The Lesbian Avengers Pride Special Issue

Kirkus Reviews

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Featuring 312 Industry-First Reviews of Fiction, Nonfiction, Children's and YA books

Celebrating LGBTQ+ Voices and Perspectives

With Brandon Taylor, Casey McQuiston, Brian Broome, Shing Yin Khor, Jonny Garza Villa, and more
The Story of AIDS Activism, Retold

I’ll never forget attending my first ACT UP meeting in the Great Hall of the Cooper Union in New York. It was the summer of 1991, and the AIDS activist organization was already famous for its theatrical demonstrations at the Food and Drug Administration, the New York Stock Exchange, and St. Patrick’s Cathedral, as well as its success in expediting drug testing and access, lowering the price of AZT, and forcing the scientific establishment to take it seriously. I had moved to the city the year before and recently come out; a gay friend had pointed me toward ACT UP—the guys were known to be smart and hot—and I wanted to do something to fight AIDS, then devastating the gay community.

I remember that the meeting was intimidating and inspiring in equal measure. I knew little about the pathogenesis of HIV, or the awful laundry list of opportunistic infections that people with AIDS battled, or the Byzantine process of drug approval, all subjects fluently discussed there. But the room was electric with energy and passion. The guys were as smart and hot as foretold. So were the lesbians and the odd straight people, France’s 2016 book, How to Survive a Plague. I was hooked.

Sarah Schulman’s new book, Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT Up New York, 1987-1993 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, May 18), captures the feeling of walking into an ACT UP meeting for the first time, and her account—woven from an oral history project that she and Jim Hubbard conducted over 17 years—is just as cacophonous and enthralling. Fortunately, Schulman is a lucid guide to the complex politics and multiple issues that ACT UP took on, succinctly introducing readers to a varied cast of characters and allowing their voices and perspectives, sometimes contradictory, to predominate.

The story of ACT UP has been told before, most notably in David France’s 2016 book, How To Survive a Plague. Schulman, a prolific lesbian novelist, playwright, and nonfiction writer, has a different agenda. While most depictions of the group have focused on a handful of treatment activists—most of them gay White men—she pulls back the camera to show that the group, while largely White and gay, was more diverse than is often recognized. She reveals that the organization of ACT UP was cellular, with smaller affinity groups working on different projects simultaneously. She devotes large sections to two successful ACT UP campaigns that don’t often get the spotlight: the fight to expand the Centers for Disease Control’s definition of AIDS to include women’s infections (enabling more women with AIDS to receive benefits and participate in drug trials) and the fight for needle exchange (giving intravenous drug users access to clean needles, thus preventing HIV infections through needle sharing).

“This is a book in which all people with [AIDS] or with [HIV] are equally important,” Schulman writes. “Their experiences all matter. Therefore, their contributions to transforming the AIDS paradigm are represented as dynamic, interlocking parts of a bigger picture.” Though I was involved with ACT UP for nearly four years, I learned a tremendous amount from this book, which offered a broader view than it was possible for any one person to have at the time.

That ACT UP should have achieved what it did, against the odds, is nothing short of remarkable. Likewise, Let the Record Show, despite its enormous cast and jumble of storylines, is remarkably successful. Reading one chapter—like attending a Monday-night meeting for the first time—will leave you hooked.
The Kirkus Star is awarded to books of remarkable merit, as determined by the impartial editors of Kirkus.

Nashville author Jeff Zentner pens another paean to the sustaining love of family and friends and the lyrical beauty of the rural South. Read the review on p. 140.

