wants. Brains? Beans? When the Crusaders ask, they find out Stomp just wants...beans—and friends. They are happy to provide both. But...“K.E.T.C.H.U.P. Crusaders might have won this time... / ...but this is just the beginning of what Dijon Mustard can do. Mwahahaha!” Nine chapters ranging in length from two to 10 pages keep the action moving, but newly independent readers will need to follow the illustration clues to understand the early-chapter shifts between Nugget and Dog and Dijon as well as the flashback that introduces K.E.T.C.H.U.P. Crusaders. A preface on how to read comics should help.

A dastardly villain, a dash of humor, and a dollop of K.E.T.C.H.U.P. combine to model positive social skills. (Graphic fiction. 5-8)
A very special bond develops between a group of elephants and the owners of an African wildlife refuge.

Thula Thula is a huge fenced refuge where rangers protect all the animals that live within. No hunting is allowed here. Lawrence and Françoise, the real-life proprietors of this enclave, are alerted to the plight of a herd of elephants, enraged after being hunted and mistreated, that threatens a village. Lawrence readily agrees to keep them at Thula Thula. Upon arrival, the elephants are placed in a boma, a wide fenced corral. But in their agitated state, they break down all the fences and escape, getting dangerously close to areas where they may be hunted.

In brief, action-packed sentences, Tomsic informs readers of all the steps taken to bring them back, with the text placed against Hooper’s beautifully realized illustrations of African animals and the vast, gorgeous landscape. It is Lawrence’s concern, patience, and heartfelt communication with the elephants that form the heart of the tale, for long-lasting connection between these special humans and the animals they love is palpable. Lawrence Anthony (now deceased) was a White South African; Françoise Malby-Anthony is a White Frenchwoman. Secondary characters are Black, presumably Zulu. Sadly, the text does not locate Thula Thula in South Africa, nor does it address thorny issues resulting from the legacy of colonialism.

Within its focus on the elephants and the protagonists, this book is lovely, tender, and moving. (author’s note, acknowledgements, works cited) (Picture book. 4-9)

A STORM TOO SOON
Tougias, Michael J.
Illus. by Geyer, Mark Edward
Christy Ottaviano/Henry Holt (128 pp.)
$16.99 | $5.99 paper | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-250-13756-2
978-1-250-13757-9 paper
Series: True Rescue

An adaptation of the 2016 young readers’ edition of the 2013 book for adults, all of the same title, with the addition of black-and-white illustrations. Aimed at a younger readership than the earlier adaptation, this version further simplifies the plot but not the language, since some of it is taken nearly verbatim from the 2016 story. Tougias has highlighted the action part for this adaptation, presenting a much shorter version that forges character development and emotional depth. In this tale based on a true event, three men set out from Florida to sail to France in May 2007. They haven’t met prior to the planned crossing, but the crew, Rudy and Ben, are impressed with the 44-foot Seamour II and its captain/owner, JP, who is experienced and well prepared (a point that comes across better in the 2016 book—this one makes him seem somewhat incompetent). Unfortunately, all the preparation in the world doesn’t help the sailors when they collide with a fierce storm. The yacht is overcome by the incredible 80-foot waves, and the men take to the tiny inflatable life raft, hoping for rescue. Nautical terms and land terms are interchanged: Sometimes it’s “knots,” sometimes it’s “miles per hour”; a character’s “raincoat” becomes “foul weather gear”—inconsistencies that are confusing. Geyer’s black-and-white woodcut-style illustrations, reminiscent of early illustrated action stories, bring the narrative into the realm of timeless adventure stories. Series companion The Finest Hours, an adaptation of the 2014 young readers’ edition of Tougias and Casey Sherman’s 2009 title for adults, publishes simultaneously.

This bare-bones action version lacks emotional and character depth but still delivers a gripping tale. (author’s note, photo gallery, glossary) (Adventure. 7-9) (The Finest Hours: 978-1-250-13753-1, 978-1-250-13754-8 paper)
WHEN WE WENT WILD

Tee, Isabella
Illus. by Tee, Allira
Ivy Kids (32 pp.)
$19.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-7112-6287-4

After a pair of farmers whose land is no longer productive let it go wild, both farm and wildlife flourish.

This hopeful tale is based on the author’s own experience, recounted for adults in Wilding (2016), of rewilding the lands around Knepp Castle, in England. Here, Nancy and Jake, an imagined interracial couple, are unhappy farmers burdened with debt for heavy equipment and chemical fertilizers and pesticides, as many farmers are. Their land is soggy and their animals sad. Spurred by a brochure advertising safari trips to Africa, they decide to make their own wilderness. They wait—for only the length of a single spread—and, without the constant disruption of modern farming methods, the former farm sees the return of brambles, wildflowers, insects, and birds. Nightingales, migrating from Africa, return to sing. Neighbors object of course, but they are convinced of Nancy and Jake’s wisdom when a flood is averted due to the land’s new ability to absorb and retain stormwater. In Tee’s line-and-color illustrations the sad faces of the farmers and their animals become happy; flowers and birds abound. A final spread shows a charming English village now gone wild as well, with flowers and bushes replacing sedate lawn and pavement, storks nesting on a chimney, and a bountiful display outside a produce shop. The straightforward storytelling and exuberant illustrations should work well for group read-alouds. The author’s note includes photographs.

Not nearly as easy as it looks—but inspiring. (Picture book. 4-8)

LUNA HOWLS AT THE MOON

Tubb, Kristin O’Donnell
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins
(240 pp.)
$16.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-06-301862-4

A therapy dog embarks on an adventure with three young clients to solve a mystery.

Silver Labrador Luna is close to receiving her 50-visit pin—a benchmark that will cement her status as an official therapy dog. But when her handler, Tessa, decides to form a new group to support children with emotional struggles, Luna’s progress might just be put on hold. Each child has their own reasons that bring them to counseling, issues that Luna describes with original, simile-heavy descriptions: Amelia, who deals with shadowy fear and anxiety; Beatrice, often angry like a tangled knot; Caleb, his personality like a rushing waterfall; and Hector, quiet and still like a river rock. When Hector doesn’t show up to a session, the remaining three decide to take it upon themselves to find him, escaping while Tessa is otherwise occupied. Luna accompanies the three children, ensuring their safety and stability as they try to track down their missing peer. Luna dazzles as the protagonist, supplying clever dog-related wordplay and adorable canine nuggets of wisdom throughout. The relationship between Luna and her young clients brims with delightful banter. Genuine sentiments about mental health, loyalty, and appreciating what makes us each different will leave readers with well-earned warmth. Tessa and Beatrice default to White; Caleb has a White mom and Black dad; and Amelia and Hector are Latinx.

Terribly sweet from start to finish. (author’s note) (Fiction. 8-12)

NOSOTROS MEANS US

A Bilingual Story / Un cuento bilingüe

Valdivia, Paloma
Illus. by the author
Knopf (40 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | May 11, 2021
978-0-593-30514-0
978-0-593-30515-7 PLB

As a mother holds a child on her lap, she talks about the ways their bond will always be there.

In simple, reassuring sentences the mother tells her child how even if their nature were to change, they would still be mother and child: “If I were a sheep, you would be a lamb,” or, “If I were a rabbit, you would be a bunny.” And even when the inevitable occurs and “one day you…hop away,” no matter how both mother and child change, they “would always be mother and child” whenever they’re reunited. A wordless sequence sets up the pair’s imagined reunion as bird and deer. Clean-lined, stylized artwork with a limited palette set against a white background keeps the mother and child as the central focus. Small, unobtrusive details keep the visual narrative flowing; for example, as the parent and child go from human to sheep, the hair texture is repeated, and a small toy horse appears, foreshadowing the next analogy: “Si yo fuera una yegua, tú serías un potrillo / If I were a horse, you would be a foal.” The book was first published in Spanish as Nosotros (2017) in Valdivia’s native Chile, and the English translation of this bilingual edition keeps the same simplicity and directness of the original. It is a simple yet thoughtful presentation of the unquestioning acceptance and loving bond attributed to the parent-child relationship.

A universal message sweetly and reassuringly expressed. (Picture book. 3-5)
“A sweet and surprising search for self, friendship, and acceptance.”

**SHELL QUEST**

Waldo, Steph
Illus. by the author
HarperAlley (32 pp.)
978-0-06-306782-0 paper
978-0-06-306783-7
tinytales.harpercollins.com

A shell quest gives new meaning to the term *diverse ecosystem* in this graphic-novel early reader.

Backyards can seem really big, especially if you are a slug, and life can be lonely when you are all by yourself. That’s why, when this story’s main character, an unnamed slug, hears rustling in the garden and spots snails nearby, its eyes light up. But there is a problem. The slug doesn’t have a shell like every snail should. When the snails offer to let the slug play with them provided it gets a shell, the slug scoots off searching for a shell—evidently the key to finding friends and leaving loneliness behind. Unfortunately, the shell substitutes it finds (an acorn cap, a thimble, and an outgrown snail shell) all fail in some fashion. With tears that blend into the raindrops, the slug worries that it will never fit in anywhere and that it will be alone forever. At least the slug has made one friend, a kind snail that, “shell or no shell,” has the slug’s back. This is a good thing since a flash flood quickly “whoosh[es]” them both away—to a welcoming and diverse hollow-log community. Simple, earth-toned backgrounds in most panels spotlight critters with expressive ping-pong-ball eyestalks that lend them great personality. Most pages are laid out in simple two-by-three-panel grids, facilitating clarity for beginning comics readers. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

*A sweet and surprising search for self, friendship, and acceptance.* (comics-reading tutorial, additional facts) *(Graphic early reader. 5-8)*

**PLANTS ON THE MOVE**

Vast, Emilie
Illus. by the author
Charlesbridge (56 pp.)
$18.99 | May 25, 2021
978-1-62354-148-4

Ten ways that plants move are described with detailed silhouette art and a moderate amount of text.

The graphic art stands out beautifully within thin black frames against stark white pages. Bold green lettering and an appropriate plant image decorate each single-page chapter heading. The short chapters begin with a plant introducing itself by its common name. Sometimes a plant also addresses readers directly, as with the strawberry: “You know me well, and you love to eat my sweet, red fruit.” However, most of the plants’ supposed narrations move quickly into scientific explanations, including simple definitions of terms such as *calyx*, *pollination*, and *samara*. (Further definitions occur in the back-matter.) There is enough information contained here that the book will benefit from reading over multiple sittings. It excels as a reference book, especially since the graphic art is so clearly detailed that reluctant or beginning readers will be able to learn a great deal from the illustrations alone. The sequence about plant seeds traveling by animal excrement is amazingly graceful, informative, and subtle—in both words and art. Similarly, clear sequences of frames show such things as a winsome fox carrying and dropping a burr and a water lily’s fruit developing and decomposing. Groupings of 24 cultivated plants by place of origin—albeit stated as incomplete—jar with the omissions of Africa, North America, and Oceania. The few examples of human skin are light-complexioned.

Leaf and learn. *(Informational picture book. 6-9)*

**DRAGON RACER**

Weiser, Joey
Illus. by the author
Oni Press (108 pp.)
$12.99 paper | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-62010-932-8

Can a dragon who loves racing snag first prize and save the day?

In this adorably styled graphic offering, readers meet Truff, a cheerful young ghostly warthog (who sometimes has legs and other times an incorporeal tail) residing with her still-living parents and hanging out with her forest-spirit friends Claude and Stanley. The trio meet Vern, a dragon with an ornately designed pedal-powered racing cart and a propensity toward exaggeration. Vern invites Truff and the gang to the Hippogryph Grand Prix to watch him compete, but they soon learn that perhaps Vern has not been completely honest with them. When a brown-skinned human girl named Tulip falls ill, the cure is located far down a perilous mountain pass, and Vern steps up (with Truff’s assistance) to race down to retrieve her lifesaving medicine; can Vern overcome obstacles both physical and mental to help her? Weiser’s merry tale is immediately eye-catching with its mix of animal, imaginary, and human characters (few but racially diverse). The plotting and character development, however, tend to overreach, leaving some aspects stretched too thin or others feeling half-baked with the zany busyness. The worldbuilding doesn’t always cohere, but those who can suspend disbelief and roll with the highly enjoyable illustrations may not be bothered by this.

*Cute but uneven.* *(Graphic fantasy. 7-11)*
**WOOF! THE TRUTH ABOUT DOGS**

Whipple, Amnette

Illus. by Oliver, Juanbjuan

Reycraft Books (52 pp.)

$17.95 | Jun. 30, 2021

978-1-4788-7380-8

Why do dogs do the things they do?

Presented in a Q&A format and illustrated primarily with stock photographs, this colorful selection presents a fact-filled overview of the beloved species by answering such child-friendly questions as, “Why are puppies born with closed eyes?” “Do dogs have feelings?” “How do dogs communicate?” “Do dogs sweat?” “Why do dogs smell butts?” “How do dogs help people?” “How can I help?” (Spaying, neutering, and adoption are also briefly mentioned.) Text boxes provide straightforward and satisfying answers to each question posed while sidebars include interesting, associated detail in thought bubbles accompanied by Oliver’s small paintings or more stock photos. The appealing, accessible, website-like design makes this a good choice for classroom or personal research. While the information itself is widely available, the presentation here is solid and effective; the tone is humorous and full of enthusiasm; the accessible design and language will appeal to reluctant readers; the Q&A format may lead children to inquire further; and the plethora of photographs will delight anyone who is canine curious. Includes a comparison of different breeds, how to behave around dogs, and language will appeal to reluctant readers; the Q&A format, which directs readers to go outside, to notice their footfalls while walking, and even to tell a joke to a friend, looking and listening for the spaces and pauses between what they see and what they hear. Inspired by the Japanese concept of ma, or empty space, the exercises are great ways to practice mindfulness. The actual concept of seeking and feeling empty space can be difficult to understand, and with a lot of text and hard-to-grasp concepts, this book will work best read aloud by a companion who can help coach listeners through the time and reflection necessary for understanding. The illustrations, done in different shades of purple, are simple, aligning with the calming, mindful tone; in many images, negative space is filled with scribbles or small shapes that emphasize it.

**THE IN-BETWEEN BOOK**

Willard, Christopher & Weisser, Olivia

Illus. by Oliver, Alison

Sounds True (34 pp.)

$15.99 | Jun. 8, 2021

978-1-68364-733-1

An interactive book encouraging mindfulness by noticing the space in between.

There is space between everything. The narrator speaks directly to readers, creating an interactive book about learning to mindfully notice that space in between things in order to “become more curious, calm, and creative.” It begins by having readers close their eyes and notice the pause between breathing in and out or listen for the space between heartbeats. Then it directs readers to trace the space between the two daisies drawn on the page to find new shapes. Continuing, the narrator guides readers to look outside, to notice their footsteps while walking, and even to tell a joke to a friend, looking and listening for the spaces and pauses between what they see and what they hear. Inspired by the Japanese concept of ma, or empty space, these exercises are great ways to practice mindfulness.
A small child takes a magical ride on the “dream weaver train.”

Evocative lyrics from the title song of Wright’s 1975 solo album, *The Dream Weaver*, form the text of this LyricPop offering. The first-person speaker boards the dream weaver train, asking the driver to “take away my worries of today / and leave tomorrow behind.” Believing the dream weaver will “get me through the night” to “reach the morning light,” the speaker asks the dream weaver to “fly me high through the starry skies / maybe to an astral plane” and “cross the highways of fantasy / ...to forget today’s pain.” The repetitive lyrics raise questions about the speaker’s identity and source of pain as well as about the mysterious dream weaver. However, playful collages, using patterns, textures, and color, span the double-page spreads and provide needed child-friendly context. Tucked into bed with a stuffed lion and pet dachshund, the speaker proves to be a dream weaver, an encouraging lion. As the fantastic train speeds through the dark night and starry skies, the boy forgets the pain (revealed to be physical rather than psychic: caused by a bicycle spill) and enjoys the ride, passing through woods, sliding down an enormous cat-shaped clock, running across the moon’s surface, and riding giant butterflies toward morning’s light. Simultaneously publishing in the series are: The Pixies song “Where Is My Mind?”, by Black Francis and illustrated by Alex Eben Meyer; Coldplay’s “Strawberry Swing”, illustrated by Mitch Miller; the Gloria Gaynor hit “I Will Survive” (starring a platinum-tressed green-skinned ET), by Frederick J. Perren and Dino Fekaris; and Paul Simon’s “The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin’ Groovy),” illustrated by Keith Henry Brown.

**Dreamy bedtime fare. (Picture book. 3-6) (Where Is My Mind?: 970-1-61775-843-0; Strawberry Swing: 978-1-61775-840-9; I Will Survive: 978-1-61775-913-0; The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin’ Groovy): 978-1-61775-798-3)**

**A BOY NAMED ISAMU**

If you were a boy named Isamu...what would you learn about your world?

Beginning with the whimsical jacket design that’s echoed in the shapes, colors, and prose that follow, readers are encouraged to experience finding their own voices in quiet spaces. Isamu, a young boy with beige skin and black hair, feels overwhelmed in the crowded and noisy market—a patchwork of stalls, merchandise, and people. Instead he seeks out colorful paper lanterns, a still wood where leaves crunch, a field of grass, a rocky beach, and more. Using the second person, the narrator invites readers to imagine themselves as Isamu, asking his questions and immersing himself in the natural world using his senses. Whimsy is woven throughout, appearing even in a large gray stone with a face that is echoed on the dust jacket. Colorful lines of all forms dominate the design of the spreads—straight bamboo stalks, rounded stones that look like birds, a wavy outline in rock that frames the sea—all carefully rendered in bold colors balanced by plenty of white space. Yang depicts Isamu in proportion with his wonder at the world, by turns prominent and peripheral. The author’s note explains how Isamu Noguchi’s biracial background (his father was Japanese and his mother was a White American) led to ostracization in both Japan and the United States, prompting him to seek out safe, natural spaces that eventually inspired his artwork, based in stone and wood. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

**A marvel of prose, illustration, and design that invites repeated meditation. (Picture book. 4-8)**

**THE SECRETS OF ANCIENT SEA MONSTERS**

In the Mesozoic Era aquatic reptiles ruled the waters. This is the third title in an ambitious, illustrated encyclopedia that uses the work of two Chinese storytellers, one working with words and the other with pictures, to bring fossils to life. The first two volumes focused on Mesozoic land- and air-dwelling reptiles; here, readers journey underwater in an imagined “book submarine.” Fossils of creatures who died underwater are far rarer than those of land animals. Yang divides the fossil
re-creations into groups, sometimes as small as a family and sometimes as large as a superorder. Each reptile is described on a single spread with a short story and a vivid picture. The text presumes a lot of knowledge—and the ability to read and recall scientific names, since these do not have familiar English names. The use of present tense enhances the idea of an imaginary journey, but in this sometimes-awkward translation, tenses may be mixed within a paragraph or even within a single sentence. Each page also includes fast facts and a helpful size key with shapes such as human silhouettes or a bus—a big help for readers trying to imagine the animals, who are often only partially shown even if posed in dramatic action scenes. Some images are encased in frames, like paintings, while others look like what readers might see through the imagined submarine window.

A colorful album of marine monsters for dinosaur buffs. (Index, endnotes, list of scientific art projects) (Nonfiction. 8-12)

Zhang's use of only two colors—yellow and green—against a gray city is lovely.

LALA'S WORDS
A Story of Planting Kindness
Zhang, Gracey
Illus. by the author
Scholastic (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-338-64823-2

A small girl, full of energy and color, brings her love of nature to a dull gray city.

In the heat of the heavy, hot summer, everyone in a black-and-gray–hued city is still...except for Lala, in an effervescent yellow dress, who's jumping, running, and tripping across the page. Her exasperated mother does not understand this whirlwind of energy, frowning at a floor covered in clutter or exclaiming about dirt tracked on the floor. Blithe Lala, however, loves nothing more than to visit an empty lot around the corner, where she tends to the weeds and scraggly plants—rendered in vibrant greens with yellow highlights—whom she considers friends. But on the hottest day of summer, when her mother finally forbids her to step foot outside, “Lala cried and cried. Who would visit her little friends?” She sends her love out to the plants in whispers all day, and the next morning, the neighborhood wakes to a miraculous sight. A giant green plant now covers the entire neighborhood with its shade! More importantly, Lala's neighborhood now also glows the same bright yellow as Lala's dress, and her mother recognizes her inner light. Zhang's message extolling the benefits of tending to nature is a bit too reproduction at all. The uncredited writer makes clear efforts to keep the descriptive notes nontechnical, with uneven results. Most eyebrow-raising are a claim that "you have tiny hairs all over your body to keep you warm" and contradictory information about whether heart muscles contract with or without commands from the brain. Still, the focus on function rather than terminology properly lays a sturdy foundation for more extensive inquiries children may pursue in the future. Along with inside views and close-ups of isolated organs, Alice's schematic illustrations feature a carefully diverse cast, including a child in a wheelchair and an older adult with a cane on a page leadingly titled "The Same Inside." The body-shaped windows, acetate printed on both sides to present front and back views, are stacked to suggest how at least some of the seven systems are “always working together, like a machine," and a final appeal to keep that machine ticking by eating properly and exercising ends the tour on a cogent note.