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**FICTION**

These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

- **LAST SUMMER IN THE CITY** by Gianfranco Calligarich; trans. by Howard Curtis .......................................................... 9
- **MRS. MARCH** by Virginia Feito ........................................... 11
- **BILLY SUMMERS** by Stephen King ........................................ 18
- **INTIMACIES** by Katie Kitamura ............................................. 19
- **AMERICAN ESTRANGEMENT** by Saïd Sayrafiezadeh ............ 28
- **DEVIL IN DISGUISE** by Lisa Kleypas ..................................... 39
- **BOMBSHELL** by Sarah MacLean ............................................ 40
- **HOW SWEET IT IS** by Dylan Newton .................................... 40
- **BATTLE ROYAL** by Lucy Parker ............................................ 41
- **THE HELLION’S WALTZ** by Olivia Waite ................................. 41

**AMERICAN ESTRANGEMENT**

Sayrafiezadeh, Saïd
Norton (192 pp.)
$25.95 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-0-393-54123-6

On Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, a hardworking single mom turns just-about-nothing into a rich life for her 10-year-old daughter.

As Airgood’s fourth novel opens, Laurel Hill has to work an extra shift at the motel where she cleans rooms, disrupting plans to watch the Perseid meteor shower with her young daughter, Skye, who is home alone waiting—an ongoing situation which will have grave consequences later in the story. Laurel is from a local family with deep roots in the fictional but archetypal small town of Gallion on Lake Superior, but her musician mother lost the homestead where Laurel grew up to the bank. Now that place is being run by another couple as a B&B, and the threadbare life Laurel has made for herself and her daughter cleaning toilets and living in a bleak one-room rental is about to give way.

Perhaps Laurel’s grit, optimism, and refusal to take help from others make her a bit of a cliché, and perhaps Skye is the most perfect 10-year-old that ever lived—none of that will stop most readers from falling in love with them. And they are hardly the only characters with problems. Laurel’s lifelong best friend is in an abusive relationship, her ex-boyfriend is a veteran with PTSD, a new friend has lost both a daughter and a granddaughter, a wealthier woman’s marriage falls apart after her husband has brain surgery. “Better times are just around the corner,” Laurel brightly assures her daughter. “Have you ever noticed how you always say that,” replies Skye, “but then the corner moves?” The corner will move many more times as their story unfolds. Late in the novel, a well-meaning schoolteacher tries to convince Laurel not to move yet again, telling her “you are her home.” That’s nice, thinks Laurel, but this woman “had no idea what it was like, being them.” Fortunately, Airgood does.

An affecting portrait of the region and its residents, filled with love and pride.
SISTERS IN ARMS
Alderson, Kaia
Morrow/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-06-296458-8

As the United States heads into World War II, two Black women in Harlem are dissatisfied with their career prospects. Although she’s a brilliant pianist, Grace Steele freezes at her Juilliard audition and fears to confess her failure to her mother, who’s already distraught about son Tony’s disappearance in the Philippines. Eliza Jones is warring with her employer and father, the editor and publisher of a prominent Black newspaper, because he’s relegated her to covering the society beat. Grace and Eliza meet as new recruits to the newly formed Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, where each hopes to alter her destiny. But as they enter training, even as relatively privileged officer candidates, they soon learn that racial and sex discrimination have followed them into the armed forces. Although prominent African Americans like Mary McLeod Bethune urge enlistment in the WACs to advance “the race,” the government reneges on its promise to not segregate the WACs. The main arc of the episodic plot is the conflicted friendship between Grace and Eliza. There is a push-pull between them, instant dislike at first, followed by personality clashes—Eliza thinks Grace is rigid and arrogant, Grace resents Eliza’s spoiled, upper-class attitude. Then both, unthinkingly, inflict grievous harm on the other. Eliza blames Grace for failing to warn her about disembarking, alone, at a deserted Kentucky train station, where she is savagely beaten. Later, Eliza will, unintentionally, put Grace in jeopardy in a manner that is equally mystifying and contrived. The language throughout is overly expository and repetitious. But the author fulfills her stated intent to shed light on “hidden figures,” in this case, the trajectory of the WAC in general and the empowerment, however provisional, with which it “armed” its soldiers, who weren’t allowed to bear actual arms.

Calls long overdue attention to the Black women veterans of World War II.

MINK EYES BY DAN FLANIGAN

YOU DON’T SEND AN ANGEL TO DO A DIRTY JOB.

“…thrilling, edge-of-your-seat scenes fill many pages of this enjoyable novel.”
—Kirkus Reviews for Mink Eyes

“A terrifically entertaining and deftly crafted mystery…”
—Midwest Book Review for Mink Eyes

THE BIG TILT BY DAN FLANIGAN

NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED.

“…Flanigan manages to conjure deft, hard-boiled, but literary prose that’s reminiscent of Raymond Chandler’s best work. A gritty and eloquent crime novel.”
—Kirkus Reviews for The Big Tilt

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When you combine LGBTQ+ pride with hot June weather, what you get is queer summer reading! Here are some of the season’s best books for your tote bag.

Sarahland by Sam Cohen (Grand Central, March 9): In Cohen’s striking collection of short stories—her fiction debut—all the protagonists are named Sarah. The stories have something else in common, according to our starred review: “A deep thematic interest in the multidimensionality of the self—especially the queer, Jewish, nonmale self….A bold collection that explores how we might break free from or reimagine ourselves and our places in the universe.”

The Guncle by Steven Rowley (Putnam, May 25): Move over, Auntie Mame: Gay Uncle Patrick is moving in on your territory. Patrick, the former star of a beloved sitcom, is grieving the death of his partner, Joe, when his 6-year-old niece and 9-year-old nephew arrive to spend the summer with him while their father is in rehab. Our review says Patrick is “a memorable character, and it’s genuinely thrilling to read screenwriter-turned-novelist Rowley’s take on the mechanics of stardom.…There’s true insight here into the psychology of gay men, Hollywood, and parenting.”

Playing the Palace by Paul Rudnick (Berkley, May 25): “Everyday American falls in love with British royal” is an ever popular trope—I have fond memories of Millie Myerson and the Prince of Wales by Penina Spiegel, which I read circa 1982. Heather Cocks and Jessica Morgan updated the story in The Royal We (2015), and Casey McQuiston gave it a queer spin in Red, White & Royal Blue (2019; see the interview with McQuiston on Page 20). Now playwright and humorist Rudnick has produced what our review calls “a light and frothy take on royal romance” when “an American event planner deals with the public scrutiny that comes with dating an openly gay British prince.”

Let’s Get Back to the Party by Zak Salih (Algonquin, Feb. 16): This debut novel is set in 2015, shortly after the Supreme Court ruled in favor of marriage equality, and it explores the tensions between gay men who want to get married and others who don’t want to turn into “breeders.” Sebastian and Oscar are childhood friends who’ve chosen to lead very different lives. Sebastian is a high school teacher who lives in the suburbs and wants to settle down while Oscar cherishes his freedom. Our review says, “There’s a deep tension between the two that’s sexual but also political: Neither can entirely stomach the life the other has chosen….An insightful examination of two of the many ways gay men present themselves in contemporary America.”

Filthy Animals by Brandon Taylor (Riverhead, June 22): Taylor’s first novel, Real Life, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize last year. Now he returns with a story collection that our starred review calls “a deeper achievement.” Several stories focus on Lionel, a Black queer graduate student in mathematics. “The settings here are bleak—alienated suburbs; petty college campuses—and the mood unsparing. But the daring in these stories is bracing.” (See our interview with Taylor on Page 14.)

The Hellion’s Waltz by Olivia Waite (Avon, June 15): The latest in romance novelist Waite’s Feminine Pursuits series follows a young pianist in Regency England as she falls in love with a woman who’s trying to pursue justice for the weavers of Carrisford. “This scheme is pure screwball comedy, and it sets the tone for a light-hearted story in which there are no barriers to love,” according to our starred review. “No one is the least bit perturbed by the idea of an affair between women.” Maybe this one should be shelved under “Fantasy” as well as “Romance”—just the thing for a day at the beach.

Laurie Muchnick is the fiction editor.
In 1926, at New York’s Bellevue Hospital, a young nurse sacrifices her career and later the love of her life to save a premature baby who will become her daughter.