The gimmick may prove a draw, but topically there are some major holes. (Informational novelty. 6-8)

RAINBOWZ
Arndt, Michael
Illus. by the author
Andrews McMeel Publishing (28 pp.)
$8.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-5248-6722-5

Stylized graphic depictions of rainbow-inspired objects and ideas from A to Z.

No one can accuse this abecedary of being staid! Applying massively saturated colors and playing with bold concepts, graphic designer Arndt takes plenty of artistic risks in his alphabetical choices. Some, like Aura or Disco, veer toward downright befuddling. His graphic stylings are vivid and eye-catching, with tight edges, zero shading, and lots of high contrast, but like his choice of objects, the illustrations can be hit or miss. A string of Lights...
“Baruzzi’s art is droll and graphically clean (inasmuch as the depiction of excrement can be described that way).”

WHERE DO YOU POOP?

Youngsters can learn about where and how various animals, domestic and wild, relieve themselves.

Via a pull-tab embedded in each recto (not, thankfully, in the rectum) readers can see the before and after, and a goldfish in a bowl leaves a trail while swimming. The verso asks each creature where it does its business, and then a (sometimes-forced) rhyming quatrains, translated from Italian, answers the question: “And where do YOU poop, mouse? / When inside my tummy / Starts to feel not so good / It’s time for a poop / On these chips made of wood!” The final double-page spread queries readers: “And where do YOU poop?” A redheaded, White toddler’s face is visible below this question; the pull-tab on the right opens a bathroom to reveal a White toddler, this time with medium brown hair, happily and modestly sitting on a blue toddler potty. The accompanying quatrains provides some developmentally appropriate guidance for feeling the signs of a movement coming on. Baruzzi’s art is droll and graphically clean (inasmuch as the depiction of excrement can be described that way). Little fingers may need some help finding the relatively easy-to-open and sturdy pull-tabs, since they blend into each page. It works as both a biology lesson and potty-training encouragement.

A fun, new take on droppings. (Novelty board book: 18 mos.-3)

STANLEY’S LUNCH BOX

Stanley the hamster teaches young readers about different types of food and the joy of sharing.

Stanley and his furry friends—mice, moles, and a chipmunk, among others—go to market to stock up on food. The affable critters browse a variety of goods, snacks, and beverages, and then Stanley treats his brother to a picnic. The lovingly rendered animal characters and bustling market scenes have an undeniable charm. Stanley and his friends have rather European tastes, which isn’t surprising; author/illustrator Bee resides in England. Stanley buys a baguette and a loaf of brown bread, with cheese to go with them. Then he’s off to buy fruits, snacks (potato chips, crackers, and jelly), and some of “Charlie’s homemade scones and muffins,” which, fortunately, “taste better than they look.” Stanley’s final purchases are lemonade and cocoa powder. At home, Stanley makes sandwiches and hot chocolate, puts the lemonade in a thermos, and loads up his
lunchbox. Its best feature is that it holds enough for two. Today, Stanley shares lunch with his brother, Herbert, who, amusingly, looks exactly like Stanley, with the addition of a waxed mustache. Culturally, the European market stalls and foods won’t resonate with all children. Similarly, in this time of rising wealth inequality and food insecurity, even the sense of plenty could sting those with fewer choices. Nevertheless, Stanley and his anthropomorphized friends have dignity, good humor, and a solid lesson for children. In companion title Stanley’s Toy Box, Stanley carries the titular container to the park for a day of play with his pals.

**Lunch is more delicious when shared with people we love.** *(Board book: 1-4) (Stanley’s Toy Box: 978-1-68262-284-0)*

**GOOD NIGHT, EARTH**
Bondestam, Linda
Illus. by the author
Trans. by Hasan-Rokem, Galit
Yonder (46 pp.)
$20.00  |  Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-65206-286-4

Inventive book design and shifting perspectives add cozy surprises to this bedtime snoozer, originally published in Scandinavia.

“Little chimp should be asleep by now. / Mama has sung and played 73 songs / on her ukulele.” Turning half pages that act like blankets being pulled up (or down), drowsy young nappers join a family of extraterrestrials watching from very far away as various animals and animal parents go through simple or strenuous bedtime routines—or, in the case of a deceptively quiescent tarier, get ready to leap into an all-night frolic. All (aliens included) turn out to be surrogates for Sweetie Pie, a human child, and her stuffies reluctantly snuggling down at long last…between a pair of weary parents. In Hasan-Rokem’s translation from the Swedish, the text is poetic, sly, and funny: “Look there, in the leaves! A little sloth in a hammock! / Shhh! Both she and the hammock are asleep, as usual.” Readers will see from the illustration that “the hammock” is the little sloth’s parent. Bondestam depicts human figures with beige skin, which allows some latitude for ethnic identification. Along with adding sly anthropomorphic touches to the rest of the cast, she caps the nighttime scenes with one final one of a comically frazzled family of owls barely getting through a sunrise supper of croissants and hot chocolate before collapsing. Parents of younger children will definitely relate.

**A droll and imaginative addition to the crepuscular corpus.** *(Novelty picture book: 3-5)*

**CAUTION! ROAD SIGNS AHEAD**
Buzzeo, Toni
Illus. by Birmingham, Chi
Rise x Penguin Workshop (84 pp.)
$17.99  |  Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-593-22432-8

Thirty-five road signs explained to toddlers in an extra-thick board book. Those ubiquitous universal symbols that decorate our streets and highways can be a mystery to kids buckled into their car seats. Explanations written in simple, direct language aim to demystify them. On the inside front cover and its recto page, a four-sentence introduction explains that signs “are a code to let drivers know how to stay safe.” Bright orange text with key words printed in white stands out against the black background. The signs are organized into five increasingly specialized categories: “Everyday,” “Neighborhood,” “Highway,” “Caution,” and “Nature.” All but eight signs are wordless symbols. A full spread is devoted to each one, with the sign on the right and a brief description in a clean black type on a gray page to the left. To adult ears these definitions seem obvious and even redundant, but explanations like “Yield / Let other cars go first!” are admirably successful at translating abstract concepts into concrete terms. Pages cut in the shapes of the signs both add playful variety and ensure small fingers can turn the thick pages. Clean graphics keep the focus on the signs. The final spread offers thumbnail drawings of all the signs by category.

**Around the neighborhood or on a road trip, pre-reading passengers will be ready to understand the signs along the way.** *(Board book: 1-5)*

**WHOSE BIG RIG?**
Buzzeo, Toni
Illus. by Olivera, Ramon
abramsapplesseed (16 pp.)
$10.99  |  May 25, 2021
978-1-4197-4220-0
Series: Guess the Job

Meet specialized big rigs involved in building a light-rail system.

Caution! Here’s a board book designed for hard-core machine aficionados. Rhyming text inside striking reddish-colored traffic signs on the left-hand page introduces a building task. “Dig the channels so water can flow”; a second, orange sign queries, “Whose big rig is this?” The right-hand page diagrams the machine responsible for the job, with many of the relevant, often quite technical components clearly labeled. Some preschoolers will want to devour every “gripper arm” factor, but it’s definitely optional reading. A fold-out flap offers more generally accessible information, naming and showing the team at work along with a succinct explanation. A “tunnel borer” team, for instance, will “cut through rock to make
way for underground tracks.” Some big rigs, like the excavator and the bulldozer, will be old favorites, but there are many new, intriguing machines and workers to learn about, including the “tie dragon’s crew,” which lays the ties of the tracks, or the “track maintenance specialist,” who “make[s] tracks level.” Tidy illustrations provide readers with clear snapshots of the various machines, and workers are made up of racially and gender diverse crews. The final flap, showing small children playing with a toy train set who have “come to help,” is satisfying.

A dream for true big-rig fans. (Board book. 2-6)

MOLLY AND THE MATHEMATICAL MYSTERIES
Ten Interactive Adventures in Mathematical Wonderland
Cheng, Eugenia
Illus. by Artymowska, Aleksandra
Big Picture/Candlewick (30 pp.)
$24.99 | Mar. 30, 2021
978-1-5362-1710-0

A child steps through a die-cut bedroom window into a wonderland of math- and number-related concepts.

Prompted by a note hidden beneath a flap, Molly finds herself first in a world (with, significantly, a white rabbit) where select insides and outsides are inverted. Subsequent flaps see her finding and passing through further concealed doorways into an M.C. Escher–style “impossible staircase,” a maze with tessellated shapes, a set of infinitely receding hallways, and six more “implausible but not impossible” settings that likewise demonstrate some of math’s central tools and ideas—often in an interactive way that requires folding, recognizing patterns, or interlacing pre-cut elements. Artymowska fills her big, square illustrations with both clearly drawn examples of each main concept and smaller details to search out, such as sets of nesting dolls to match up. (A tiny mouse and even the rabbit show up now and then, too.) Spurred by a reminder that inverses can themselves be inverted, Molly, depicted as a small child with light brown skin, a black pageboy, and a bright, inquiring look, rides through wormholes back to her room for a well-earned rest…but Cheng carries on with second looks at 17 notions met along the way, from types of symmetry to fractals, Latin squares to logical paradoxes.

Considerably more than six “implausible but not impossible” things to believe before breakfast…and after. (Informational novelty. 6-11)

CLARINET & TRUMPET
Ellsworth, Melanie
Illus. by Herzog, John
HMH Books (32 pp.)
$14.99 | Mar. 30, 2021
978-0-358-10747-7

Two instruments wind up playing beautiful music together—after a few sour notes.

Thanks to a tube of loose beads embedded in the spine, the book itself turns into a rhythm instrument when shaken—but there’s no (overt) connection made between this gimmick and the actual story. All is harmony between Trumpet and Clarinet at first…but then in swaggers Oboe to turn Clarinet’s head (“‘Is that a double reed?’ gasped Clarinet. ‘I know, right?!’ said Oboe”). Oboe is followed by Trombone, Flute, and others so that soon the band room is dominated by rival camps of brass and woodwinds. At last, though, following some painful discord, Clarinet hears Saxophone’s jazzy honks and realizes that Trumpet’s bright “buzz and blast” would make ideal harmony. Trumpet responds to her overture by agreeing to be tuned, and soon all the instruments (with a few newcomers of the percussion persuasion) have found a new groove. Herzog pastes broadly expressive facial features on the instruments and stands them up in stylish postures on stick limbs. In the climactic ensemble, each of the three coupled anthropomorphic pairs consists of one light- and one dark-colored instrument. Whether there’s anything to be made of that, there’s a bright, infectious energy to the illustrations that plays well with the narrative’s musical idiom.

Unexploited novelty aside, a clever improvisation with neither literal nor figurative strings attached. (Novelty picture book. 6-8)

GERM THEORY FOR BABIES
Ferrie, Chris & Goldstein, Neal & Suder, Joanna
Illus. by Ferrie, Chris
Sourcebooks eXplore (24 pp.)
$9.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-7282-3407-6

Series: Baby University

A basic primer on germs, how they spread, their prevention, and hygiene.

As in other books in the Baby University series, balls are used to represent the disembodied heads, here of a “healthy person” and a “sick person,” with brown and white skin, respectively. More circles enclose magnified views of viruses and bacteria, which are shown in simplified cartoon form. While the authors never shy away from big words (including coronavirus, bacteriophage, and streptococcus), they never mention the words bacteria or disease, instead opting for the simplified term germ. Nor do they mention the common names of typical childhood sicknesses, but they do spend two pages outlining the obsolete
miasma theory, accompanying it with a mystifying image that appears to be meant to look like a murky swamp. While the art is graphically simple, the use of calendars, clocks, and other symbols may only confuse the putative baby audience still learning to name the objects and the concepts they represent. The last few pages are the most useful and explain what youngsters can do to prevent the spread of disease, including washing hands, wearing a mask, and staying home when sick.

The “baby” moniker does a disservice to content more developmentally appropriate and useful for an older audience. (Board book. 3-5)

**How Big Is Baby?**

Hall, Kirsten  
Illus. by Aki  
Chronicle Books (20 pp.)  
$14.99 | Apr. 6, 2021  
978-1-4521-7382-5

A month-to-month gestational guide for young siblings-to-be.  

Beneath the heading “1 month!” a bubbly little kid happily announces: “We’re having a baby!” Over the next several double-page spreads—one for each month of growth—the new baby’s development is explained using various familiar foods to approximate the size of a baby developing in the womb. These comparisons help to make the information accessible to young children. From the first month, when the developing baby is the size of a poppy seed, to the ninth month (the size of a pineapple), children can lift the flap on Mommy’s belly to see the fetus developing. The last spread predictably shows the newborn baby together with Mommy and the proud sibling: “Hello, baby!” The text is simple and direct: “Mommy tries an apple and tells me our baby is this size.” For children ready for a little more information, the inside of the flap provides additional detail: “The baby’s face muscles are working now, which means it can open and close its mouth.”

The two main characters are mother and child, with no other family members mentioned or depicted, thus leaving the book unconstrained by family type. Both mother and child have literally yellow skin, but the developing fetus is pink. The mother has black hair and the child red hair.

Should be helpful in many a household expecting a new baby. (Board book. 2-4)

**Dinosaur Adventure**

Hayes, Susan  
Illus. by Remnocks, Sam  
What on Earth Books (36 pp.)  
$14.99 | Apr. 6, 2021  
978-1-912920-46-4  
Series: Zoom

Young explorers risk prehistoric perils and cataclysmic destruction to learn about the dinosaurs of the late Cretaceous. Best friends Jasmine (who has brown skin and wears dark hair in a braid) and Jamie (who presents White and has a thatch of brown hair) set their time machine for the days of the dinosaurs, go exploring, and make it home in time for dinner. This well-constructed board book is both visually engaging and as rich in information as it is in adventure. It features 17 different two-page set pieces, 24 distinctly labeled prehistoric creatures, creative die cuts offering tantalizing peeks at what lies beyond each turn of the page, and a spectacular pop-up of the asteroid that caused the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction event. The adventurers journey through or over habitats ranging from jungles, swamps, deserts, plains, and oceans and fly through the air and dive in the sea with the help of a friendly pterosaur and elasmosaurus, respectively. The featured creatures are all Age-appropriate, as is the asteroid. The two friends are cool and cavalier about tracking T. rex and chasing Velociraptor. Caregivers might want to caution their charges that, if or when they get their time machines working, they should exercise appropriate caution when approaching powerful, carnivorous eating machines. Companion volume Rainforest Adventure stars a light-brown–skinned girl named Lin and is a similarly engaging and informative trek down the Amazon and, once again, home by dinner. Both offer inspiration for inquisitive young adventurers everywhere.

A ferociously entertaining blend of wonder, thrills, and science. (Board book. 1-5) (Rainforest Adventure: 978-1-912920-40-2)

**Grow**

Henry, Theodore  
Illus. by Pang, Hsulyynn  
HMH Books (12 pp.)  
$10.99 | Mar. 23, 2021  
978-0-358-45206-5

Poetic language describes babies and their caregivers as though they are elements in a flourishing garden, with pull-tabs that bring the garden symbolism to bloom. Opening with the text “I waited for you like a sprout from a seed,” the book follows various babies as they grow through the stages of early childhood, all described through rhyming plant imagery. Among the children are the metaphoric “new leaf,” a blond, White baby joyfully crawling; the “bloom,” a Black child toddling under an older woman’s watchful eye, and the “blooming wonder / an unfurling vine,” an adventurous, scooter-riding White preschooler. Like every garden, the narrative ends...
"The images and cutaways are well layered, offering views into the spacecraft's interior that change with each turn of the page."

ROCKET

Hepworth, Amelia
Illus. by Semple, David
Tiger Tales (10 pp.)
$9.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-68010-652-7
Series: How it Works

Everything young readers need to know about rockets, from liftoff to splashdown.

Inventive die cuts and inherently fascinating subject matter make this board book ideal for budding astronauts. The rocket-shaped cutouts are perfect for small hands to grab onto, and the pages are thick and seemingly indestructible. The colorful drawings are easily read. The images and cutaways are well layered, offering views into the spacecraft’s interior that change with each turn of the page. Rockets are well suited to this approach because of the differently purposed sections, or stages, of the spacecraft. Vocabulary words appear throughout the book, with arrows pointing to what they describe in each illustration. Items depicted include “rocket boosters,” “exhaust gases,” “fuel tank,” and “command module,” to name a few. The astronauts aboard are a man and a woman, both White-presenting, and a similarly spacesuited mouse. After splashdown, they are picked up by a ship with a multiracial crew. Scenes are presented in a sequence of six double-page spreads following the various stages of space exploration and return: “What Is a rocket?” “3, 2, 1, Blast Off!” “Out of This World,” “One Small Step for Man,” “Prepare for Re-entry,” and “Splashdown!” Contemporaneously published companion volume Tractor also features die-cut windows but lacks the level of variation and layering of interest this volume achieves.

Stellar! (Board book. 6 mos.-5) (Tractor: 978-1-68010-651-0)

MOIMOI—LOOK AT ME!
Shapes, Colors, and Sounds That Will SOOTHE Your Crying Baby
Hiraki, Kazuo
Illus. by Ichihara, Jun
The Experiment (24 pp.)
$6.95 | Mar. 30, 2021
978-1-61519-780-4

Nonsense words and multicolored forms combine to appeal to babies.

This vibrant board book from the University of Tokyo’s “Baby Lab” purports to use lab-tested designs to help calm infants with a combination of colorful shapes and soothing vocalizations to read aloud. Each page includes two or more basic tadpole-like shapes with contrasting stripes and an “eye” on both the body and tail, offering plenty of visual interest for a baby to focus on as their vision is developing. The simple text reflects the changing figures, with larger lettering on pages on which the forms have grown in size, multiple iterations on the pages where many tiny shapes appear, and a stretched-out “moooomoos!” on the pages on which the characters have long tails. Simple onomatopoeic words are interspersed and seem to reflect subtle changes in the shapes as well. While the jury is still out on whether a book of this type can truly console an upset baby, the interesting format combined with adult interaction will certainly appeal to many a tot. A QR code on the back of the book leads readers to a helpful recording of the correct pronunciation of moimoi, which rhymes with koi koi.

Bright and engaging for the tiniest readers. (Board book. 0-2)

DREAM MACHINE
Jay, Joshua
Illus. by Pizza, Andy J.
Chronicle Books (16 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-4521-7487-7

Little ones can arrange the settings in the dream machine to create their own sweet dreams.

This dream machine is no sleek, clean, modern machine. It is more along the lines of a mad-scientist contraption, with vivid colors, plenty of images all over, levers and tabs to move and slide, dials to turn, and flaps to open. The action starts right from the cover, with a tab to slide to the ON position. Next, “RAISE the antenna”—but most toddlers will not know what that is. Then, set the snoring level—again, toddlers may not know about or be interested in snoring, but adult readers will. Readers wanting to set the snoring level to 0, as suggested by the text, will find no 0. A different dial allows readers to choose the kind of dream desired: “fantasy,” “flying,” “weird,” and others. And a sliding tab allows the choice of a dream companion. Spinning a wheel should encourage yawns, and it will also turn down the light. After lowering the dream shield (or closing
treat along with praise for learning and growing. “Hi, little monkey! Are you able to move across the trees, just like your mommy? Well done! Here’s a delicious little banana!” Chick understands—being tiny as well—that these babies are on their own journeys of discovery and Chick wants to cheer them on as much as possible. Simple line drawings set against uncluttered backdrops that are dotted with colorful flowers add a delicate, joyful touch to Chick’s expedition. It’s certainly not geographically sound—Chick sees a wide variety of animals, including elephants and penguins, seemingly all in one day—but at least the minimal landscapes do change appropriately. There isn’t a dynamic story arc, with Chick simply walking from one family to the next, but the tiny fowl’s spindly legs carry a great big heart. Though not, strictly speaking, a board book, this offering features a padded cover and rounded, card-stock pages that suit it to a toddler audience.

Chick’s two oft-repeated words, sweet and cute, accurately sum up this tale. (Picture book. 1-4)

A little chick brings gifts to newborn animals.

So many babies have been born, and Chick wants to visit them all. Baby bunnies with tiny puffball tails get a colorful bunting as a present—and a hug. A baby squirrel, high up in a treetop nest, gets a nut—and a kiss. Each animal gets a simple
Unfolding pages and lifting up large flaps on their way through Companion volume \textit{Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, French, Arabic, and Esperanto. Each discovery on the latest fold-out train in this well received series.}

Some birds and their names in several different languages are presented in this multilingual board book.