“To qualify as a nurse, I must master it all,” Althea Anderson reflects of her profession’s scientific requirements. “But to serve as one, I must pretend I know none of it.” In 1926, in a male-dominated obstetrics ward, she sees premature babies, their parents typically poor, consigned to die because, as one doctor says, “It is not our place to question God’s plan,” even though a doctor in Coney Island is saving such infants daily by putting them in incubators...and displaying them as a sideshow to fund his initiative. Haunted by one child’s death in particular, Althea smuggles another newborn, who weighs a little over 2 pounds, out of the hospital and places her in the admirable care of Dr. Couney at Luna Park. “Live babies!” the barker tells the boardwalk crowd. “All the world loves a baby!” Inside, however, all is calm and competence, and Margaret thrives. And Althea’s life, already altered by a single act of mercy, becomes one of secrecy and sacrifice. “Love makes us do things we would not otherwise consider,” one character observes, and though the novel occasionally strays into such sentimental clichés, Althea remains an engaging and convincing heroine. As does Stella Wright, the novel’s other narrator. A young special education teacher in 1950, Stella confronts that era’s brand of male callousness and societal bigotry with its undercurrents of eugenics and racism. Still mourning her recently deceased mother and disturbed by her husband’s wartime PTSD, Stella is drawn back into her mother’s past, where true identities and destinies are deftly revealed. “She made me who I am,” Stella realizes, “and I need her help to figure out who I can become....”

A romantic yet historically evocative depiction of two pioneering women’s intertwined lives.
This coming-of-age story set mostly on the island of Mauritius touches on political, religious, racial, and family tensions.

On a visit to Mauritius after years living overseas, narrator Vishnu Gopal recalls his boyhood and adolescence in the time leading to the island’s independence in 1968 and his move abroad to attend university. Life was defined by the immediate family and the larger clan and by the frictions that arose from disagreements over Hindu rituals or property. The boy’s roots go back to Indians who came to Mauritius in the 19th century as indentured labor; the island is also marked by French and British colonial rulers and African influences. His clan has moved on from the sugar-cane fields to better trades. Vishnu’s schoolteacher father wants his academically gifted son to go even further and win a university scholarship, and an overlong episode concerns a “bureaucratic foul-up” that costs the young man a chance to study in France. Busjeet, who left the island to finish his education and has worked for the World Bank and International Finance Corporation, has no doubt mined his own youth for this debut novel. The strongest scenes trace the pressures of family life and clan feuds amid the larger strains of the island’s multiracial society. Busjeet’s prose is workmanlike though sometimes stilted (“He’d tried to initiate me to yoga, but I was recalcitrant to any form of physical exertion”). Details of local life—young Vishnu sees Grandma carrying sugar-cane leaves on her head to feed her two cows—reflect a culture far removed from IFC corridors. Within the Hindu clan, it’s a heavily male culture, and the novel has few strong women.

An often compelling but uneven view of life in Mauritius.
“A portrait of a young man adrift in a world where meaning has been swept away.”

LAST SUMMER IN THE CITY
Calligarich, Gianfranco
Trans. by Curtis, Howard
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (192 pp.)
$25.00 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-0-374-60015-0

When nothing means anything, what do you grab onto to save yourself?
Drifting aimlessly in a sea of alcohol, coffee, women, and cigarettes, Milanese transplant Leo Gazzara floats through life in Rome, buoyed by his collection of secondhand classic books and a loose network of friends (some similarly disaffected, some seeming to have goals or, at least, cash). Leo's attempts to create a more structured life—usually involving less alcohol and more employment—occur in waves and begin to take on more urgency when he encounters the troubled but alluring Arianna at a party at the home of more successful (and more settled) friends. Leo and a coasting soul mate, Graziano, mull over the causes of their estrangement from routine life and attempt a concerted effort to rescue themselves from slipping away entirely into adolce vita punctuated by drives to the sea or revivifying showers.
Leo's own efforts to recognize and connect with a meaningful existence rely in no small part on what may be the enduring love of his life: books. Allusions to Proust, James Fenimore Cooper, and other masters echo throughout Calligarich's short but dense novel. Andre Aciman's epic foreword to this first American edition provides biographical and bibliographic context for Calligarich's novel, which was widely rejected before finally being published to acclaim in Italy in 1973 and, though falling in and out of print, developed a cultlike following over the years. The account of a lost generation in Rome in the early 1970s (possibly the children of the children of Hemingway's lost generation) carries the weight of both family history and generational saga.

A portrait of a young man adrift in a world where meaning has been swept away.

VORTEX
Coulter, Catherine
Morrow/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$28.99 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-0-06-300408-5

The FBI and the CIA tangle as a cold case heats up.
Manhattan-based reporter Mia Briscoe can never forget her best friend, Serena Winters, who vanished from a fraternity rave seven years earlier. Even though Serena's boyfriend's father was an FBI agent, no trace of her was ever found, and Mia continues to think she was raped and murdered by someone at the party. When she's given the job of covering the mayoral campaign of Alexander Talbot Harrington, a wealthy Bostonian with an equally ambitious fiancee, Mia never suspects that the job will be connected to Serena's disappearance.
In Washington, FBI Agent Savich takes on the case of CIA agent Olivia Hildebrandt, recently released from the hospital after a mission gone wrong, who killed one of the two men trying to kidnap or kill her. Olivia's teammate and lover, Mike Kingman, escaped Iran with a flash drive and is in hiding. Both of them are certain that they were betrayed by someone inside the agency. Fighting off attempts by the CIA to keep the case to itself, Savich moves Olivia to a safe house. Savich's wife, the talented FBI agent Sherlock, is sent to New York to help with a tricky case and becomes involved in Mia's quest, which has blossomed after a friend sends old pictures taken at the fraternity party that lead to a shocking and dangerous discovery.

Coulter's patented two-case structure serves her well despite the absence of any heightened sense of danger.
DANGER AT THE COVE
Dennison, Hannah
Minotaur (304 pp.)
$25.99  |  Aug. 17, 2021
978-1-2501-9450-3

Adventure blooms off the Cornwall coast for a pair of middle-aged sisters. Evie Mead and Margot Chandler have hit the daily double of cozy tropes. Evie’s longtime husband dies, leaving her nothing but debt, around the same time her sister Margot’s no-good spouse leaves her for a younger squeeze. Instead of repairing to some charming country village, however, the two make their way to Tregarrick Rock in the Isles of Scilly, a remote and thinly populated region with tenuous ties to Britain. There they take out a long-term lease on the Tregarrick estate from absentee landlord Cador Ferris, hoping to make the sprawling property into a tourist destination. The two have vastly different ideas about the clientele they might attract: Evie meticulously restores each suite in period furnishings while Margot plans to install a helipad. But the two are inching their way toward their grand opening when a combination of human weakness and nature’s wrath throws a wrench in their plans. Softhearted Margot agrees to allow a recently widowed old friend from California to stay for a few days in their not-quite-completed accommodations ahead of an epic storm that, along with the vernal equinox and historic low tides of the syzygy, will lay bare large parts of the sea bed. The hotel staff plans an expedition to explore the wreck of the Isadora, normally inaccessible. But the disappearance of handyman Oliver Martin complicates things. Soon the wild beauty of the island must be tamed to host a police investigation as murder and deceit invade Tregarrick Rock.

Its novel setting pushes this cozy to offer unexpected pleasures.
“In a horror-laced psychological drama, the wife of a bestselling novelist learns his latest protagonist is modeled on her.”

**MRS. MARCH**

Feito, Virginia
Liveright/Norton (256 pp.)
$26.00  |  Aug. 10, 2021
978-1-63149-861-9

In a horror-laced psychological drama, the wife of a bestselling New York novelist learns his latest protagonist is modeled on her.