Attractive paper collages set against a plain cream background represent 15 different familiar birds. Among them are a turkey, a dove, a pheasant, an owl, an ostrich, a kiwi, and a hummingbird. Surrounding each bird are the names given to it in each of seven languages, printed in small type or script: English, Chinese, Hindi, Spanish, French, Arabic, and Esperanto. Each language is assigned a color and a number from one to seven so readers know as they look at the words what language it is. For the three languages that do not use the Roman alphabet—Chinese, Hindi, and Arabic—the word has also been transcribed. Companion volume \textit{Ocean Animals} is similar in presentation. In this case, the collage artwork represents 15 different animals that live in the ocean. Among them are a seahorse, a sperm whale, a starfish, a jellyfish, and a manta ray. The names for each are given in the same seven languages. Readers’ curiosity may be sparked to look for the similarities or differences across the different languages, or they may be prompted to find out how to pronounce the words, as a pronunciation key is not provided. The illustrations are the stars, assembled from found, often printed papers in a variety of colors that have been cut and layered to create arresting images.

\textit{Lovely.} (Board book. 2-5) (\textit{Ocean Animals: 978-1-73500-056-5})

Licensed Disney characters and hidden items galore await discovery on the latest fold-out train in this well received series.

Following the general track of previous entries, readers are invited to join Mickey Mouse on a quest for his hidden kite. Unfolding pages and lifting up large flaps on their way through the train, they are challenged to pick out significant details like green, red, sour, and sweet foods on a laden table in the dining car, zigzags and stripes on a blizzard of hair bows created in the lounge car by fellow passenger Minnie, and dozens of acorns scattered throughout by Chip and Dale, among others. A landscape on the back sides of the cars offers opportunities to count sheep and spot a few more surprises. Poring over each car’s crowded contents offers distractions and discoveries aplenty—but it’s hard not to notice that Kolb devotes more attention to the settings than to the Disney content. He depicts the cartoon cast members looking at each other or off into the distance rather than at viewers and Mickey, cast as the chatty narrator, with his mouth closed most of the time. The figures look posed rather than expressive...not exactly pasted in, but not really participating in the action either. The sense of disconnection extends to the narrative, in which all of the characters appearing here consistently get name checks except Huey, Dewey, and Louie.

\textit{The commercial angle may earn sales, but the train may be running out of steam.} (Board book/novelty. 2-4)

A fun-loving daddy’s dedication is apparent in this slice-of-life board book.

Leo, a brown-skinned boy with tight curls, full lips, and a broad nose, delights in playing with Daddy, who has equally clearly Black features. Leo wakes up to Daddy tickling his tummy. Then this superinvolved father fixes pancakes, dances, takes Leo on a bike ride, and tends to Leo’s scraped knee. Together they build with blocks, take a bath, and snuggle with a book before bed. Companion title \textit{Leo Loves Mommy} follows a similar trajectory through the day. Leo builds a blanket fort with couch cushions, practices yoga, and paints with his mother, who also presents Black. After a bike ride, mommy’s lunch “is so flashy”: celery and carrot sticks turned into edible critters with fruit and nuts. The loving devotion of both parents is tangible and genuine, sweet but not cloying. Simple two-line sentences introduce the sounds trucks make. But...
“Could be profoundly useful in many families and in elementary school libraries.”

FIRST WORDS...AND LOTS MORE!

Port, Moni
Illus. by the author
Chronicle Books (22 pp.)
$19.99 | Jan. 12, 2021
978-1-4521-8079-3

This multilingual picture dictionary features vocabulary for a plethora of useful subjects: food, sports, clothing, entertainment, electronics, toys, and, as the title says, “lots more!”

In an increasingly multicultural world, and given the numbers of migrants making fresh starts in new countries, this book could be profoundly useful in many families and in elementary school libraries as well. English-language terms for each depicted item appear first, in eye-catching white type and a larger font, followed by the Spanish, French, and Arabic equivalents. Arabic words are spelled out in Arabic characters; their pronunciation is indicated phonetically below, in Roman letters. Many listings are straightforward, but there are strokes of whimsy throughout: Entries include “egg,” “broken egg,” and “another egg”; “apple (the worm likes it too)?”; and “milk (spilled…but no worries).” There is a section on bugs and animals and one on plants and items found in gardens and fields, including, unfortunately, litter. “Full tab,” “old shoe,” and “mitten (found)” appear, as do commonly composted items like fish bones, eggshells, and banana peels. In a section on the bathroom, a roll of toilet paper winds back and forth down one page and across the next. Musical instruments and kitchen items appear as well. A spread of dangerous things—“little knife (sharp?),” “cigarettes (yuck?)”—includes an emphatic “NO! NO! NO!” in all four languages highlighted against a jagged red callout. There is no index.

A valuable tool across a variety of settings. (Board book. 3-6)

COUNTING WITH OWL AND BIRD

Purcell, Rebecca
Illus. by the author
Tiny Seed (66 pp.)
$4.95 | Feb. 1, 2021
978-1-80036-011-2
Series: Owl and Bird

Another well-designed concept book featuring the two slightly bemused friends.

Owl and Bird return this time for a counting walk. The slight story opens with Owl, carrying an open umbrella, and Bird on the teal-blue left-hand page and an invitation to readers to “help them count the things they see.” On the opposite, sky-blue page they count “1 / One rainbow.” Then Owl’s umbrella becomes a prop for Bird to perch on or for Owl to use to point out the next object to be counted. This pattern continues until the final spread, when Owl counts 12 stars on the sky-blue left before the story ends with “Good night, Owl and Bird” on the night-blue right. Every other page presents just the numeral within a circle, and the number and name of what is to be counted. The sans-serif white font displays cleanly against the blue backgrounds. Whimsical details in the illustrations (Owl’s pink rain boots, the two flamingos’ hats) do not distract from the primary goal of counting. And there is always the little white Bird to find. Despite the increasing number of objects per page, the design remains uncluttered and focused. Smaller objects are featured as their numbers increase, so there are three kites and five airplanes but eight spiders, 10 bumblebees, and 11 leaves. Finding the ninth apple is a bit challenging. (It’s under Owl’s wing.)

Great for toddlers who are practicing counting. (Board book. 1-4)

LOOK OUT, CAT!

Purcell, Rebecca
Illus. by the author
Tiny Seed (22 pp.)
$7.95 | Jan. 1, 2021
978-1-80036-008-2
Series: Cat’s Adventures

Cat skateboards past animals in this board book that showcases rhymes.

Purcell’s Cat, from Cat Goes Fast (2020) and other titles, is back on wheels again. As Cat zips by via skateboard, other animals also whiz along, each with its own descriptive rhyme. There’s a goose “on the loose,” a duck “in a truck,” and a bear “in the air,” for example. The formulaic setup line “Look out, Cat!” is always followed by the approaching animal’s rhyme and appropriate onomatopoeia. It’s this familiar cadence that helps little readers begin to predict what will come next, the oinks or barks often appearing before a page turn, inviting prediction and participation. It all proceeds per formula until the giggle-producing bait and switch as Rat appears without a rhyme but carrying ice cream cones to share with Cat. As with the other
Cat books, the illustrations are simple, with bold blue backgrounds and a bit of grass across the bottom of each page. It serves to emphasize Cat’s movement around the page, making subtle changes more pronounced, encouraging readers to notice them. The only disappointment in the illustrations is the fly that looks confusingly like a gray bee. As a bonus, the book does not include any gendered pronouns. Purcell’s careful use of language and simple, thoughtful illustration are the strengths of this series.

Move over, Spot, there’s a new Cat in town. (Board book: 1-3)

10 HUGS AND KISSES
Illus. by Slater, Nicola
Chronicle Books (20 pp.)
$7.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-4521-7094-7
Series: Beginning Baby

A rhyming, counting board book full of animal snuggles.

This Beginning Baby title features many of the same animal friends from Welcome to Shape School! (2021). Each double-page spread includes a large numeral printed with a 3-D effect on the left, with the text and animals on the right. There are “fishy kisses,” “tum-tum tickles,” and “happy smiles,” all prompting loving interactions to be shared between a caregiver and child as they make their way through this lap book. Some of the items are awkward for counting purposes. How are “six lovey cuddles” or “seven snuggles” between two creatures countable? Nevertheless, cuddles and snuggles are irresistible. The animals march on to bed, where they turn off the light and say “nighty night.” The animals are adorable, rendered in soft blues, pinks, and yellows. From the giggling narwhal to the bespectacled elephant, they are sweet and appealing. While the backgrounds are pleasingly uncluttered, thoughtful details abound. The llama has a tiny pen, pencil, and paintbrush tucked into its overalls, and the octopus dons a frilly sleeping mask at the end. While this is a fairly traditional counting book, complete with rhyming text, it’s still a cozy, enjoyable read.

Worthwhile just for the adorable animals and the excuse to cuddle up with a little one. (Board book: 6 mos.-2)

WELCOME TO SHAPE SCHOOL!
Illus. by Slater, Nicola
Chronicle Books (20 pp.)
$12.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-4521-7093-0
Series: Beginning Baby

The friendly animals of the Shape School invite readers to find and explore 10 different shapes.

This board book is more than a simple shape seek-and-find or identification book. It goes one step further to engage little readers in fine motor practice. For example, Elijah the elephant encourages readers to trace all of the circle shapes on the page with a finger. On another, readers are asked to tap the three points on the triangles in the picture. Each page features a different shape, which is highlighted on a tab located on the outer edge of the book. Some double-page spreads include a lot of shapes, perhaps more than a toddler or preschooler would have the patience to interact with: more than 20 triangles and 40 hearts, for instance. That said, there is no counting challenge per se, and it does allow for readers to do as much or as little as they would like. Similarly, it includes some less-obvious shapes, like the cabinet with nine square cubbies that is also itself square, and there are two flamingos whose bodies form the shape of a heart. This helps stretch the challenge for slightly older readers. The illustrations are darling and certainly inviting. Riley the narwhal is irresistible in a red-and-white striped shirt and tiny red backpack. None of the animals are gendered with pronouns in the text.

Adorable illustrations and an unusually engaging approach to shape recognition. (Board book: 2-4)
A grim, modern-day manifestation of the Peter Pan tale drawn from subtle, dark elements in the original text. Wendy Darling is a sweet, naïve 17-year-old who just moved to Chicago. One night, Peter Pan comes through her open window, expecting an empty house and instead becoming enamored with the girl inside. Wendy herself is immediately enchanted by Peter, whose boyish charm and good looks convince her to join him for a night on the town along with his spunky and snappy ex-girlfriend Tinkerbell. During the course of a single night, Wendy runs into more of Peter’s connections, including a collection of orphans he houses off the grid, a Detective Hook eager to bring him down, and other counterparts from the source material (including the racist caricature of a Native girl, gracefully realized here as a three-dimensional young Ojibwe woman). But as the night goes on and Peter’s facade grows more transparent, the frightful truth at his center threatens the safety of everyone involved. Eschewing literal magic, Ancrum’s remix is spellbinding and psychologically compelling despite a slower-moving middle. The haunting truth surrounding Peter is well earned and disturbing, a perfect—and bleak—transformation of the character for the 21st century. Wendy is Black, Peter and Tink are White, and the supporting cast represents myriad racial and queer identities.

Dynamically reckons with the real-life ramifications of someone who refuses to grow up. (Thriller. 14-18)
Mario, arrives home late one day, it sets their dad off in a rage, Lucy Sánchez, a Mexican American girl who has inherited Bernal keeps the pacing tight and brisk, mapping out Lucy's Brooklyn to upstate New York. Bri quickly grasps that her new and Mario runs away from home. It doesn't take long for Lucy and to Los Angeles to enroll in culinary training. On the road, how -ever, she spots a help wanted sign on the window of La Cocina, there to start over away from the trauma of her past: a community of supportive (mostly Latinx) friends, an opportunity for recovery. Bernal keeps the pacing tight and brisk, mapping out Lucy’s arc from scared adolescent to triumphant yet cautious chef-in-progress. Despite a somewhat abrupt ending, readers will find a story buoyed by likable characters and the author’s compassionate writing.

A well-rounded feast for the heart. (Fiction. 14-18)

RESERVATIONS REQUIRED
Bernal, Estela
Piñata Books/Arte Público (304 pp.)
$14.95 paper | May 31, 2021
978-1-55885-915-9

On the cusp of adulthood, a 17-year-old girl escapes her abusive home and discovers a refuge in a sleepy Arizona town. Two weeks have passed since Nana’s funeral. Her absence still feels raw to Lucy Sánchez, a Mexican American girl who has inherited her grandmother’s love for and knowledge of cooking. Home offers little solace. Lucy’s mother is a ghost of her former self; her father, meanwhile, is a violent tyrant. When Lucy’s brother, Mario, arrives home late one day, it sets their dad off in a rage, and Mario runs away from home. It doesn’t take long for Lucy to fall victim to her father’s ire, and she’s soon plotting her own way out. After a brief spell with her aunt, Lucy decides to head to Los Angeles to enroll in culinary training. On the road, however, she spots a help wanted sign on the window of La Cocina, a small-town restaurant. Lucy ultimately finds what she needs there to start over away from the trauma of her past: a community of supportive (mostly Latinx) friends, an opportunity for love—and even a puppy. In this tale of resilience and recovery, Bernal keeps the pacing tight and brisk, mapping out Lucy’s arc from scared adolescent to triumphant yet cautious chef-in-progress. Despite a somewhat abrupt ending, readers will find a story buoyed by likable characters and the author’s compassionate writing.

A well-rounded feast for the heart. (Fiction. 14-18)
A wealthy man discovers the consequences of selfishness and the possibility of redemption in a middle-grade fantasy inspired by Greek folktales.

...a lyrical story of bravery and redemption anchored by a courageous and resilient protagonist.

A splendid folktale that may appeal to fans of short stories and folklore.

—Kirkus Reviews

FOR ALL INQUIRIES, PLEASE EMAIL
Anthony@anthonymannabooks.com
“Buoyed by tenderness and humor amid moments of deep pain.”

**FIFTEEN HUNDRED MILES FROM THE SUN**

Garza Villa, Jonny
Skyscape (354 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-5420-2705-2

Julián “Jules” Luna is a closeted junior who is about to have his life turned upside down.

Set on leaving Texas to go to UCLA, Mexican American Jules is betting that moving 1,500 miles away will allow him the space to finally come out. Despite being surrounded by fiercely loving friends, he has accepted the duality of his closeted life, which he keeps under wraps to avoid his homophobic father’s verbal and physical abuse. When a drunken night leads to his accidentally coming out on Twitter, he is catapulted into an out life, which—amazingly—including a blossoming relationship with Mat, a Vietnamese American boy and online crush who happens to live in Los Angeles. Garza Villa’s debut is buoyed by tenderness and humor amid moments of deep pain. The gay romance certainly delivers in Jules and Mat’s adorable chemistry, but the real standout is the love story between Jules and his (mostly Latinx) friends as they live life to its fullest together, standing on the precipice of new beginnings before leaving for college. Jules’ friendship with Jordan, his straight, Black soccer teammate, is exceptionally moving in the boys’ mutual care and vulnerability. The delightfully sassy Spanglish with myriad pop-culture references seamlessly woven into the conversational prose is an added bonus.

*An open-hearted expression of love in its many forms.* (Fiction. 14+18)

**THE SEA IS SALT AND SO AM I**

Hartt, Cassandra
Roaring Brook (384 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 8, 2021
978-1-250-61924-2

Three small-town teens navigate sea changes both personal and environmental. After another storm in West Finch, Maine, withdrawn artist Tommy MacQueen attempts suicide while on a swim. His survival triggers events that change both his future and those of his confident twin, Ellis, a bisexual amputee and track star, and Ellis’ best friend, activist Harlow Prout. Estranged ever since Harlow entered their lives and drawn further apart by Tommy’s depression, the MacQueen brothers struggle to regain their childhood bond. Harlow begins a secret relationship with Tommy out of pity, but what’s meant as a distraction becomes a tender romance between the formerly bitter enemies. Harlow and Ellis’ volatile friendship is given equal weight in the narrative: Vacillating between codependency and profound devotion, their relationship is the novel’s heart. Insular West Finch is as atmospheric and colorful as...
Tommy’s paintings, overshadowed by the acceptance of its own eventual destruction through coastal erosion. Hartt is uninterested in easy answers, unspooling mysteries and emotions that shift what we thought we knew about characters caught in realistically nonlinear growth. The points of view are specific and well realized, with belligerent, loving Harlow, a fixer unable to stop breaking things, being a particular standout. Tommy’s recovery proceeds in complicated fits and starts; his depression is portrayed with sensitivity. Main characters default to White.

A melancholy and thoughtful debut. (author’s note) (Fiction. 14-18)

THE GIRL IN THE HEADLINES
Jayne, Hannah
Sourcebooks Fire (250 pp.)
$10.99 paper | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-72822-521-0

A high schooler is hunted for a crime she can’t remember. Athletic, asthmatic Andrea McNulty had a happy life with her adoptive parents and little brother, Josh. But when she awakes in a strange motel room after her 18th birthday, bruised and bloody, she finds her family’s peace shattered, her parents possibly dead, and her brother missing. Unable to remember what transpired the previous night, Andi finds a street-wise ally in oddly helpful motel employee Nate (described as mixed-race; which races are not specified). Floundering through her sudden ejection from the sheltered, middle-class life of her White family, Andi soon uncovers suburbia’s seedier side—and dark family secrets. No accomplished amateur sleuth, Andi’s attempts to exonerate herself and find the perpetrators just feed the media frenzy. As the news outlets and her former friends sensationalize Andi’s rough childhood—a birth mother addicted to heroin, issues in the adoption process following her time in foster care—Andi begins to question everything and everyone. Jayne gestures at but doesn’t fully explore poverty or racism: Certain characters come off as caricatures, with their tacky nails, cigarettes, and prison sentences, more driven by greed than downtrodden by the system. Overall, this is a propulsive—if occasionally illogical and unlikely—story rife with true-crime TV tropes and plenty of red herrings.

A teen thriller that questions middle-class myths. (Thriller. 14-18)
In Camryn Garrett’s second novel, *Off the Record* (Knopf, May 18), 12th grader Josie Wright beats out thousands of competitors for the opportunity to go on a cross-country movie press tour and do a series of interviews with attractive, up-and-coming, Black, French American actor Marius Canet for a major entertainment magazine. Forced by her parents to bring her gregarious, blunt, confident older sister along as chaperone, Josie—who lives with social anxiety—soon faces bigger challenges than everyday sibling tensions and an awkward, possibly mutual, crush on her interview subject. She makes friends with a young female actor from the film who confides that Roy Lennox, an Oscar-winning Hollywood legend who is directing Marius’ next movie, is a serial sexual predator who has preyed on her and other women.

Soon Josie is pursuing two stories—one so explosive she’s unsure whether anyone will go on the record with their experiences. And even if they do, what news outlet would stand up to one of the most powerful men in the film industry and publish an exposé by a 17-year-old? This compelling page-turner with well-drawn characters is very much of this moment while highlighting themes that, unfortunately, are of perennial significance. Garrett, a student at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts, spoke with us over Zoom from her home in Brooklyn, New York; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

It’s sadly very clear where the general inspiration for a story like this would come from, but was there a specific event that prompted you to write it?

I wrote the first half in 2019, when a lot of women were telling #MeToo stories, especially on social media. There were a lot of kids from my school making group chats and sharing *This happened to me and this person did this to me*. So I was trying to think of an outlet to explore those ideas.

Another timely theme is the importance of investigative journalism. What does this element of the story mean to you?

One of the reasons why I wrote this is because I didn’t go into journalism and I wanted to write about my love of it. I was a *Time for Kids* journalist when I was 13 and then my high school had a really cool program where you could take a journalism class. You had to be a sophomore, but my teacher let me take it as a freshman, so I took it all four years, and it was a big part of my life. And I freelanced. I just am so in awe of journalists. The industry is really rough to be in; it’s not the way it was—there’s not as much security and not a lot of protection either. When
these #MeToo stories were coming out, I couldn’t wrap my mind around how one journalist would have to switch gears so many times. You’d have to be looking at legal documents, you’d have to be talking to the survivors and be approachable enough to be able to take down these stories, and then you’d have to deal with the accused abusers. How do you switch gears and do that? I thought that was such an amazing thing, and I wanted to write a teenager who could and have it be almost like a superpower. Especially since I decided not to go into journalism, I was like, *Let me live vicariously through her.*

One of my favorite things about the book was how well-rounded and real the female characters were: Each was imperfect in a human and sympathetic way yet fundamentally supportive of other women, not tearing them down.

I’m really glad that you picked that up. I obviously read a lot of YA, and I [did] growing up, and I think it has shifted in a great direction since I’ve gotten older, but those [negative] archetypes [about women’s relationships] exist in all the media we consume. So, especially since it’s a book about this topic that affects women in a tough way, I didn’t want anyone to be one-dimensional. I wanted everyone to feel real, because that was what they deserved when it comes to a topic that’s so weighty and heavy. And those are just the types of characters that I want to see, so I’m glad that they came [across] that way. I love sister stories, like *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* and *Little Women,* so I wanted to write something where it’s a little contentious but ultimately loving.

The line where Josie remembers her sister’s advice to the effect that she can’t have an impact on the world if she’s not healthy herself really resonated with me.

Does this come from personal experience?

I definitely feel the same way, especially recently. I was very bad at this—I tried to take a social media break, and I lasted three or four days. But one of the reasons I did [it was] because I kept telling my friends, *I feel so bad that I can’t devote equal energy to all these atrocities that keep happening, one right after the other.* I don’t think that me tweeting something fairly basic while I’m anxious about a million things is going to do anything. I think pulling back was really helpful. I definitely was writing that line to try to save myself but also other people: We’re so much more connected now, but because of that we’re constantly seeing everything. There’s so many ways that you can help, but you can’t do all of them, so it’s really easy to feel guilty. But you’re just one person.

I appreciated how Josie’s being a queer, fat, Black girl with anxiety was all woven together so naturally, making her feel so much like someone you would know in real life. Too often it seems like there is this implicit message that characters from marginalized groups should have some artificial limit on how many identities they are allowed to have. Of course, that’s not how reality works.

I’ve definitely gotten that, not with this specific book, but before: *There’s so much going on in terms of identity.* I don’t like that critique, because if [Josie] had been a White, cis, straight dude, no one would say, *These are deliberate choices.* But I made her Black and she’s a girl and she’s bisexual—those are all seen as me making deliberate choices. And I was, but I hate that “the default” isn’t seen as a choice. Her having all these different aspects of who she is makes her feel more real: I don’t think one person is just one thing. When I was younger I cobbled together different YA books—books with plus-size protagonists and books about girls dealing with sexual assault and [ones] about Black girls. It felt, at least when I was younger, that they couldn’t have multiple things [going on]; I’d have to read them separately. So something I wanted to do was put them all together.

Off the Record received a starred review in the April 1, 2021, issue.
intent on total domination, sends an army of monsters against the rebels who dare to challenge her. The third-person point of view rotates among three characters—Eli, Tav, and the blue-skinned witch Kite—with perspective shifts that ramp up the momentum and suspense. The queer, polyamorous romance is wound with tension and longing that are not based on jealousy while remaining consent-positive. Jerreat-Poole crafts vivid imagery using wild and surprising prose. Snippets of lore tease another cracking mystery, this time ingeniously working with the witchery and the untamable, sentient magical setting, the community engagement. An energizing and magnetic whirlwind. (Fantasy. 14-18)

THE BOX IN THE WOODS
Johnson, Maureen
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-06-303260-6
Series: Truly Devious, 4

Amateur boarding school detective Stevie Bell is back with a new cold case to crack in a companion novel to the Truly Devious trilogy.

After solving one of the greatest murder mysteries of the 20th century, Stevie is at a bit of a loss while back home working at a deli counter during summer break. When the new owner of Camp Wonder Falls—the site of the gruesome (and unsolved) Box in the Woods murders back in the ’70s—invites her over to work on the case for his upcoming documentary and podcast, Stevie immediately says yes. It’s especially appealing since she gets to invite her closest friends, Nate and Janelle, as well as her boyfriend, David, to tag along. When a new murder takes place just as Stevie starts asking questions around town, the gang find themselves in danger once more. Johnson’s hallmark charming humor and lovable characters provide a robust foundation for another cracking mystery, this time ingeniously working with summer-camp and locked-room-mystery tropes. A few snippets relating back to the events in 1978 and Stevie’s empathy for the grieving friends and relatives of the dead, who still yearn for answers, provide a strong emotional grounding for the case. Apart from Janelle, who is Black (and queer), most characters are White. Stevie’s relationship with her lifelong anxiety is particularly well portrayed.

A fantastic stand-alone mystery companion revisits a much-loved sleuth. (author’s note) (Mystery. 14-18)

FLASH FIRE
Klune, TJ
Tor Teen (400 pp.)
$10.99 paper | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-250-20368-7
Series: Extraordinaries, 2

This sequel to the superhero tale The Extraordinaries (2020) is jampacked with action, nefarious plots, romance, and puns.

Nicholas Bell has it pretty good: Though he’s only 16, he’s got a strong, positive sense of self (critical for a gay teen) in addition to a supportive dad, great friends, and an adorable boyfriend, Seth. Seth’s alter ego is the superpowered Pyro Storm, who can manipulate fire and spends much of his free time aiding local citizens in their fair city. Nick is proud of Seth and does everything he can to support him, including orchestrating Pyro Storm’s rebranding efforts via social media and composing hot fanfic—if Nick does say so himself. Of course, Nick has his own struggles, like dealing with his ADHD, massive headaches, awkward visits from a sketchy rich dude (long story), and some explosive secrets on the verge of being revealed. Spending more time with these characters is an absolute delight; the love they share and readily profess for each other, both platonic and romantic, is beautiful to witness. Of particular note is the tension between Nick’s cop father and the middle-class Black family of Gibby, one of Nick’s friends. The discussions by both parties are frank, with Nick’s father ultimately taking responsibility for his past misconduct and Nick showing growth in understanding Gibby’s parents’ perspective. Nick and Seth are White.

Another extraordinary installment. (Fantasy. 14-18)

THE GIRL LEAST LIKELY
Loutzenhiser, Katy
Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins (352 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 29, 2021
978-0-06-286570-0

A self-aware, meta rom-com with all the tropes delightfully delivered.

High school junior Gretchen is “shiny person adjacent”—older sister Hen, cousin Carmen, and best friend Sam love her and indulge her rom-com habit even if she never wants to join them for activities including other people. But now she’s fallen for Sam, he’s announced he’s moving away to live with his dad in New York City for senior year, and college freshmen Hen and Carmen are too caught up in their new lives to be available. What’s a girl to do? Apparently, accidentally enter a stand-up competition under a false identity, start a flirtation with very cute (if maybe a jerk) business student Jeremy, explore new friendships, and basically discover herself. Although this offers all the beats of the romantic stories Gretchen loves, it’s really a feel-good story about a
girl finding herself (and several boys) that’s set in a South Portland, Maine, high school populated by an amazingly nice group of teens. Feminist Gretchen is a work in progress; she recognizes the flaws of the rom-com playbook (the titles referenced include many of the greatest hits from the ’80s and ’90s), but her go-to insult tends to be some form of douche. Gretchen and other major characters are White, excepting White/Filipina Carmen, Brazilian American Sam, and Natalie, Gretchen’s Black/Japanese school friend.

Don’t mind the snowy setting: This is a charming, sun-shiny beach read. (Romance. 13-18)
family is worth a potentially world-ending war. But even if she has a change of heart, can Esmae broker peace before she and everyone she loves lose what they truly value? This final volume in a gripping trilogy about the battle to claim Kali is, in some ways, lighter and more humorous than its predecessors, resting as it does on the firm foundations of relationships the author has skillfully built over the course of many pages. While the plot is action packed and the dialogue is witty and, at times, hilarious, the book’s biggest strength lies in the author’s profound knowledge of human nature and the slow, rewarding revelation of each character’s psychological development.

A thrilling space opera and a fitting ending to an impressive trilogy. (list of characters) (Science fiction. 14-18)
temporarily swap places and confront their parents. Only when they’re on their respective flights home do they realize that they’ve been transformed to look like one another. The relative ease with which various characters accept the magical element strains belief, but the sisters’ growth over the course of the story is convincing and satisfying. With help from their love interests, Pakistani Zarar and Filipina Dawn—both of whom are well developed and endearing—Jamie and Siri, who are White, confront their individual flaws and strengths and learn to accept the work inherent to healthy familial relationships.

**Thoughtful and entertaining.** *(Fiction. 14-18)*

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**KINDREDS**  
Russell, B.B.  
Green Place Books (336 pp.)  
$15.95 paper | Jun. 15, 2021  
978-1-73365-346-6

A mysterious carnival upends Lilah’s life.

Sixteen-year-old Lilah’s parents and twin brother died in an accident years ago—and after her grandma dies, she ends up in foster care. She finds herself drawn to her new next-door neighbor Joey, also in foster care and a former childhood friend of her brother’s, and wonders where he’s disappearing to at night. At school, Lilah overhears a strange conversation between Joey and arrogant classmate Sebastian, another foster kid, and she decides to investigate. Following them into the woods, she discovers Carnival Nolana, a place for young people like them who don’t have families. It has a portal that only opens for nine nights per year to

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**“In this middle-grade SF/fantasy, a present-day boy with prophetic dreams and a mind attuned to time is the only hope for 31st-century Earth after an alien takeover.”**

**“Cool illustrations by Peres are a major asset...”**

**“The author includes a glossary that features both ‘real’ (scientifically grounded) and imaginary details.”**

**“This engaging, anything-goes SF/fantasy should hold young attention spans, with more installments promised.”**

—*Kirkus Reviews*
outsiders and in a new location each time. If they’re one of the 10 visitors invited to stay on Halloween, then they won’t be able to leave for a year. Joey had desperately wanted to join this community until reconnecting with Lilah and being drawn to her. Lilah’s falling for him in turn and not so sure she trusts Sebastian. 

The story suffers from a lack of coherent worldbuilding. The only fantastical elements are the carnival’s portal and some drugged carnival food which causes selective memory loss. The intriguing execution of the found-family trope is lessened by the superficial romance. Lilah and Sebastian are White; Joey has brown skin, and there is some diversity in background characters.

A thoughtful volume that will appeal to a broad range of readers. (Anthology. 13-18)

A NIGHT TWICE AS LONG
Simonet, Andrew
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (320 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-0-374-30932-9

The power has been out for three weeks. Everywhere.

No one has electricity, water, phones, or the internet; it’s all just gone. In a rural American town, 16-year-old Alex has been lost in the dark since before the blackout, since that day at the lake a year ago. Soon after those events, Georgie, her nonverbal autistic brother, went to live with a foster family. Now her friend Anthony wants to walk 10 miles to reach someone with a shortwave radio for the chance to maybe, possibly, contact his mother who is away in the Navy. Recognizing his quiet desperation and suddenly, desperately, needing to take control of her life, Alex shaves off her hair and goes with him. Their long walk takes them past nudists, doomsayers, sociable Christians—and Georgie’s school. Simonet holds raw humanity up to the light and throws all of life’s jumbled mess together, showing, for example, guilt alongside romance. This book reveals a society forced to shift dramatically, something that feels particularly poignant post-2020. Simonet’s portrayals include the “Nation of Difference,” or the world of disabled people and their families who are shown leading lives that are difficult and joyful, full of nervous fear and also full of love. The narrative comments upon some of the realities faced by biracial (Black/White) Anthony in contrast to Alex and her White family.

A journey imbued with emotion and worth every step. (Fiction. 13-17)

MISTER IMPOSSIBLE
Stiefvater, Maggie
Scholastic (352 pp.)
$16.99 | May 18, 2021
978-1-338-18836-3
Series: Dreamer Trilogy, 2

Whether dreamed or crafted, art engenders life.

Creation and destruction, art and mimicry, power and disenfranchisement: The world requires balance, but the Lynch brothers, standing at the center of it all, have always tended to extremes. Although Ronan continues to be the pivot, the dreams take precedence. Jordan finds herself as a maker rather than a forger while Matthew grapples with who he is now that he understands he was dreamed. Power dynamics have shifted following the showdown between the dreamers and the Moderators. Three groups—the dreamers, the dreams, plus a rogue Moderator/Visionary team, each selfish, amoral, and deeply sympathetic in turn—circle one another, trying to change or save the world, or dreams, or themselves, or all of the above. The dreamers want open ley lines and the freedom to dream. The dreamed want to...
live free of their dreamers. Farooq-Lane wants to stop killing but still stop the dreamers. More meditative than the first volume, this complexly plotted wonder offers little to reorient readers but much to engage them. Stiefvater's pitch-perfect prose, detached and full of precise details, creates a tension that never lets up until the zinger of an ending that will leave fans gasping. The Lynch brothers are White; Jordan is Black, and Farooq-Lane's name cues some Middle Eastern heritage.

**Explosive.** (Fantasy. 13-adult)

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**ROOM SERVICE**

*Stoffels, Maren*  
*Trans. by Watkinson, Laura*  
*Underlined* (272 pp.)  
$9.99 paper  |  Jun. 29, 2021  
978-0-593-17598-9

Four teens spend an unsettling weekend at a fancy hotel in this Dutch import. It has been almost a year since Fender, Kate, and Lucas lost a friend—but they don’t talk about her anymore. Thanks to Kate’s dad’s work meeting, they’ve got rooms at the five-star Riverside Hotel to celebrate Kate’s birthday weekend—supposedly there will be adult supervision, but in reality, they’re largely left to their own devices. The trio will be joined by their new friend from school, Linnea, who seems to have filled in all the gaps left behind by their friend who is gone. Fender and Linnea alternate as first-person narrators along with a creepy unnamed voice who stalks them both. It’s that voice that’s in the threatening messages delivered to Fender’s door on room service trays and written in black marker on the walls of Kate and Linnea’s room. That voice, brusque and accusatory, directs the narrative, creating suspense with a growing feeling of dread as it alludes to sexual assault, murder, and suicide. The characters are compelling enough to keep the pages turning, and the emotions, both intense and mercurial, feel apt for a young adult novel. The ending, however, feels anticlimactic, the twist not quite sufficient to justify the magnitude of the horror in all the preceding hints. Main characters are assumed White.

**Macabre and melodramatic.** (author’s note) (Thriller. 14-18)

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**THAT WEEKEND**

*Thomas, Kara*  
*Delacorte* (336 pp.)  
978-1-5247-1836-7  
978-1-5247-1837-4 PLB

Her friends are missing from a camping trip gone bad and Claire can’t remember anything, but she’s determined to find them.

After catching her boyfriend sneaking off with another girl, there’s no way Claire is going to prom with him. Instead, the teen becomes a third wheel on a secret weekend trip to the mountains with her best friend, Kat, and Jesse, Kat’s boyfriend. The worst Claire is expecting is having to witness too many PDA’s between Jesse and Kat—especially since she has a secret crush on Jesse. When she wakes up alone on the mountain, hurt and with amnesia, that’s when the real trouble begins. Kat and Jesse are missing, possibly dead, and Claire can’t remember anything past their first night on the mountain. In this well-paced mystery, Thomas raises doubts about everyone, from Kat’s wealthy and influential ex-congresswoman grandmother to the mountain’s small-town residents to even Claire herself. When her friends’ ongoing disappearance causes her mental health issues and the FBI still hasn’t cracked the case, Claire begins her own investigation. The story is primarily told through Claire’s first-person narration, with later flashback chapters from Kat’s perspective offering more clues. The twists and turns accelerate until the final page as readers learn not just how the teens disappeared, but why. Most main characters are cued as White; Jesse is White and Mexican American.

**Mystery fans will welcome another shocking missing teen case.** (resources) (Mystery. 14-18)

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**“Helpful and inspirational.”**  
—*Kirkus Reviews* (March 15, 2021)

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**SAVING ANIMALS**

*Catherine Kelleher*  
*A future activist’s guide*  
*Ashland Creek Press*

Release: May 4, 2021  Pages: 310  
Paper: 978-1-61822-094-3  
Case: 978-1-61822-095-0  
Available via Ingram.

“*If you want to do something for animals, reading Saving Animals will get you off to a great start.*”  
—Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation*
**VIOLET GHOSTS**
*Thomas, Leah*
Bloomsbury (336 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 15, 2021
978-1-5476-0463-0

Fifteen-year-old Dani knows a few things for sure: He is a transgender boy, ghosts are real, and most victims are murdered by someone they know. After escaping Dani’s abusive father, he and his mother move to Michigan. His only friend is Sarah, an angry teenage ghost who hates men and keeps the details of her murder a closely guarded secret. When they meet Patricia, another ghost, lying dazed in the woods, they decide they need to find a way to help the ghosts of murdered women. Meanwhile, Dani reluctantly begins to befriend taciturn classmate Seiji, who is also haunted by ghosts both real and metaphorical. Ghosts are not the scary things in this story, however. The characters, the living ones as well as the ghosts, explicitly and honestly deal with the traumas of physical and sexual abuse, rape, violence, abandonment, suicide, and murder. Some forgive, some hide, and some rage while others feel inexplicably drawn to return again and again to their abusers. The author evokes the setting of the late 1990s and early 2000s with plenty of pop-culture references, but the characters’ knowledge and attitudes about transgender issues are often optimistically— but not impossibly—contemporary. Dani, Patricia, and other major characters seem to be White; Sarah has pale brown skin and black hair, and Seiji is White and Japanese.

*A haunting and hopeful story of self-discovery. (Paranormal. 14-18)*

**BURY THE LEAD**
*Thrace, Mischa*
BHC Press (228 pp.)
$22.95 | Jun. 10, 2021
978-1-64397-219-0

An aspiring journalist investigates the urban legend surrounding mysterious disappearances of students at her school. After losing out on an internship to fellow classmate Emma Morgan, high school senior Kennedy Carter looks for the next great exposé that will earn her the New England regional Excellence in Emerging Journalism Award. She dreams of getting out of her little Massachusetts town and becoming an investigative reporter. For their final project in journalism class, Kennedy and her best friend, school photographer Ravi Burman, decide to profile members of their school community and probe the curse haunting Maplefield High. Kennedy begins by researching students who disappeared in recent years—but everything takes a turn for the worse when Emma goes missing and is later found dead, supposedly by suicide. Certain that Emma was murdered, Kennedy and Ravi risk everything to uncover the truth behind the curse threatening Maplefield students, a truth which is contained in the anonymously authored side story, “The Making of a Monster,” that is interspersed throughout the novel. Kennedy’s self-righteousness is tempered by Ravi’s level-headed understanding, but asexual Kennedy fears their budding romance could ruin years of friendship. This mystery in the vein of Holly Jackson’s *A Good Girl’s Guide to Murder* (2020) is well paced, but the resolution may strike readers knowledgeable about mystery conventions as not playing fair. Most characters are cued as White; pansexual Ravi’s mother is White, and his father is cued as a British immigrant of Indian descent.

*Sufficiently thrilling. (Mystery. 13-17)*

**COLD HEARTED**
*A Tale of the Wicked Stepmother*
*Valentino, Serena*
Disney-Hyperion (304 pp.)
$17.99 | Jun. 29, 2021
978-1-368-02528-7
Series: Villains

How did Cinderella’s stepmother come to be so wicked? She may have been self-focused, but at least she wasn’t always so cruel. Lady Tremaine, mother of two spoiled daughters, is a lonely widow hoping for a bit of happiness. Unfortunately, when Sir Richard appears at her friend’s house party, she’s swept off her feet and fails to heed the frantic warnings of her dedicated, elderly lady’s maid. Had she ever bothered to read the book of fairy tales her late husband purchased years before, she might have recognized the perils of assuming the role of stepmother. Entranced by Sir Richard, she agrees to a hasty marriage and a move to the Many Kingdoms, where he reverts to his true, domineering nature and she and her daughters become virtual prisoners in his home. Although the Odd Sisters—clever, manipulative witches—try to intervene on her behalf, it seems her fate is already written; she becomes as cruel and demented as the story described. However, Cinderella’s Fairy Godmother and her sister, Nanny, have plans to rescue Lady Tremaine’s daughters as they develop much-needed, rehabilitative insights into the family’s dynamics. Mostly told from the Lady’s shallow, self-centered perspective, this is an entertaining retelling of the Disney “Cinderella” story from a different viewpoint, with references to the rest of the series woven throughout. Characters follow a White default.

*For princess fans and lovers of fairy tales. (Fiction. 12-16)*
**WHERE IT ALL LANDS**

*Wexler, Jennie*

Wednesday Books (352 pp.)

$18.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-250-75004-4

A coin flip creates two different timelines in this emotional, romantic tale.

Stevie is once again the new girl. Her father's football coaching job has led to their family's being repeatedly uprooted. Passionate about music, Stevie joins the marching band at her new high school, where she meets best friends Drew and Shane. Drew is popular because his dad is famous; incredible drummer Shane is bullied. The two have been tight since they were young and refuse to let anything get in between them. When Drew and Shane are both immediately attracted to Stevie, they default to their usual method of solving problems: flipping a coin. The winner gets to ask her out. The first section of the book follows one result of the coin toss; the second goes back in time and presents the other outcome. Although the story is often melodramatic, the moony musings on new romance are charming, and through each path, the trio experiences love, desire, drama, and grief. Stevie is no passive object; the boys are aware they ultimately have no control over her choices, and both narratives reinforce that critical point. While the writing is repetitive in places and the pacing uneven, this book succeeds in creating all the feels with well-developed, believable characters who make readers become invested. The exploration of choices and their consequences is thoughtfully done. Main characters are implied White; Stevie is Jewish.

*An emotionally driven teen drama made more intriguing by its dual timeline.* *(Fiction. 13-18)*

**UNDER A DANCING STAR**

*Wood, Laura*

Random House (320 pp.)

$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Jun. 29, 2021
978-0-593-30957-5
978-0-593-30958-2 PLB

Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* gets a face-lift.

In 1930s England, Beatrice feels like a woman trapped within her own time. Bea is tired of constantly bucking against her stodgy parents’ clumsy attempts to marry her off to the richest suitor available, preferring instead to study the world around her and dream of a life away from the gray grounds of Langton Hall. Bea’s wish is granted when she’s allowed to spend the summer in Italy with her Uncle Leo, who would like her to keep her cousin, Hero, company. In fair Italy she meets Ben, a frustratingly handsome English artist who quickly sweeps Bea off her feet with his witty repartee. The pair agree to a summer fling that will absolutely not end with them falling in love—but any reader familiar with the rhythms of romance can see where this relationship is going. The romance is well drawn, and while some credit must of course be given to the Bard for supplying a timeless structure for the author to twist, shuffle, and build upon, Wood effectively fleshes out the characterization and narrative for contemporary audiences. Bea and Ben are engaging romantic foils, and interwar Europe is an ideal backdrop for their tale. The novel will work for Shakespeare experts and novices alike. Characters follow a White default.

*A riveting cautionary tale.* *(Historical romance. 14-17)*

**IF YOU, THEN ME**

*Woon, Yvonne*

Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins (416 pp.)

$17.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-06-300864-9

Sixteen-year-old Xia Chan’s latest creation, Wiser, is an innovative AI program that earns her a spot at the Foundry, an elite school in Silicon Valley that develops the next generation of technology leaders.

Although Xia is thrilled at the thought of being among teens who share her passion, she quickly discovers that racism and sexism among the Foundry students, called fellows, and in the tech industry at large put her at an unfair disadvantage. Some of the fellows are especially vexing—for example, Benjamin “Mast” Matsuo, a cute AI programmer who’s interested in getting to know Xia better but gets under her skin. Xia can’t help feeling something for Mast but isn’t sure if he’s the right guy for her since she’s also grown close to an anonymous boy she met on a forum for teen programmers who goes by the username ObjectPermanence. Romance is the least of Xia’s worries, though. Between demanding course work and social sabotage by entitled fellows, she’s nearly ready to go home. Then a serendipitous encounter with her idol, Foundry alum Mitzy Erst, changes everything. This page-turner offers a peek into the dark side of Silicon Valley through the eyes of an earnest newcomer and sheds light on issues hidden beneath the glitz of startup culture, including old-boy networks, unsustainable lifestyles, and the lure of promises that are too good to be true. Xia is Chinese American; Mast is half Japanese (the rest of his heritage is not specified).

*A riveting cautionary tale.* *(Fiction. 13-18)*
These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

ATTACHMENTS by Jeff Arch ................................................................. 156

THE CONJURING OF ZOTH-AVAREX by K.R.R. Lockhaven ...... 164

REALITY TESTING by Grant Price .................................................. 167

ART | COMMERCE by Steven J. Riskind ........................................ 169

The Conjurin of Zoth-Avarex
The Self-Proclaimed Greatest Dragon in the Multiverse
Lockhaven, K.R.R.
BookBaby (306 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Apr. 1, 2021
978-1-09-835150-2

This book of spiritual teachings aims to ease readers’ pain and help them find their true selves.

In multiple South Asian religions, samadhi is an ultimate goal—a state of being either at or extremely near full enlightenment; in other words, a total clarity of mind. Simply put, it’s a very big deal, so many readers will find it intriguing when spiritual teacher Aikawa writes that, in 1986, she was the first and only woman ever to achieve samadhi—and it’s no small miracle that Aikawa makes this claim with what feels like near-total humility. That may be because she seems so eager to share her knowledge with as many people as possible; from the moment of her enlightenment, she writes, “I have been committed to spreading the truth to hundreds of thousands of people all over the world.” This book is part of that effort, and in it, readers will find 108 discrete pieces of wisdom, each crafted to deliver a sense of peace, love, and fulfillment in a world that often seems designed to create the opposite of these. Some of her teachings are delightfully worldly; in one, she encourages readers to seek joy and think creatively and likens the creative life to preparing food, which rewards experimentation and daring: “Cooking is exciting: playing with flavors and tastes, trying out different ethnic cuisines... similarly, thinking creatively is joyful and fun.” Other entries are more esoteric, such as one that suggests that “Pure essence loves you profoundly”; it continues with a passage that demands more serious reflection: “To gain access to our True Selves, we must express more gratitude to our True Selves... In so doing, we connect with love and faith to the presence of the sacred source.” To her credit, however, Aikawa delivers both types of instruction with simplicity and grace.

A charming collection of transcendent teachings delivered urgently and elegantly.
CONFESSIONS OF A GAY CURMUDGEON
Ambrose, Andy V.
NineStar Press (301 pp.)
$15.99 paper | $5.99 e-book
Aug. 28, 2019
978-1-951057-34-3

A middle-aged gay New Yorker contends with toxic office politics, a brutal dating scene, and erectile dysfunction in this raucous comedy of manners.

Newly single after the breakup of his 12-year relationship, 50-year-old Manhattanite Viktor finds himself floundering in almost every aspect of life. The bars where he seeks companionship are full of young guys who ignore him—or even demand cash upfront—and he’s not attracted to older men. His friends, meanwhile, are always whining about their own problems. The publishing house where he works as an editor has been bought by a conglomerate whose executives are pursuing their vapid corporate vision statement—“quality product that finds its market”—by putting out minibooks for cellphones. His psychotherapist, Dr. S, is no help, remaining frustratingly silent while Viktor talks about his travails; worse, the doctor’s appearing unbidden in Viktor’s sex fantasies. Each of Viktor’s successes seems to be followed by a humiliating reversal. He hooks up with an attractive guy named Lloyd but gets dumped when he balks at anal sex with the well-endowed man. To get over what he sees as a hang-up, he takes a self-help class called “Get to Know Your Anus,” where he meets randy grad student Casey, but he’s filled with anxiety about his waning potency; a Viagra prescription gloriously rectifies that problem—but then sends Viktor to the emergency room with a case of morbid priapism. Ambrose’s debut novel limns Viktor’s predicament in prose that mixes cheerful lewdness, sardonic humor, and occasional touches of plangent loneliness while also sketching an atmospheric tableau of the club dating scene: “Always that loud, empty thump thump thump bouncing around the empty rooms. It’s a place to slit your wrists, not celebrate life.” Viktor is a compelling antihero, blending grumpiness with neurosis (“Am I just a cheap bastard or is there some underlying deep dark secret about not wanting to tip go-go boys?”), but he’s always aware that he’s distancing himself from everything that matters to him. There’s not much forward motion in his pratfalls, but his struggle to enjoy his journey is captivating.

A bawdy and entertaining view of a gay man’s midlife crisis.

THIRTIES
The Album in Portrait and Prose
Andrews, Jill
Photos by Hubbard, Fairlight
Dexterity (112 pp.)
$25.00 | $9.99 e-book | Mar. 27, 2020
978-1-947297-16-6

This companion work of essays and photographs complements an album.

For folk musicians like Andrews, songwriting is a form of storytelling. But sometimes there’s more to the story than can fit in a song. “It contained thirteen songs about my life, some of the most intimate I’d ever written,” she says of her recent album, Thirties. “As I finished recording it, something about the project felt incomplete: I had more to say, and I wanted to go deeper than a three-minute song could take me.” The volume contains 13 brief personal essays, each corresponding to a song. Together, they paint the portrait of a woman caring for two small children as her connection to her partner comes apart—a repeat, essentially, of her last relationship. She’s anxious about aging, regretful of mistakes, and wonders where it all went wrong. Accompanying the essays are full-color photo shoots presenting Andrews, dressed and made-up immaculately, as an ideal wife and mother. The contrast between Hubbard’s images—their staged positions, the mid-20th-century palette—and the vulnerable, claustrophobic essays highlights the tensions between the life the musician imagined for herself and the one she somehow ended up with. Andrews’ prose contains fleshed-out scenarios and specific details too large, perhaps, for songs. Here, she discusses how her plans to plant a garden with the man she lived with were soon abandoned: “An icy wind picks up. I bend down to get a closer look: the plastic signs from the nursery are sun-bleached and stuck in the places they were first planted. I wonder quietly, How can so much damage be done in a single growing season?” The writing is occasionally facile or sentimental, but that mostly aligns with Andrews’ pop-folk aesthetic. On its own, the book may come across as a strange vanity project, but when read alongside the album—a lushly produced but melancholic meditation on growing older and falling out of love—it works quite well. The elements inform one another, like parallel levels of thought or views of the same object from different distances. It’s a successful experiment, and one wonders if more of these companion volumes might appear with future albums.

A striking album book of glossy photos and confessional essays.
In Arch’s thoughtful novel, the past comes back to haunt three prep school friends.

Stewart “Goody” Goodman, Sandy “Pick” Piccolo, and Laura Appleby were fast friends—and a love triangle—at Pocono Prep in the 1970s. Seconds before a stroke erases his consciousness, their mentor, Dean Henry Griffin, calls out for Pick and Goody, setting everything in motion. (And then there is the Griffins’ adopted son, Chip.) Pick is now a very successful attorney married to Laura. They lost a child, which put extra strain on their shaky marriage. Goody literally fled the school after discovering Pick and Laura in bed, wrote a blockbuster book about the three of them, and then disappeared again. Eventually Goody, now a Zen Buddhist priest, is tracked down. The whole cast is assembled, and it’s clear that this “reveal” is what Dean Griffin desperately wanted in that last moment of consciousness. (Pick’s precocious son says it’s like the last scene in an Agatha Christie novel.) We’ll have to stop here, because any more would spoil a really clever plot. This is Arch’s first novel in a long writing career that began with his breakthrough, the screenplay *Sleepless in Seattle*. The characters are wonderfully drawn. Henry Griffin is the wise father figure that any troubled teen would kill for. Pick is a take-no-prisoners litigator in lifelong rebellion against his mobster father. Goody is a saintly figure but unbelievably believable (you have to be there). How they sort out their relationships with one another after the big reveal is worth the price of admission. These are all good, if flawed and complex, people. The narrative is from several shifting points of view (Laura, Pick, Chip, etc.) and goes back and forth in time between the ’70s and the present—and Arch works it like a maestro.

Fine writing, memorable characters, depth of feeling, and gripping drama—a real keeper.

In his debut memoir, Beck recounts his career as a psychiatrist and reflects on what he sees as the decline of his field in this debut memoir. Beck recounts his career as a psychiatrist and reflects on what he sees as the decline of his field in this debut memoir.

Art museums, galleries, auction houses, and fairs offer a bracing array of media, sensibilities, materials, and visions. They grant visitors tickets to Ai Weiwei’s China, Jacob Lawrence’s America, Georgia O’Keeffe’s New Mexico, and Canaletto’s Venice. Patrons can savor searing works like Picasso’s Guernica or striking paintings like Jasper Johns’ Flag. Kirkus recently reviewed three nonfiction books about the art world.

A Mind in Motion: The Art of Charles H. Forrester mixes essays with photographs of sculptures, drawings, and paintings. The coffee-table book features a biographical sketch and commentary about Forrester’s work, including the abstract sculpture The Voyage and the concrete monolith The Equestrian. Our reviewer calls the volume, edited by the artist’s daughter, Winifred Forrester, “a captivating examination of a creative mind in constant motion.”

In *The Black Market*, Charles Moore delivers a variety of tips on collecting African American art. The author’s credentials include an MBA in finance and a master’s degree in museum studies from Harvard. He discusses Black artists, provides profiles of collectors, and looks at museums, fairs, auctions, and art schools. Moore highlights “economical...methods on which we can educate ourselves in the art world.” According to our critic, this guide is “an essential primer on collecting Black art that expertly blends the passion of an art student with the expertise of an insider.”

Linda Durham’s *Still Moving* relates her experiences running a gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico. According to the author, her gallery “helped launch an innovative contemporary art market in Santa Fe” and “also opened doors of opportunity and recognition for the vital New Mexico art scene through our participation in top-tier international art fairs.” The sweeping memoir explores Durham’s childhood recollections, decision to close her gallery, and extensive travels. “A ranging, rich collage of memory and reflection,” our reviewer writes.

Myra Forsberg is an Indie editor.
Alongside this astute, if excessively granular, account of his professional career, the author chronicles the historical arc of the future of a baby in this picture book. And it kept Burke from speaking up to certain people he knew. In Burke’s debut memoir, he says the things he wishes he could say to people in his past.

Now a senior citizen, Burke looks back on his decades spent as a closeted gay man, keeping his private affairs hidden from his professional life as a journalist and ad writer. That tension was present from a young age, and it kept Burke from speaking up to certain people he knew along the way. The author supplements his narrative with letters to some of these people. There are the predictable figures: parents, former friends, ex-lovers. But there are also letters to more peripheral figures as well, like the group of jocks he briefly hung out with in high school or the disciplinarian nun who served as the school’s principal. There’s a letter to his first boss, a grown man who kissed Burke when he was still a teen, and another to Marie, a girl Burke himself tried to kiss on the first night they met. There are letters to would-be oppressors, like the group of boys who almost beat up Burke and a man while they were on a date or the cops patrolling a cruising boardwalk. Together, they present the interior life of a person who no longer wishes to let things go unsaid. Burke’s conversational prose is often quite moving, as in the very first letter to several classmates he ate lunch with: “You were all really great guys, and I forgive you for the prejudice that a lot of people had then. If we were in school today, would you be tolerant? Most young people are. Let’s go back. I’ll be out as being gay. I bet we’ll still be friends.” The memoir rambles at times, and it gets less urgent once Burke moves into his later years. The reader sometimes wishes the entire book were composed of letters, as they provide an unusual, direct structure. Even so, the work succeeds in charting the shifting position of gay men in America over the last eight decades while also providing the specific story of one man who never got to express himself...until now.

A sprawling, open-hearted memoir of trespasses and reconciliation.

LETTERS OF FORGIVENESS
A Gay Man’s Life
Burke, Vincent
Manuscript

In Burke’s debut memoir, he says the things he wishes he could say to people in his past.

Now a senior citizen, Burke looks back on his decades spent as a closeted gay man, keeping his private affairs hidden from his professional life as a journalist and ad writer. That tension was present from a young age, and it kept Burke from speaking up to certain people he knew along the way. The author supplements his narrative with letters to some of these people. There are the predictable figures: parents, former friends, ex-lovers. But there are also letters to more peripheral figures as well, like the group of jocks he briefly hung out with in high school or the disciplinarian nun who served as the school’s principal. There’s a letter to his first boss, a grown man who kissed Burke when he was still a teen, and another to Marie, a girl Burke himself tried to kiss on the first night they met. There are letters to would-be oppressors, like the group of boys who almost beat up Burke and a man while they were on a date or the cops patrolling a cruising boardwalk. Together, they present the interior life of a person who no longer wishes to let things go unsaid. Burke’s conversational prose is often quite moving, as in the very first letter to several classmates he ate lunch with: “You were all really great guys, and I forgive you for the prejudice that a lot of people had then. If we were in school today, would you be tolerant? Most young people are. Let’s go back. I’ll be out as being gay. I bet we’ll still be friends.” The memoir rambles at times, and it gets less urgent once Burke moves into his later years. The reader sometimes wishes the entire book were composed of letters, as they provide an unusual, direct structure. Even so, the work succeeds in charting the shifting position of gay men in America over the last eight decades while also providing the specific story of one man who never got to express himself...until now.

A sprawling, open-hearted memoir of trespasses and reconciliation.
 WHEN SNOW WALKS IN Poems
Candland, Christine
iUniverse (114 pp.)
Oct. 23, 2020
978-1-66320-176-8
978-1-66320-174-4 paper

A collection of poetry celebrates the awe of everyday moments.

Candland’s book takes quotidian moments and turns them into poetry, from enjoying the blissful hours of quiet before daybreak to knitting with an older neighbor and running an errand in the days when potato chips cost a mere 15 cents. The author recalls a mother and daughter selling candy bars on the subway and how an aunt embroidered her whole life. Candland composes poems honoring legends like Green Man and Lady Godiva. In a piece about Paris, she describes wandering around the City of Light: “Over-washed chalcedony sky / canaries yellow in tender cages / under market tents, / trade songs with one another.” She explores “vermilion rooms” in Edinburgh’s National Gallery and admires Botticelli’s Simonetta Vespucci, asking the subject, “Are the whispers true that you were in love?” “Summer’s Lament” depicts a mother’s raising from “Chaotic” to “Strategic.” Chait and Stross use lively, appropriately detailed descriptions to effectively contrast what operations look like at each point in this curve; “Chaotic,” for instance is defined as “the Wild West, or a free-for-all,” in which “hiring painfully gets done when circumstances force the issue.”

The Hiring Maturity Curve is particularly intriguing because it identifies HR practices on a spectrum that ranges from “Chaotic” to “Strategic.” Chait and Stross introduce their company’s “Structured Hiring Framework,” which contains observations based on the authors’ experiences with scores of organizations. In addition, Chait and Stross include insights by senior HR experts that validate the book’s emphasis on involving leaders at every level in the process. In Part 1, they introduce their company’s “Structured Hiring Framework,” which references concepts that are explained in further detail later in the book, including “Employee Lifetime Value,” the “Hiring Maturity Curve,” and “The Four Competencies,” which include “Finding talent,” “Hiring experience,” “Decision making,” and “Operational excellence.”

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“Hiring is the mother of all variables,” write Chait and Stross in a candid debut that’s directed not at HR managers but at business leaders who “must become the Talent Maker and catalyst for [their] team.” Their fervent belief that senior executives need to be more engaged in the staffing process, rather than simply delegate it to human resources, is the cornerstone of their approach, which aims to help readers to identify, attract, and retain the best talent. This message is conveyed in a tightly organized work comprised of three logical parts: Part 1 walks the reader through the reasons why a “structured approach to hiring” makes sense (“The ‘Why’ ”); Part 2 addresses four specific hiring competencies (“The ‘What’ ”); and Part 3 lays out the tactics for becoming a “Talent Maker” (“The ‘How’ ”). Each section contains observations based on the authors’ experiences with scores of organizations. In addition, Chait and Stross include insights by senior HR experts that validate the book’s emphasis on involving leaders at every level in the process. In Part 1, the authors introduce their company’s “Structured Hiring Framework,” which references concepts that are explained in further detail later in the book, including “Employee Lifetime Value,” the “Hiring Maturity Curve,” and “The Four Competencies,” which include “Finding talent,” “Hiring experience,” “Decision making,” and “Operational excellence.”

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Evocative poems that feel familiar but not mundane.

Talent Makers
How the Best Organizations Win Through Structured and Inclusive Hiring
Chait, Daniel & Stross, Jon
Wiley (272 pp.)
$28.00 | $17.00 e-book | Apr. 20, 2021
978-1-119-78527-9

The co-founders of human resources software firm Greenhouse Software make a strong case for systematizing talent acquisition.
A nurse practitioner and experienced writer offers a collection of poems. Davis opens her volume of free-verse poetry with scenes of her nursing life: She stabs oranges with needles, washes urine from skin, and views an autopsy. Her observations reveal patients at their most vulnerable moments: a 16-year-old girl and her mother arguing about whether or not the teen will terminate her pregnancy; a 12-year-old rape survivor asking if she is still a virgin. The poet shows readers the most horrific cases of an intensive care unit: an abused baby, a boy hit by a car, a drowned child. She also delves into her own family, describing her mother’s funeral in one poem and her father’s death in another. In “March 28, 2001 / March 28, 1945,” the poet imagines how her mother felt, 56 years earlier, when she was pregnant with her while Davis’ father swept land mines in Italy. In “Becoming the Patient,” the poet’s professional and personal worlds collide as she confronts “the haze of could-die / could-get-better” during an epic hospital stay. Davis’ visceral language will seer into readers’ brains and evoke images more vivid than a medical documentary. She describes patients’ “crescendo of moans like sweet violins,” how a woman’s legs “jut out ever remembering the internal source of their own happiness. Grouping his meditations around such broad categories as “Purpose,” “Love,” and “Truth” and deploying stories, quotations, and scriptural reflections, the author explores many aspects of personal redemption, returning often to the buoyant point that seekers have to find their inner contentment, as he did. “After an entire lifetime of looking ‘out there’ for God, Truth, Love, Happiness and Knowledge,” he writes, “I now know that all of the most elusive, sought-after answers to life already lie within me—and they always have.” This principle of self-sufficiency—and the tone of optimism with which DeVincck presents it on every page—will strike just the right note with readers who are searching for inner knowledge.

A young woman falls into drugs and alcohol, leaves her loving parents and sister, and only returns after she’s hit rock bottom, had a baby girl, and entered a sobriety program. Her parents exultantly take her back home. It’s a tale with which the author can identify because, he tells readers, he fought an addiction to alcohol and has been sober for 10 years. In these pages, he seeks to explain a Christianity-infused personal philosophy of redemption. He urges his readers to consider that they’re born pure: “In the same way that one particular child, born beneath a star in Bethlehem, brought into this world Peace, Joy, Love and Light, so too does every child born possess these same gifts within themselves.” In order to locate the essential happiness that will see them through their darkest hours, DeVincck wants his readers to “visit the happiness” that lives inside them. Many people go through life looking for the next new thing, the next external prompt for their own joy, he observes, without ever remembering the internal source of their own happiness.

A spiritual memoir chronicles addiction, despair, and recovery. This latest book from DeVincck opens with an affecting modern-day twist on the scriptural story of the prodigal son. A young woman falls into drugs and alcohol, leaves her loving parents and sister, and only returns after she’s hit rock bottom, had a baby girl, and entered a sobriety program. Her parents exultantly take her back home. It’s a tale with which the author can identify because, he tells readers, he fought an addiction to alcohol and has been sober for 10 years. In these pages, he seeks to explain a Christianity-infused personal philosophy of redemption. He urges his readers to consider that they’re born pure: “In the same way that one particular child, born beneath a star in Bethlehem, brought into this world Peace, Joy, Love and Light, so too does every child born possess these same gifts within themselves.” In order to locate the essential happiness that will see them through their darkest hours, DeVincck wants his readers to “visit the happiness” that lives inside them. Many people go through life looking for the next new thing, the next external prompt for their own joy, he observes, without ever remembering the internal source of their own happiness. Grouping his meditations around such broad categories as “Purpose,” “Love,” and “Truth” and deploying stories, quotations, and scriptural reflections, the author explores many aspects of personal redemption, returning often to the buoyant point that seekers have to find their inner contentment, as he did. “After an entire lifetime of looking ‘out there’ for God, Truth, Love, Happiness and Knowledge,” he writes, “I now know that all of the most elusive, sought-after answers to life already lie within me—and they always have.” This principle of self-sufficiency—and the tone of optimism with which DeVincck presents it on every page—will strike just the right note with readers who are searching for inner knowledge.

A vigorous and uplifting call to look inward for support and happiness.
child, setting his bed afire and stabbing the family dog. With Vern's health in decline, the stress of caring for Stanislaus forced the couple to reassess their marriage. The author strives to understand her husband's inner struggles and, in doing so, unpacks some startling "sealed memories." Fairley's memoir is part mystery, leaving the author (and the audience) to guess at Vern's true motives for taking in Stanislaus. Fairley's slow reveal makes for absorbing reading. Throughout the volume, she maps her shifting emotions with a candid clarity: "I felt myself slump. In that moment, I realized another reason I had resisted Stan's presence so fiercely: time was a commodity in my relationship with Vern." The author has an occasional tendency to share extraneous information. Describing their dog, Chippie, she notes: "He'd developed a severe anal sac problem and would scoot along the floor, leaving oily anal juice on everything." Fairley's scrupulous attention to detail is put to better use when capturing the ambience of small-town Ohio: "I loved the screened-in porch, the way it overlooked the old footbridge with the cast-iron street lamp....The old furnace pumped out heat that smelled of kerosene in the winter." At its best, the author's writing is evocative, and her story is both unique and intriguing. Despite the sporadic digressions, this is a book that many readers will find difficult to put down.

A captivating family account that delivers compelling, acutely observant writing.

TenEBRae
A Memoir of Love and Death
Flanigan, Dan
Arjuna Books (76 pp.)
$8.99 paper | $0.99 e-book
Feb. 26, 2019
978-1-73361-032-2

A writer grieves the loss of his wife to an aggressive form of cancer in this collection of poetry.

In a concise introduction, Flanigan connects this noteworthy volume's title to the first 15 poems, each of which features a candle printed above it that would be lit at the beginning of each offering. The first offering, "Sonora," is an impressive work that establishes the author's "Nana" was the best he could have asked for in the face of uneven parenting. Flanigan's "Strepitus: Like a Fallen Empire," presents a rhyming pattern and a heart-wrenching finality: "Yes, may we take solace in the certainty of our defeat, / We gave it almost all that it was due, / We were braver than we knew." The remaining 10 pieces include visions of older relatives and a poignant moment shared by father and daughter. One of the standouts here is a moving tribute to Flanigan's grandmother, "The Irish in America: Annie D." Despite all of the challenges she confronted, the author's "Nana" was the best he could have asked for in the face of uneven parenting.

A writer grieves the loss of his wife to an aggressive form of cancer in this collection of poetry.

In a concise introduction, Flanigan connects this noteworthy volume's title to the first 15 poems, each of which features a candle printed above it that would be extinguished one by one during the traditional ceremony. He explains: "The structure, mood, and dramatic progression of this ancient ritual seemed to perfectly suit my mournful purpose." The first offering, "Sonora," is an impressive work that creatively paints a vivid desert landscape: "Roadrunners like wicked witches arrogantly prancing." It also sets the stage for what is to follow. With the benefit of hindsight, the author realizes that this memory from the couple's early days suggests a youthful disregard for mortality. Upon closer inspection, danger lurks beneath the surface, represented by a hawk stalking desert creatures: "Stopping every few yards and glancing sharply to the sky / From which Death swoops down and strikes low. / We did not know then what we do know now— / You are, you become, then are no more." Most of the poems feature free verse while three longer works appear as prose poems and deftly use the second person as Flanigan directly addresses his wife. With a journallike feel, these denser texts present a timeline as readers learn the details of his wife's battles with chronic lymphocytic leukemia. In addition to self-recrimination, the author makes the physical and emotional tolls of the disease palpable, recounting her decline, her last words, and her death. Curiously, one of these longer works, "A Trip to the Underworld," breaks out of the prose format and ends with a traditional rhyme scheme. Similarly, the 15th poem, "Strepitus: Like a Fallen Empire," presents a rhyming pattern and a heart-wrenching finality: "Yes, may we take solace in the certainty of our defeat, / We gave it almost all that it was due, / We were braver than we knew." The remaining 10 pieces include visions of older relatives and a poignant moment shared by father and daughter. One of the standouts here is a moving tribute to Flanigan's grandmother, "The Irish in America: Annie D." Despite all of the challenges she confronted, the author's "Nana" was the best he could have asked for in the face of uneven parenting.

Sharp writing and keen imagery underscore poetic themes of love and loss, memory and regret.

A strategic business consultant discusses how to shift corporate culture, with an emphasis on improving performance.

Early in this excellent debut guide, Freedman cites research showing that "70 percent of the American workforce is disengaged at work" and that "70 percent of business transformation and change initiatives fail to deliver the intended results." These two rather extraordinary conditions compellingly demonstrate why it is so tough for businesses to achieve high performance. In response, the author has neatly turned lessons learned from his consulting practice into a "blueprint" for dramatic improvement. As with many business books, this one has the requisite attributes: a systematized approach, appropriate case studies ("Case in Action"), specific tools ("THRIVE Accelerators"), and interactive exercises ("THRIVE Reflection"). The manual is packed with actionable strategic advice in two sections comprised of seven compact chapters. The first part of this well-constructed book is more general, covering what it takes for leaders to move their organizations into high-performance modes, while the second part lays out specific steps for building such a company. Anchoring the content is the "Exemplary Performance System," a nifty framework the author's firm uses to guide its clients in understanding six “influences” that underpin high-performance cultures. Several of the concepts in the guide are refreshing and perhaps even unconventional. One striking example is the
“Hoffman channels the Doctor Who franchise in this sweetly madcap escapade.”

THE TRANSLUCENT BOY AND THE GIRL WHO SAW HIM

Halesworth gives an absorbing account of this contentious episode, complete with intriguing characters and a classic shareholder-meeting showdown where wily lawyer James Chang turned the tables on the Yin Group’s complacent board. The author sets it against a cogent analysis of the difficulties of the vaccine business—Sinovac’s SARS vaccine suddenly lost its potential market when that pandemic fizzled in 2005—and of the traps awaiting Americans who invest in China. He contends that opaque Chinese companies are listed on American stock exchanges but are beyond the reach of United States regulators. Halesworth elaborates this critique in prose that’s lucid and lively. (“After going private, they would often do a new stock offering in China for a new stock listing to trade at three to five times the price paid to buy out shareholders in the United States. These were not your father’s Chinese Communists.”) But he does have a stake in the proceedings, and it shows. He did not favor the Yin Group’s “lowball squeeze out,” and he reprints part of an open letter questioning the accounting and ethics of Sinovac’s buyout proposal. The book contains much scolding and lobbying of company management, including suggestions for reconfiguring the board and hiring a PR firm, along with calls for both sides to withdraw the lawsuits so that Sinovac investors can better profit from the bull market in biotech and vaccines. Readers and investors will find rich food for thought from Halesworth’s take on the Sinovac wrangles, but they should keep in mind that he’s not a neutral observer.

A one-sided but engrossing insider’s view of corporate scheming behind the vaccine triumphs.

CONQUERING COVID

Sinovac: An Unlikely Hero

Halesworth, Peter
Self (117 pp.)
Feb. 1, 2021
979-8-70-609378-5

Tumultuous battles among shareholders and management have roiled the Chinese company that makes a leading Covid-19 vaccine, according to this business book.

Halesworth recapts the history and fortunes of Sinovac, a Beijing biopharmaceutical firm and maker of the CoronaVac vaccine, from a deeply informed but materially interested perspective. He’s the founder and portfolio manager of Heng Ren Partners, a Boston hedge fund that owns Sinovac stock. He starts with an upbeat but sketchy rundown of CoronaVac’s success as an easy-to-store vaccine, with hundreds of millions of doses sold to developing countries despite its mediocre performance. (Studies put its efficacy in preventing mild and severe infections at 50.4% in Brazil.) The author soon turns from science to the book’s focus: disputes between Sinovac’s management and some of its investors over company governance and stock buyouts. The main issue was a 2016 Sinovac buyout proposal that offered investors $6.18 per share, a figure that Halesworth argues was far too low for the company’s true valuation. He further claims that Sinovac persistently played down the company’s prospects in order to keep the share price and the buyout cost low. The thorny situation became a rivalry between chairman and CEO Weidong Yin and his former partner Aihua Pan, leader of a dissident investors’ group that presented a competing buyout bid of $7 (later $8) per share. In Halesworth’s telling, the Pan Group won majority support in a shareholders’ vote, but when the Yin Group clung to power and issued new shares to friendly investors, things turned nasty. According to Sinovac, Pan Group minions tried to occupy the firm’s Beijing facilities and the police got involved. The struggle then proceeded down a labyrinth of lawsuits.

NOTION OF WORKING “RIGHT TO LEFT.” Here, Freedman observes that high-performing leaders first strategically define organizational outcomes that employee roles need to produce. This is the reverse of the typical approach, in which leaders design a role and define its tasks in isolation. If there is a downside, it is the harsh truth that sweeping change is not easy for a leader to implement and manage across an entire organization. The case studies woven throughout the chapters are particularly apropos in this regard because they focus on specific challenges and present real solutions. In one instance, an organization instituted a simple yet powerful set of routines to enhance high performance. Freedman’s firm facilitated the process, so this and other case studies in the book (written with Elliott) cleverly act to promote the practice’s consulting services.

Valuable high-level thinking about high performance in business.
“dimensional shifting,” which takes them to the bucolic world of Pacalia. So begins their whirlwind journey of self-discovery, facing off against pirates, magicians, and the hive-minded Atroxians. Hoffman channels the Doctor Who franchise in this sweetly madcap escapade. While avoiding teen tropes such as love triangles, the plot rewards attentive readers with clever details, like the toy “six-wheeled sailing truck” from Odo’s childhood that’s modeled after a vessel he and Sephie will eventually ride in. The author also teaches his audience lessons, everything from Latin phrases (“aperi oculos tuos et vide”; “open your eyes and see”) to biology (“The amygdala is the part of your brain responsible for fear”). Dramatically revealed secrets regarding Sephie and other characters add spice to the story. Many of the otherworldly capers feel like packing paper surrounding the treasure of philosophical lines like “Most creatures are controlled by their fears, not by reality.” One beautiful moment has Odo realize that “the universe is a magic show and we’re all trying to figure out how the tricks are done.” Hoffman’s overall message that weird things are precious is well emphasized.

A big heart beats within this conceptually chaotic romp.

**FREEDOMLAND**

**Jackson, Christopher**

Manuscript (324 pp.)

Some right-wing malcontents get in over their heads with an ocean-based secessionist movement in this debut comic novel.

North Carolina mechanic and Civil War reenactor Gage Randolph, recently unemployed, has just been paid to dig up Stonewall Jackson’s arm for a wealthy collector. Gage has the arm beside him in his Ford Bronco when he’s involved in a three-car accident. One of the other vehicles contains progressive TV host Monica Bell, who—right at the moment of impact—is conducting a call-in debate on right-winger Bill Spark’s internet radio show. The third car is piloted by Jacob Kelley, the so-called Unacrapper, on the run from the law facing off against pirates, magicians, and the hive-minded Atroxians. Hoffman channels the Doctor Who franchise in this sweetly madcap escapade. While avoiding teen tropes such as love triangles, the plot rewards attentive readers with clever details, like the toy “six-wheeled sailing truck” from Odo’s childhood that’s modeled after a vessel he and Sephie will eventually ride in. The author also teaches his audience lessons, everything from Latin phrases (“aperi oculos tuos et vide”; “open your eyes and see”) to biology (“The amygdala is the part of your brain responsible for fear”). Dramatically revealed secrets regarding Sephie and other characters add spice to the story. Many of the otherworldly capers feel like packing paper surrounding the treasure of philosophical lines like “Most creatures are controlled by their fears, not by reality.” One beautiful moment has Odo realize that “the universe is a magic show and we’re all trying to figure out how the tricks are done.” Hoffman’s overall message that weird things are precious is well emphasized.

A big heart beats within this conceptually chaotic romp.

**FABLE**

**James, Daniel**

Self (264 pp.)

Feb. 20, 2021 979-8-71-192925-3

In this fantasy, a teen’s attempts to pull his life together become complicated by the return of his supposedly imaginary—and murderous—childhood friend.

Neil Karp is a senior at Hawthorne High in Birch Creek, Michigan. After his father undergoes treatment for lung cancer, Neil decides to quit smoking. This worries his pot-loving friends Matt and Sam, especially the latter, who’s committed to the stoner life of driving a van and all but abandoned school for video games. When Sam buys a round of drugs from a nightclub dealer rather than local bully Russel “Shit Storm” Staubach, life becomes hellish for Neil and his friends. Staubach sells drugs from stock provided by 19-year-old Jason Noakes, whose family runs Birch Creek’s gangs. During a confrontation, Neil defends Sam by pushing Staubach against Noakes’ Pontiac Firebird Trans Am. Neil and company narrowly escape in the van and now must watch their backs for retaliation. The best part of Neil’s life is Lindsey McGuire, a cute violinist he’s finally found the courage to talk to. As he continues the high-wire act of dodging Noakes and courting Lindsey, Neil notices a strange presence on the periphery of his life. At a skate park one evening, he sees a dancing shape on a nearby rooftop. This is Frogmore, a tweed coat–wearing, talking frog whom Neil knew five years ago. Frogmore appeared when bullies attacked Neil at Rawlins Pond. The ostensibly imaginary friend killed the bullies, prompting Neil to take medication to heal from the trauma. Now Frogmore is back, just when Neil and his friends need protection.

James offers a fun, psychedelic thriller that’s steeped in classic rock and teen melodrama and styled after Stephen King’s *Christine* and *Carrie*. Fans may be surprised the story is set in the present. Many genuine, grounded moments revolve around 1980s cultural touchstones, as when Lindsey plays Van Halen’s “ Ain’t Talking ’Bout Love” for Neil on her violin. The novel’s antagonists toss homophobic slurs around readily—making them retro and repulsive. James rounds out most of the cast well enough for the audience to worry when Frogmore starts killing people. Sam becomes exceptionally real to readers when he admits that he smokes because “I can’t turn my
“The novel deftly shows how thoughtfulness and deliberation are as important in navigating extreme situations as courage or bold action.”

**ENCOUNTER AT JUPITER**

**WINE DARK DEEP: BOOK TWO**

Keith, R. Peter

Uphill Downhill Press (209 pp.)


978-1-73510-952-7

A spaceship crew encounters a strange object near Jupiter in this SF sequel.

Several months ago, Cmdr. Calvin Scott of the spaceship *Ulysses* averted disaster on Ceres by outwitting would-be rebels who refused to refuel his vessel. He and his crew, consisting of Paul Arthur, engineer; pilot Sarah Samuels; Inez, the comm/IT specialist; Xu Zuoren, science officer; and medical officer Susan (nicknamed Doc), are now back on course toward Jupiter and their long-planned exploration mission. When a binary asteroid in the debris field surrounding Jupiter breaks apart, one object, the usual rock/ice asteroid, disintegrates, but the smaller and much brighter second chunk survives. It’s head straight toward the *Ulysses*, and it’s accelerating. In the 10 days before it reaches them, Cal and his crew attempt to learn more about the object (Probe? Weapon? Alien life form or infection?), assess the possible danger, and come up with contingency plans. When the moonlet does arrive, it latches gently onto the *Ulysses* and infiltrates it with fractal, red-black tendrils that branch out and grow, taking over the ship yet causing little damage. Eventually the filaments begin redesigning themselves, embedding large structures in and around the *Ulysses* that have an enigmatic purpose and oddly compelling elegance. After finding a mathematics-based common frame of reference, the crew begins communicating with the weed when a new and terrifying development occurs. The alien entity takes the ship on a deorbit burn, seemingly dooming the crew—but the weed’s modifications to the *Ulysses* make possible an incredible journey downward through the gas giant’s surrounding turbulent maelstrom of magnetic fields, gravitational waves, diamond showers, and simmering gases, and more. What the explorers see when they reach orbit again is nothing they could have expected.

Keith, creative director of a company that partners with NASA to design space-flight simulation exhibits, brings a well-informed imagination to this second volume of the Wine Dark Deep trilogy. The first book focused on Cal and his clever resourcefulness in getting out of a jam; in this outing, he also shows his leadership and good working relationship with the crew. Although their characterization remains hastily sketched, Cal’s shipmates now have more of a chance to display their mettle. As they do so, the novel deftly shows how thoughtfulness and deliberation are as important in navigating extreme situations as courage or bold action. The weed’s unknown intentions give the characters a compelling mystery to figure out.

**THE TROUBLE WITH COWBOYS**

Keith, R. Peter

HarperCollins (2019)


978-0-06285-824-4

A sweet installment in a heartfelt romance series.

**WISHING FOR A COWBOY**

James, Victoria

Entangled: Amara (364 pp.)


978-1-68281-567-0

A rancher bonds with his long-lost son and the teen’s guardian in this contemporary romance.

On a snowy night, Chicago veterinary student Janie Adams drives into Wishing River, Montana, on a mission: find local bar owner Aiden Rivers and introduce him to the boy who is most likely his 15-year-old son. Janie’s not the mother—that would be her spoiled older sister, Maxi. Maxi left baby Will in her sister’s care when Janie was just 18 years old. Janie is now grappling with serious debt and hoping an introduction to the son he never knew he had will prompt Aiden to help provide for Will. Aiden is shocked: He hasn’t thought about Maxi since their brief fling left him with a scar from her then-boyfriend. Aiden had no idea Will existed—or his stubborn, beautiful guardian. Aiden connects with both Will and Janie, introducing them to the joys of Wishing River, the horses the bar owner is rescuing on his own ranch, and his vibrant group of friends. Janie, a devoted mother to Will since she was barely out of high school, finds work at a local veterinary clinic and, eventually, comfort in Janie’s and Aiden’s points of view as the two bond over their love of animals and Will, a thoughtful and realistically written teenage character. The author deftly depicts Aiden wrestling with the idea of fatherhood in light of his own sad childhood with an abusive dad who quashed his son’s teenage dreams of studying veterinary medicine. The Montana town of
Mercy loses her job over a grave error that was unmistakably hers. Perhaps the story’s strongest section is the astonishing, vividly described trip down through Jupiter’s atmosphere: “The cerulean shades of the whipping atmosphere grew dark, mottled by turbinations of slate gray and streaks of obsidian. Another vibration hit. A shower of diamond ricochets washed over the ship, punctuated by a burst of lightning...Ahead of them clouds thickened, flowing like streamers of heavy cream.”

A tense shipboard mystery that builds to an absolutely thrilling tour-de-force finish.

YOU MIGHT FEEL A LITTLE PRICK
Leder, Reuben
FriesenPress (393 pp.)
$22.99 | 14.99 paper | Apr. 16, 2021
978-1-5255-7308-8
978-1-5255-7309-5 paper

Mysterious deaths and disappearances beset an Ohio hospital in Leder’s darkly humorous debut novel.

On Christmas Eve, a surgeon drops from a balcony at Cleveland Mercy Hospital. No one immediately reports anything; a blizzard covers the man’s body. But a missing person case becomes a homicide months later when melted snow exposes an apparent murder. But who would want to kill the surgeon? He’d just performed a spinal fusion on former baseball star Nick Glass. It was decidedly unpleasant for Nick, particularly since he doesn’t recall signing the form allowing a TV news crew to film the procedure. Around the deli where she works. This complicates her relationship with her boss’s fault. Readers know that the couple has some link to the surgeon’s fatal plummet. This death furthermore ignites a series of startling events, from attempted blackmail to possible insurance fraud. Nearly retired Lt. Artemas Sikorski begins investigating a single homicide, which may soon spin off to a horde of zombies whom Draven and Coach Hale, Harley’s Krav Maga instructor, handily destroy. It turns out that Draven is a 500-year-old demon-fighting Judge, and Coach Hale is actually Anka, a good demon; the attackers were minions of “greater demon” Marid, and they were hunting Harley because she’s “the Key” that can release Marid from hell. Harley develops the ability to shoot flames from her fingers and gets a magic tattoo that temporarily shields her from Marid’s demons—although snake demons, alligator demons, terrierlike demons, and hypnosis demons continue to plague her. They have seven days—plenty of time for Harley to make out with Draven, but if he touches her for too long he could drain her of life. Over the course of this fantasy novel, Lee manages to work creatively from the familiar Buffy the Vampire Slayer template: an angst-y teen with the weight of the world on her shoulders battling a monster menagerie while navigating a relationship with a broody, dangerous boyfriend. Her prose is sharp and evocative whether the peril that Harley is facing is domestic (in the case of her father) or demonic (“One demon leaps and lands atop me, wrestling me to the ground with the weight of a fucking truck. Jesus, what do they feed these things? Bricks?”). The result is a lively, imaginative love story with plenty of hellish energy.

An entertaining fable with supernatural combat enriched with intricate psychology and passion.

EMBER OF NIGHT
Lee, Molly E.
Entangled: Teen (400 pp.)
978-1-64937-031-0

A teenage girl joins forces with a divine being to fight the forces of hell in Lee’s cosmic fantasy YA romance.

Seventeen-year-old Chicagoan Harley Ward has an abusive, alcoholic father, and she has a plan to rent an apartment for herself and her 7-year-old sister when she turns 18. She usually has a firm grip on her emotions, but this changes when she meets Draven, an attractive guy with amber eyes, chiseled muscles, and a mischievous smirk, at a club; he later gets a job at the deli where she works. This complicates her relationship with her best friend, a nice boy named Kai. Things get more complicated when Harley is attacked by ghoulish men and a hedgehog of zombies whom Draven and Coach Hale, Harley’s Krav Maga instructor, handily destroy. It turns out that Draven is a 500-year-old demon-fighting Judge, and Coach Hale is actually Anka, a good demon; the attackers were minions of “greater demon” Marid, and they were hunting Harley because she’s “the Key” that can release Marid from hell. Harley develops the ability to shoot flames from her fingers and gets a magic tattoo that temporarily shields her from Marid’s demons—although snake demons, alligator demons, terrierlike demons, and hypnosis demons continue to plague her. They have seven days—plenty of time for Harley to make out with Draven, but if he touches her for too long he could drain her of life. Over the course of this fantasy novel, Lee manages to work creatively from the familiar Buffy the Vampire Slayer template: an angst-y teen with the weight of the world on her shoulders battling a monster menagerie while navigating a relationship with a broody, dangerous boyfriend. Her prose is sharp and evocative whether the peril that Harley is facing is domestic (in the case of her father) or demonic (“One demon leaps and lands atop me, wrestling me to the ground with the weight of a fucking truck. Jesus, what do they feed these things? Bricks?”). The result is a lively, imaginative love story with plenty of hellish energy.

An entertaining fable with supernatural combat enriched with intricate psychology and passion.

THE CONJURING OF ZOTH-AVAREX
Lockhaven, K.R.R.
BookBaby (306 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Apr. 1, 2021
978-1-09-835150-2

A fantasy novel in which a grandiose dragon declares his independence.
In this rambunctious debut, Lockhaven imagines a secret sorcery instruction institute that’s far different from Hogwarts, although it does feature avian messengers and quirky field sports. The Site, on the West Coast of the United States, was first opened in 1943 and has been dedicated ever since to harnessing magic for the good of the school, the country, and humanity—very much in that order. It has three new hires, in an echo of the main trio of the Potterverse: Harris Reed, Silvia Flores, and Patrick Nash are all conjurers, and during their orientation, they, and readers, are introduced to the Site’s spacious campus with its Conjuring Department, Prophecy Department, Realm Travel Department, and so on. They have arrived at the Site at a very auspicious moment—one that has been no less than 37 years in the making: Under the careful direction of the Conjuring Department, the Site is ready to whip up a dragon—one that they’re confident will be bound to their will and obediently help American interests. However, once the great dragon Zoth-Avarex appears, it’s clear that he has other ideas: He easily casts aside the bonds of the Site’s magic, snatch up Silvia as his princess-captive, and flies off over the landscape (“if he really concentrated, he could almost hear the screams of the people below. It was just like old times”). He takes Silvia to the top of Seattle’s Space Needle and there makes a den, where he waits for a gold tribute from all the nations of the world. Before long, the creature becomes a worldwide media star.

Lockhaven impressively controls all of this fun from the very first page, offering an endless array of allusions to canonical fantasy literature as well as quite a few snide asides, such as a sign tacked up in one of the Site’s labs: “Absolutely No Conjuring of Sparkly Vampires.” There are references to Star Wars (“I made the Kessel run in less than eleven parsecs”) and J.R.R. Tolkien and a moment when a magician offers Zoth-Avarex a dragon-rider specially trained on Pern, evoking a scornful response: “I’m not a horse, I’m a super-intelligent force of nature. I made your Einstein look like a preschooler the day I cracked out of my egg.” The exaggerated reputation of the Site (“this was the pinnacle of human civilization”) is perfectly played against its officials’ officious incompetence, and although Zoth-Avarex shares the typical charisma of folkloric dragons, he’s much funnier and more media-savvy; indeed, he’s easily the best character in the book. The human drama involving Harris and Silvia and the hapless Site administrators is conveyed with heart and empathy; but it pales in comparison to the conjured creature’s endless stream of quips and insights. The author keeps the plot really concentrated, he could almost hear the screams of the people below. It was just like old times”). He takes Silvia to the top of Seattle’s Space Needle and there makes a den, where he waits for a gold tribute from all the nations of the world. Before long, the creature becomes a worldwide media star.

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An insecure cactus learns to love the spines that make her different in this picture book.

Libby, a cactus, lives on a windowsill in Abigail’s kitchen. Libby is jealous of the flowers in Abigail’s garden, with their soft leaves and colorful blossoms. When Abigail gets another kitchen plant, an African violet, Libby feels less confident than ever, especially after the newcomer’s unkind words. When Abigail’s cat, Prea, eats some of Violet’s blossoms, the plant is understandably upset. By the time Violet’s blossoms return, Libby has grown a lovely flower, too. And when Prea tries to take a bite of Libby’s bloom, her spines save the day—and Violet praises the cactus’s powerful defense feature. Veteran author Macaulay and debut children’s book writer Risk use a straightforward style, with British spellings (colourful) and vocabulary (parcel) that may give young American readers pause. The bright illustrations provide plenty of context for figuring out unfamiliar terms. The pronunciation for Lobivia Jajoiana (“Low-BIV-ee-uh Jah-joe-AHN-nuh”), Libby’s cactus species, is helpfully provided in the dialogue. Bagshaw’s highly textured digital art mixes realistic details—in the backgrounds and the depictions of Prea and Abigail, who appears to be White—with cartoonish faces on the plants. This technique effectively offers readers a connection to the protagonist (while never making the feline’s flower-eating too scary). The moral of valuing your differences—even when others initially judge you because of them—comes through clearly.

An engaging, beautifully illustrated tale of believing in yourself told from the perspective of a cactus.
wanted to start her own business, and she “wanted to help entrepreneurs build successful businesses that provide opportunities for others.” In a sentiment reflected by others she’s interviewed, she says that she wanted to strengthen her family legacy, so she founded her own accounting firm. She paints a vivid picture of the hardscrabble early days of other minority business owners like herself, the child of an African American mother and a Chinese father who also had a family accounting business. She and others were “all hustling to acquire clients and build our businesses…and most of us had absolutely nothing to show for it.” She was inspired by Mike Michalowicz’s Profit First money management system, and the bulk of her book is devoted to an explanation of how to make this system work for minority business enterprises. (Michalowicz provides a foreword to the book.) One of the primary goals of Profit First is to build “a self-sustaining, debt-free company,” so a large part of Mariga’s work deals with the details of managing finances, building and abiding by budgets, and handling the swings of emotion that occur every step of the way. As sharply focused as these insights are, the author’s recollections of her own experiences are more rewarding, as when she tells readers of her brief time as a cut-rate accountant and learning that it was a mistake to try to compete on price. These stories, as well as financing specifics and clear encouragements (“Small changes and adjustments accumulate. Over time, they will lead you to your goal”), will make this book invaluable to entrepreneurs of all kinds.

A vigorous and highly readable plan for building the finances of a new business.

**CYBERJUTSU**

*Cybersecurity for the Modern Ninja*

McCarty, Ben

No Starch Press (264 pp.)

$29.95 paper | Apr. 27, 2021

978-1-71850-054-9

McCarty draws from the techniques of feudal Japan’s ninja warriors in order to develop a complete cybersecurity plan.

The debut author, who once worked as a developer for the National Security Agency and was among the first class of Cyber Warfare Specialists to serve in the Army Network Warfare Battalion, observes that tight cybersecurity has never been more necessary or more difficult, as security specialists and their criminal counterparts are both constantly innovating—locked in what Accenture security research and development lead Malek Ben Salem, in a foreword, calls a “cyber arms race.” McCarty’s approach to the issue is as novel as it is illuminating, as it looks deep into the past. Deeply impressed by “ninja scrolls” written in the 17th century, which were essentially tactical manuals for espionage, he decided that the basic philosophy contained within them could be converted into a “practical cybersecurity field guide.” After more research, he concluded that ninja techniques were “essentially on-the-ground training in information assurance, security, infiltration, espionage, and destructive attacks that relied on covert access to heavily fortified organizations,” which, as a cybersecurity expert, he found highly familiar. At the heart of his strategy is what he calls the “castle theory thought exercise,” in which one pretends to be “the ruler of a medieval castle with valuable assets” and imagines various ways to defend the castle and anticipate invaders’ assaults. He provides a remarkably comprehensive tour of the subject, which is especially impressive for such a concise work that’s well under 300 pages. In it, he covers such topics as mapping networks and authentication and provides unconventional tips, as well; for example, he advises that one be wary of possible “hours of infiltration”—overly predictable routines that provide opportunities for attack.

The author has decades of credentialed experience in cybersecurity, and his professional background is evident throughout the book, which manages to convey his expertise in language that will be generally accessible to laypeople and immediately actionable. The running conceit of the work at first appears implausible—that warriors from a pre-technological era could teach modern readers something about cutting-edge cybersecurity. However, McCarty will convince skeptics, as he provides an elastic and forethoughtful approach to defense based on the warrior philosophy—one that involves constant improvisation and imagination to reveal every conceivable weakness in one’s cyberfortress. As he puts it in the book’s concluding chapter, his overriding message is that it’s always “critical to consume threat intelligence and respond against dynamic threats in innovative ways.” Along the way, he describes something far more aggressive than passive vigilance—a defensive approach that makes extensive use of historical anecdotes, such as a chapter that uses a small medieval village’s distrust of outsiders as an analogy for how permissions are established in a computer system. McCarty not only articulates the elements of his overall philosophy, but also explains its practical applications in rigorous detail, recommending “security controls and mitigations” and concluding every chapter with a helpful synopsis, or “debrief.”

A thoughtful, original, and thorough guide to cybersecurity.

**LISTEN**

*Sourland Mountain Series Book 2*

McGlothlin, Kristin

Bird Upstairs Books (146 pp.)

$14.95 | $8.95 paper | $4.99 e-book

May 4, 2021

978-1-73635-791-0

978-1-73632-433-2 paper

A 13-year-old boy reconnects with his long-lost mother in this middle-grade novel.

It’s Thanksgiving on Central New Jersey’s Sourland Mountain, and Gwilym Duckworthy has just finished the annual scavenger hunt with his diverse family when he receives a life-changing voicemail. His mother, who left Gwilym and his two older siblings in the care of their father when the teen was just 3 years old, will soon be in the area and wants...
to meet her youngest son for dinner. Gwilym isn’t sure what to do—he’s happy with his dad, his stepmom, and his siblings and friends and doesn’t initially tell them about his mother’s reemergence. Besides, she voluntarily packed up and abandoned them to pursue her professional music career, so why does she want to reconnect now? Gwilym ponders this as he goes through the motions of classes and his bicycle delivery job while choosing his instrument for the school band: the trumpet, which his mother also plays. As Gwilym and his mother begin to rebuild their relationship, he comes clean to his older brother Clay, who has Down syndrome, and his adopted sister, Bex, who is on the verge of getting a softball scholarship to college. The three tightknit siblings decide to watch their mother play a concert with her jazz band, processing the new relationship together. This moving novel is the second book in McGlothlin’s Sour­­land Mountain series, set in the backwoods of the unique area 20 minutes outside Princeton, New Jersey. The straightforward story delivers a strong cast of characters. Gwilym’s best friend, Cat Hamilton, who was featured in the series’ first book, Draw­ing With Whitman (2019), makes several appearances along with her family’s boarder, Benton Whitman, a quirky visual artist and descendant of Walt Whitman. Benton inspires Gwilym to see his passion for music in a whole new way. Gwilym’s world is small and intimate but distinct as well: Bex, a Black teen, was adopted as a baby, as was his cousin Hattie, who was born in China. In addition, the protagonist is sensitive and observant in ways that are realistic for a 13-year-old boy.

A simple, touching tale of music and family.

The novel brims with wild characters, exotic settings, a skillful embroidering of CNN headlines, and mind-blowing concepts. A riveting tale with globe-circling, cloak-and-cyber skulduggery and strong Bible code underpinnings.

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A computer security expert learns from an amazing secret ally that biblical end times prophecies are coming true as Chinese, Russian, and American sins edge the world toward war.

Debut author Morris spins a global conspiracy cyberthriller with threads drawn from both well-worn sources (the book of Revelation) and breaking news out of Washington, D.C. In 1995, hacker prodigy Cary Nolan, having meddled with the sinister secret-society affairs of New World Order elite Andre Strauss, is targeted for death. Strauss mistakenly kills not only Nolan’s lover, Bianca Troon, but also his best friend and computer partner, Derek Taylor, while Taylor and Bianca are in post-coital bliss together. Shattered, Nolan switches identities with Taylor and, 26 years later, perpetuates the ruse as a maverick tech-security contractor to the National Security Agency. Know that this is an alt-2021 in which a controversial, reckless, Russia-manipulated, power-mad president—Donald Trump is never mentioned but there’s no doubt who the “stable genius” is—has been reelected. He lasts for a third term amid a post-pandemic recession and international chaos. As events unfurl against a devastating Chinese computer-virus attack (and Strauss’ machinations), Taylor/Nolan is investigated by beautiful Navy Lt. Jennifer Scott for his ties to rogue hackers. He goes on the run with the attractive enemy. Among the secrets he keeps from Jenn: His partner in the hacker underground is not human but a top-secret, escaped, sentient software program called SLVIA. SLVIA lately has been bombarding Taylor/Nolan with Scripture, reasoning that the Bible end times verses compute as accurate and are coming to pass as allegories of geopolitical upheaval and corruption. Verily, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than to count all the Bible prophecy/apocalypse novels out there. But Morris’ specimen stands out for not being conservative-megachurch recruiting material (instead blasting the alt-right Trump GOP and QAnon believers something fierce) and for coordinating a grandly indulgent, globe-trotting narrative in the Dan Brown/Iris Johansen style. The novel brims with wild characters, exotic settings, a skillful embroidering of CNN headlines, and mind-blowing concepts, into which the religious stuff fits snugly. Readers may heed the spiritual messages (if any) or just go along for the ride. It does seem a little unfair to poor Trump, though. Without his insane reign, this story wouldn’t feel half as terrifyingly plausible.

A riveting tale with globe-circling, cloak-and-cyber skulduggery and strong Bible code underpinnings.
transplant technique available only to the most elite. An instant fugitive from deadly law enforcement automatons who want her for murder, Mara (or whoever she is now) seeks sanctuary and hunts for answers among the rebels and underground-resistance misfits who trust neither her story nor her scrambled identity. Readers will find an instant echo of the invigorating cyberpunk territory famously birthed by visionary SF author William Gibson—and, not long after, written off by the novelist himself as a genre past its expiration date. But Price reboots the familiar noir scenarios of greedy multinationals, hero hackers, and freakishly augmented adventurers, upgrading the software with piquant bytes of green politics run amok and the unholy intersections of capitalism, recession, and transhumanism. The prose is bullet-point sharp and rich in future-speak street argot (“Lightwalls are feeding them all kinds of ads for biomed and the potential dangers it poses.”)

A bracing blast of neo-cyberpunk with some smart tweaks to the operating system.

**THE NEW EUGENICS**
_modifying biological life in the twenty-first century_

Quintyn, Conrad B.
Archway (424 pp.)
$42.95 | $28.99 paper | $3.99 e-book
Dec. 17, 2020
978-1-4808-9919-3
978-1-4808-9920-9 paper

An impressively thorough survey of the development of biotechnology and the potential dangers it poses.

Quintyn, an associate professor of biological anthropology at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania, observes that the breakneck speed of biotechnological advancement has outpaced not only its regulatory oversight, but also society’s ability to fully digest the scientific and moral challenges such progress presents. Although the promise of new science has been extraordinary, most people lack an adequate understanding of its implications, according to the author: “In this dangerous era of light-speed scientific advancement, especially in biotechnology, can human-kind endure the long-term cost in detrimental changes to human and nonhuman life-forms?” For example, molecular scientists, committed to correcting the apparent defects of nature in the creation of genetically modified organisms, routinely overlook “complex bioenvironmental interactions” that could present future problems, Quintyn asserts—just as genetic engineering could “unintentionally cause deleterious alterations to a human embryo’s genome.” Moreover, the author frets about the slippery slope that could lead from legitimate therapeutic uses of genetic modification to elective enhancement and all the moral issues it raises. The author argues that there’s a line that runs from the “old eugenics” that grew from racial and economic oppression to what he sees as its new iteration, which genuinely aspires to the betterment of humankind but tends to produce other ethical dilemmas. Over the course of this book, Quintyn’s discussion is as rigorous as it is wide-ranging, and his mastery of the subject matter and his ability to translate technically forbidding topics into accessible prose are remarkable. The author’s discussion of how scientists are either blind to the issues he raises—too focused on technological progress to pause to consider moral objections—or willing to resort to semantic obfuscation to downplay them is particularly astute.

A technically precise and philosophically thoughtful treatise.

**THE TRUTH ABOUT JACOB MARLEY**
_Rapier, George_
Twin Oaks Press (288 pp.)
Nov. 18, 2020
978-1-977937-24-9

A fictional memoir reimagines Dickens’ holiday classic _A Christmas Carol_. Few stories are better known than that of Ebenezer Scrooge, the misanthrope who, thanks in large part to the ghost of his partner, Jacob Marley, is redeemed. Readers all know Bob Cratchit (and Tiny Tim) and even Scrooge’s nephew, Fred, who will not give up trying to cajole his uncle back into the human race. But in this telling, in the form of Fred’s memoir, Marley does not die. Instead, after he gets himself in deep trouble, he and Ebenezer successfully stage Marley’s death, and he decamps to America. It is no spoiler to say that Fred’s version also ends well, with the transformed Scrooge whom readers have all come to adore. Scrooge then devotes his life to promoting good causes and preaching the gospel of loving one’s fellow man. And Fred’s memoir reveals what really happened that fateful, magical night that changed Scrooge forever. In terms of period details and customs, Dickens would surely approve of Rapier’s retelling. A difference is that readers get a much fuller picture of Fred, a real mensch, and Marley, a livelier and more outgoing character than his friend Ebenezer (which leads to his downfall). An intriguing point about young Fred is that early on in his marriage to the lovely Emily, he almost stumbles into the Scrooge trap: Emily wants a baby, and Fred desires just a little more money, just a little more security first. A close call. But with the exception of one tight year, the couple’s Christmas party with its silly games is a treasuresd tradition for all their friends. Thus does the eternal struggle between grasping and giving play out. And readers learn in this enjoyable story that Scrooge was not Fred’s uncle’s real surname but one of those inspired Dickensian eponyms. An afterword by Fred’s son, Ebenezer, ties all the loose ends together in a fashion that Boz would applaud.

Faithful to the spirit of Dickens, this engaging tale gives two neglected characters their due.
“The photographs make the book come alive, showing off odd and intriguing manufacturing processes.”

ART | COMMERCE

Four Artisan Businesses Grow in an Old New Jersey Industrial City
Riskind, Steven J.
Photos by the author
Steve Riskind Photography (126 pp.)
$45.00 | Jul. 28, 2020
978-0-578-68425-3

Dingy workshops incubate unlikely aesthetic epiphanies in this colorful photographic study of small businesses.

Photographer Riskind showcases four artisanal manufacturers in and around Paterson, New Jersey, a faded textile center whose old factories now shelter firms making specialty products. He begins at Jerry Valenta and Sons, a textile company with 10 industrial looms. Many of these pictures are composed and formally elegant, juxtaposing the fiendishly complex and forbidding loom mechanisms—with their starkly lit mazes of oily, muscular steel gears and chains—and the delicately abstract geometries of the gossamer threads hanging on them in dense yet ethereal patterns. He then visits Great Falls Metalworks, a family jewelry maker that once numbered Jackie Onassis among its customers. Here he depicts an atmospheric tableau of workers using hand tools to hammer, drill, solder, and polish, bending over tiny objects while bundled up against the winter cold in an unheated workshop where piles of gems glow against a backdrop of grungy concrete walls. Riskind’s third subject is the Peragallo Pipe Organ Company, an instrument maker now on its fourth generation of family craftsmen. There’s a spaciousness in these photographs of organ pipes that are major architectural elements in their own right, often large enough to dwarf the workers. We see demure smaller variants adorning the wall cutters and glass panels spread out on workbenches, brows furrowed in concentration, convey an almost spiritual union of art and craft.

Riskind finishes at the Hiemer Stained Glass Studio, taking viewers through the integrated process of drawing sacred figures, transferring images to colored glass, cutting and soldering panels to frames, and installing them in churches. The photographs of workers peering intently at light boxes and glass panels spread out on workbenches, brows furrowed in concentration, convey an almost spiritual union of art and craft. Riskind’s accompanying captions and commentary are informative if a bit stolid. (“Tying 12,000 knots in fine (and sometimes slippery) threads is extraordinarily time consuming.”) The photographs make the book come alive, showing off odd and intriguing manufacturing processes and the dedication of the people who practice them.

An engrossing portrait of artisanship as a blend of mechanical genius and human fulfillment.

WHY CAN’T RELATIONSHIPS BE LIKE PIZZA?
Roamer, Andy V.
NineStar Press (283 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Apr. 7, 2021
978-1-64890-171-3

Set in Boston, Roamer’s third installment in a series stars a gentle, queer teenager who’s full of questions.

Picking up after the first two books, Why Can’t Life Be Like Pizza (2020) and Why Can’t Freshman Summer Be Like Pizza (2020), Roamer continues to follow his 15-year-old narrator, RV, into his sophomore year at the prestigious Boston Latin School. Everything in RV’s life seems unsteady at the moment. He’s no longer in the class of his mentor, Mr. Aniso. His best friend Carole is too wrapped up in her crush on a French boy to pay him much attention. His parents’ fights are only getting worse. And, most troubling of all, his friendship with Bobby—the handsome African American jock with whom he shared his first same-sex kiss—has not been the same since Bobby joined varsity football.

To cope, RV drowns his teenage sorrows in cheese slices at Joe’s Pizza, his local haunt. He also strikes up a new friendship with Mark, a born-again Christian who first seems only interested in ogling their exotic Spanish teacher, Señorita Sánchez, but slowly reveals surprising depth. RV continues to grapple with his sexuality as LGBTQ+ issues come up around him at home, at school, and in the news, but his exact feelings on whether he’s really gay is all about youthful apprehension and hesitation. Some readers might be frustrated with RV’s (and thus the book’s) slow progress, but by focusing on subtler plot points, RV comes to terms with issues of sex, religion, and race at his own pace.

A coming-of-age novel focused on its endearing narrator’s introspection rather than typical teenage drama.

BEES ON THE SNOW
Šaltenis, Saulius
Trans. by Novickas, Elizabeth
Pica Pica Press (360 pp.)
$13.99 paper | Feb. 5, 2021
978-0-9966304-5-0

Lithuanian writer Šaltenis’ 1990 novel about a small-town pastor’s death is available in English for the first time.

On a frigid Christmas night in Lithuania at some point in the distant past, the
pastor Kristijonas goes missing. When he’s located the next day, he’s lying among the animals in his own manger, nearly frozen to death; some people say that he was trying to preach the Gospel to the livestock. When the man dies a few days later, the circumstances surrounding his demise remain uncertain. As a funeral is prepared, the life of Kristijonas is revealed through his past interactions with the colorful villagers who lived around him, including Karvelis, the former herdsman and current church bell ringer, who loved the pastor but fears encountering him as a ghost, as “he had, after all, sinned heavily against the late Kristijonas”—and, it’s revealed, others as well. Another villager is Loté the Betrothed, who never married, and her son, Jonelis, whom Kristijonas once said had the makings of a bishop. There’s also Fingerless Limba, the local schoolteacher and undertaker, whose missing appendages are the cause (and result) of controversy. Through these and other characters, a loving, self-effacing portrait of rural Lithuania emerges. Šaltenis’ prose, as translated by Novickas, is formal but riotous in tone: “So then, when Mr. Kristijonas was still but a crowing baby, the plague arrived, also Fingerless Limba, the local schoolteacher and undertaker, neither sought nor summoned, and went reeling through the villages without missing a single cottage, unbending, proud, all buttoned up like a minor court official.” As the author wrote the work toward the end of the Soviet period in Lithuania, the book can be read as a reflection on that occupation—especially as in the novel, the country faces a similar threat from Germans. For readers without a sense of Lithuanian history, however, it reads more like an off-kilter pastiche of preindustrial life. It’s a short book, and it may take the reader some time to acclimate to its peculiar rhythms, but the wide assortment of intersecting lives and disputed histories makes for an amusing puzzle.

A dense and surprising tale from an acclaimed Lithuanian author.

MAKE YOUR OWN JOB
Anytime, Anywhere, at Any Age
Smith, Wm. Hovey
Stratton Press (156 pp.)
$7.99 paper  |  $2.99 e-book
Oct. 19, 2020
978-1-64895-264-7

A guide for displaced or disgruntled employees focuses on the fundamentals of starting a business.

The premise of entrepreneur/author Smith’s manual, a follow-up to his book Create Your Own Job Security (2018), is that “the best way for workers to insure their futures is to make their own jobs.” Beginning with an overview of today’s workplace in Chapter 1, Smith discusses older workers who are let go in favor of younger workers; the rise of the gig economy, in which he participated as a contract consultant; and the potential perils of automation. The author quickly transitions from this introductory content to the basics of establishing a business in Chapter 2. He first examines the “three stages” of forming and operating a business, “concept, people, and execution.” Smith suggests that “most people think too small” when starting a new business while cautioning “you have to be watchful about the next trend or market twists that might render your product or service obsolete.” The subsequent 14 chapters outline various elements of small-business management and execution, including the development of a concept, identification of an audience, types of businesses, funding, legal issues, business plans, names and branding, and more. Most chapters are brief, providing only perfunctory information, just enough to help an individual interested in self-employment launch a business. While some chapters cover a topic, such as patents, in adequate detail, others are quite abbreviated; for example, the chapters “Locating Your Business” and “Running Your Virtual Corporation” are a mere two and a half pages each. Still, the book covers a broad range of areas and offers some solid advice. A discussion of selling locally and regionally versus internationally should be useful for globally oriented entrepreneurs. The final chapter helpfully deals with some of the pluses and minuses of self-employment.

Here, Smith addresses the psychological aspects of starting a business as well as the impact ownership can have on one’s physical health; the author shares some of his personal strategic wisdom for maintaining wellness. Smith’s uncluttered prose reflects his passion for small businesses.

A worthy rudimentary resource for business newbies.
The author succeeds in conjuring a pressure-cooker atmosphere with a sinister noir vibe."

DANGEROUS MEDICINE

Stookey, Jeff
Pictograph Publishing (352 pp.)
$18.00 paper | $4.99 e-book
Oct. 10, 2018
978-1-73260-362-2

Gay couples battle the Ku Klux Klan and a predatory gangster in this period thriller set in the Roaring 20's.

The concluding novel in Stookey's Medicine for the Blues Trilogy finds piano player Jimmy Harper returning to Portland, Oregon, in shock after seeing his musician lover get gunned down by mobster Danny Felton in Chicago. There to catch him is previous lover Carl Holman, a surgeon whose renewed live-in relationship with Jimmy complicates life in a Portland dominated by a homophobic Ku Klux Klan. Rumored to be a gay man—he announced a fake engagement with his lesbian friend Gwen Cook to quiet the gossip—Carl also runs afoul of Klan taboos by performing surgeries at St. Mary's Catholic Hospital and prescribing birth control to women. Friction with the Invisible Empire increases when Carl discovers that a Klansman who runs a bootlegging operation had been molesting his 12-year-old son before the boy died of appendicitis. Then Carl's boss, another Klansman, pressures him to join the group and marry Gwen in a Klan mass wedding. As if that weren't enough, Danny arrives in Portland and tries to blackmail Carl into giving him drugs, and the surgeon gets on the wrong side of vice cop (and Klansman) Steve Bateson when he investigates the bigot's savage beating of a gay suspect. On the bright side, a solution to Carl's relationship conundrum materializes: He marries Gwen and Jimmy weds her lover, Charlene, and the two ostensibly straight pairs reside in neighboring houses, which allows them to surreptitiously live as gay couples. But will that keep them off the Klan's radar?

Stookey's tale throws together elements from his Acquaintance (2017) and Chicago Blues (2018) in a frenetically busy, often overstuffed narrative. The romantic reverses—and graphic sex—of the previous novels are muted here. Jimmy doesn't have much to do besides lick his wounds after his Chicago misadventure, and Carl remains preoccupied with sleuthing and strategizing his way through a maze of threats and murders. The author succeeds in conjuring a pressure-cooker atmosphere with a sinister noir vibe as Carl probes the seamy underbelly of placid Portland. Danny is a charismatic figure of insinuating malignancy. Bateson is a vicious, violent man, and Carl has to maneuver carefully around him. In one scene, barbershop customers subtly rally to protect Carl when Bateson menacingly gay-baits him; in another, the surgeon elicits enough nuance and residual conscience from the cop to reach a rapprochement that serves both men's purposes. In Carl's first-person voice, Stookey's prose shows flashes of poetic imagery (“Caving overhead caught my ear and I looked up to see a flock of ragged black shapes flapping above me. I rested a moment, leaning against the wooden handle of the shovel while the crows circled once and flew on.”) Too often though, Carl's sensibility sounds stoically clinical—“During these weeks, Jimmy continued to come into my office for his periodic Wassermanns, and I kept an eye out for penile and anal warts”—or moralistic (“There are a lot of things in this world that are more unnatural than my friendship

This nonfiction work delves into the perennial land disputes between Indigenous and settler institutions in Canada.

Canada's war on its own Indigenous population has never ended, at least according to anthropologist and activist Stevenson. "The war is unfolding on multiple fronts—social, economic, political, cultural, spiritual, and psychological—and is being fought in arenas where the rights and interests of the two cultures clash," writes the author in his introduction. "But first and foremost, the war is being waged in the minds of Canadians." Whatever the intentions of the Canadian governmental and corporate authorities, many of the battles come down to a paternalistic sense that non-Indigenous institutions know better than Indigenous groups when it comes to what's best for the land—and even what's best for the Indigenous groups themselves. The book, which blends reportage, memoir, and analysis, explores transgressions such as the Department of Fisheries and Oceans' attempts to shut down the Baffin Inuit beluga hunt and the relocation of the Sayisi Dene in a misguided attempt to protect the caribou population. Other topics include issues of land management, Indigenous contributions to ecological knowledge, continued marginalization of Indigenous governing bodies, and the fight for Indigenous rights across many facets of Canadian society. Stevenson's prose is always technical, often fiery, and usually rooted in that most intricate and foundational of topics, the land: "On numerous occasions when discussing Aboriginal title and land ownership with First Nations elders, they have corrected me employing the epithet: 'We do not own the land, the land owns us.' Perhaps more than any other, this characterization captures the true nature of Aboriginal title and the right to sovereignty over their lands." The author is a passionate advocate, and his enthusiasm for addressing the injustices still perpetrated against Indigenous people is contagious. Most intriguing are the sections in which Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge challenges the claims of environmental scientists—a dispute many readers may not know much about. The volume is a bit too legalistic for general readers, but for those with questions about the current fault lines in the struggle for greater Indigenous autonomy in Canada, this is a wide-ranging and well-researched work. A dense but captivating window into Canada's modern land wars.
When she arrives at the Rochester estate on a stormy night, she begins to realize that not all at the Rochester home is what it seems. Romance author Warren possesses a love for Charlotte Bronte’s 1847 classic that’s beautifully apparent throughout the book, from Jane’s explorations of the forbidden attic space to her breathtaking, weighted exchanges with the modern-day Mr. Rochester. Jane is a compelling heroine from beginning to end—a young woman with a wealth of real-world experience and a dream to make the world better for kids facing circumstances that she herself barely survived. Her relationship with Paige, always one step forward and two steps back, feels realistic and eventually quite rewarding, and her attraction to and frustration with Beau make the novel a page-turner. Some readers may wonder about the appropriateness of a boss-employee romance although Jane and Beau’s connection feels consensual.

An often engaging story with dark and sensual elements.

PRIVATE PROPERTY
Warren, Skye
Self (282 pp.)
979-8-71-702158-6

A young woman falls for her mysterious employer in Warren’s modern, erotic reimagining of Jane Eyre.

All Jane Mendoza wants is to help others. Not long out of high school, where she was valedictorian, she dreams of going to college to become a social worker. After the death of her beloved father, Jane was bounced through the Texas foster care system until she was 18 and then worked two jobs in Houston to make ends meet. A new opportunity to provide live-in care for Paige Rochester, a troubled first grader who’s also lost her parents, requires a move to Maine but will provide Jane with the funds she needs for her future. When she arrives at the Rochester estate on a stormy night, she immediately butts heads with Paige’s uncle Beau, a shipping magnate and former playboy who isn’t thrilled with his new role as Paige’s guardian or Jane’s presence as her nanny. Almost immediately, however, the sizzling shared chemistry between Jane and Beau is obvious to both of them, and a clandestine physical relationship ensues. As Jane forges an emotional connection with little Paige and struggles with feelings for her boss, she begins to realize that not all at the Rochester home is what seems. Romance author Warren possesses a love for Charlotte Bronte’s 1847 classic that’s beautifully apparent throughout the book, from Jane’s explorations of the forbidden attic space to her breathtaking, weighted exchanges with the modern-day Mr. Rochester. Jane is a compelling heroine from beginning to end—a young woman with a wealth of real-world experience and a dream to make the world better for kids facing circumstances that she herself barely survived. Her relationship with Paige, always one step forward and two steps back, feels realistic and eventually quite rewarding, and her attraction to and frustration with Beau make the novel a page-turner. Some readers may wonder about the appropriateness of a boss-employee romance although Jane and Beau’s connection feels consensual.
INDIE

Books of the Month

Tower of Mud and Straw
Yaroslav Barsukov
This marvelous SF tale about dangerous technology offers sublime stretches that will warrant revisiting.

The Socialist’s Garden of Verses
Christopher Bernard
A dazzling poetry collection, its intimations of doom lit by a furious clarity.

Almost Innocent
Shanti Brien
An intriguing, informed examination of the justice system from a professional and personal perspective.

99 ERICS
Julia Serano
Knocks down literary conventions, sexual stereotypes, the fourth wall, and more in enthusiastic defense of the weird.

10 Hidden Heroes
Mark K. Shriver
Illus. by Laura Watson
An inclusive, visually delightful story that may give youngsters the confidence to be heroes themselves.

Enemy Combatant
David Winner
A searingly insightful, tragicomic adventure that lays bare personal and political fault lines.

Almost Innocent
Shanti Brien

Tower of Mud and Straw
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REPORT: BARRETT, BARR SIGN BOOK DEALS

Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett and former Attorney General William Barr have both signed book deals, according to a report by Politico.

Barrett, who took her seat on the nation’s highest court last October, reportedly received a $2 million advance for a book that the magazine says will be “about how judges are not supposed to bring their personal feelings into how they rule.” Politico did not indicate who will publish the book.

There’s also no word about the publisher who has acquired Barr’s book, which is said to be a memoir about his service in former President Donald Trump’s White House. Barr was a highly polarizing figure whose term in the Trump administration ended last December when he resigned, reportedly because of Trump’s insistence on pushing false conspiracy theories about voter fraud in the 2020 presidential election.

Barrett’s and Barr’s books are the latest in what seems likely to be a long string of books by people with ties to the Trump administration.

The most high-profile of these books was announced in April, when Simon & Schuster revealed it had signed a two-book deal with former Vice President Mike Pence. The announcement was met with anger by some critics of the Trump administration, who said that Pence’s supposed presidential ambitions make it unlikely that his book would contain any remotely critical information about Trump.

There are no projected release dates for Barrett’s and Barr’s books.

MICHAELA COEL TO PUBLISH MANIFESTO ABOUT ‘MISFITS’

I May Destroy You creator and star Michaela Coel will make her literary debut this summer with a book titled Misfits: A Personal Manifesto, the Guardian reports.

Coel’s book is based on a lecture she gave at the Edinburgh TV Festival in 2018. “What carried me through [secondary school] was the abundance of Black girls, White girls, mixed girls—misfits. My friends were all misfits—a huge gang of commercially unattractive, beautiful misfits, who found the mainstream world unattractive,” she said.

On a webpage for the book, Ebury Press, which will publish the book in the U.K., calls it “a powerful manifesto on how speaking your truth and owning your differences can transform your life.”

“Advocating for ‘misfits’ everywhere, this timely, necessary book is a rousing and bold case against fitting in,” the publisher says.

Coel is best known as the creator and star of the sitcom Chewing Gum and the critically acclaimed series I May Destroy You, which aired on HBO in the U.S. The show follows a social media influencer–turned-novelist who tries to come to terms with her sexual assault.

Misfits will be published on Sept. 7 by Henry Holt in the U.S. and Ebury Press in the U.K.

Michael Schaub is a Texas-based journalist and regular contributor to NPR.
A poet of my acquaintance was incensed when Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 2016. He bridled when the Nobel committee deemed Dylan the creator of “new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition.” “He writes lyrics,” the poet sniffed, perhaps forgetting that the Greek and Romantic lyric poets bore that epithet for a reason, perhaps ignorant of the troubadours as well.

Meanwhile, a middling genre novelist wondered whether Dylan’s Nobel meant that she was eligible for a Grammy, not stopping to consider whether her work occupied a place remotely near Constellation Dylan. And a classical music critic (whose name you will not have heard of) sneered, “They couldn’t find a writer so a musician was the next best thing?”

Dylan, of course, is the lyricist behind some of the best-known songs of our time, evoking T.S. Eliot, watchtowers, God, love, loss, and a thousand other things. He is also a writer pure and simple, those critics notwithstanding.

There were all those thousands of lyrics, of course, indisputably poems set to music. Then, 50 years ago, came Tarantula, an odd exercise in literary psychedelics that took off where John Lennon’s A Spaniard in the Works ended. It was not well liked when it appeared, and indeed Dylan had held off publishing the book, finished in 1966, for five years, past the shelf life of first-generation hippiedom and the neo-Beats. “Crystal jukebox queen and hymn & him diffused in drunk transfusion wound would heed sweet sound-wave crippled & cry salute to oh great particular el dorado reel & ye battered personal god,” Dylan wrote.

Haters hated, and how—but a first edition of the book commands a small fortune today.

Dylan revealed his interest in strategy and self-invention in Chronicles, Volume One (2004), whose title promised more volumes that have yet to materialize. He read von Clausewitz and Machiavelli, studied mathematics and the blues and the Civil War, borrowed chords and tropes from everyone whose couch he ever kipped on. He built an encyclopedic knowledge of American folk music, a corpus that begs to be appropriated and reshaped and that, Dylan writes, is made up of songs that have a thousand faces, “and you must meet them all if you want to play this stuff.” (That thousand-faces business explains why Dylan’s songs sound so different from performance to performance, why his voice has mutated and morphed over the generations.) Artifices and all, Chronicles is the real deal: Open it, and it’s immediately apparent that you’re in the presence of literature.

Bob Dylan, who turns 80 on May 24, has been accused of owing far more debts, literary and musical, than he has ever acknowledged. Still, a poet, a writer, is a bricoleur, in Claude Lévi-Strauss’ formulation—a magpie who appropriates and uses every scrap of information that passes by: That a bricoleur can also be a trickster compounds the sins, but Dylan’s evasions and calculations are more in the spirit of Groucho Marx than of your everyday grifter. Made up of borrowed bits and pieces, he remains an American original. Long may he endure.

Gregory McNamee is a contributing editor.
New York Times bestselling author Marjorie Liu (Monstress) leads you deep into the heart of the tangled woods. In her dark, romantic, and spell-binding short fiction, you will find dangerous magic and even more dangerous women.