“But…isn’t she...a whore?” whispers Mrs. March to the woman behind the counter at the patisserie she visits daily, who, like every other person in Manhattan, is reading, and loving, her husband’s new book. Abandoning her purchases, she bolts from the store, never to return, and immediately confronts an advertisement featuring a woman smiling knowingly under the words “SHE HAD NO IDEA.” Even the billboards know! This is just one of innumerable creepy details that speed Mrs. March’s descent into a spiraling vortex of psychosis. Not that it’s all in her head—copies of the book are everywhere, even in someone’s cart at the grocery store. Debut novelist Feito sets her story in a hazy period in the pre-technology past and confines much of the action to her protagonist’s claustrophobic Upper East Side apartment, where terrifying literati regularly convene for unbearable parties. Mrs. March’s painfully low self-esteem drives the self-consciousness, paranoia, and jealousy that control her relationships with everyone from her housekeeper to her son to a family she runs into at the skating rink. The husband is there on a weekday? She thrills to speculate this means he’s been laid off and concocts an elaborate lie to cover the real reason her own son is not in school. Mrs. March is the only character in the book who doesn’t get a first name, even in a flashback to her childhood: “On tiptoes, Mrs. March cupped her hand and whispered into her mother’s ear...‘I have to go to the bathroom.’” While the poor woman never gets a break from the misery, Feito does offer the reader a few homeopathic drops of humor, such as when her protagonist learns that people will do just about anything you ask if you tell them you work for the *New York Times*. Feito is Spanish and lives in Madrid, but somehow she is the love child of Patricia Highsmith and Shirley Jackson.

On her way to the screen played by Elisabeth Moss, Mrs. March is absolutely right—everyone is talking about her.

**BIG DARK HOLE**

Ford, Jeffrey
Small Beer Press (288 pp.)
$17.00 paper  |  Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-61873-184-5

Fifteen tales of horror, suspense, and macabre encounters that recount moments when the fantastic finds a crack in our everyday world.

Ford is a prolific writer with a shelf of well-deserved rewards for his novels, but short stories are his sweet spot. Armed with the paranoia of Poe, the psychological terror of Shirley Jackson, and Stephen King’s empathy for everyday people, this latest collection is both subtle and nightmare-inducing, depending on the story. The opener, “The Thousand Eyes,” is about a noir-tinged period piece about a mysterious bar, an obsessed painter, and a frightening singer with a “voice of death.” Many of the stories are subdued creature features: “Hibbler’s Minions” is about a flea circus gone awry while “From the Balcony of the Idawolf Arms” features a werewolflike shape-shifter. Finding the minor magic in the everyday world is another thread, but the shifts in style between stories are impressive, from gothic horror in “Inn of the Dreaming Dog” to mythology in “Sisyphus in Elysium” to the long-suppressed grief in the title story. Several of the stories—some of the most experimental and intriguing—find the author narrating his own experiences through fantastical events. In “The Match,” sporadic writing teacher Ford is informed that in order to keep his job, he must fight an angel, as one typically does in academia. Elsewhere, in “Monster Eight,” the author’s fictional...
counterpart has a run-in with the local monster just doing his “monster thing,” and in “The Bookcase Expedition,” he witnesses a minor war between fairies and spiders. In “Five-Pointed Spell,” the final story and one of the longest, Ford deftly spins a tale that starts with shades of Dune or Mad Max and turns into something that more closely resembles The Blair Witch Project.

A collection of wonderfully creepy gems in which each story goes its own way, to frightening effect.

THE BOOKSELLER’S SECRET
Gable, Michelle
Graydon House (368 pp.)
$28.99 | Aug. 17, 2021
978-1-5258-1155-5

A London bookshop serves as backdrop to the lives and loves of two women from different centuries.

The novel toggles back and forth between the story of (real-life) struggling author Nancy Mitford’s life during World War II and present-day (fictional) struggling author Katharine Cabot’s transformative visit to London. When the novel opens on Nancy’s story, the war is in full effect, London is being bombed nightly, and Nancy has just taken a job working at the Heywood Hill bookshop. Nancy and her seven siblings are something of a legend: Of her five sisters, one is a Hitler sympathizer, one a fascist, one a communist, and one a duchess. Nancy takes up spying for the British government by befriending a French colonel who becomes both her lover and her most eager audience for stories of her life, inspiring her to finally write her first successful novel loosely based on her own dramatic family and upbringing. Katie, meanwhile, after a truly spectacular meltdown during a family celebration in Virginia, mostly driven by her frustration with writer’s block, travels to London. Visiting the same Heywood Hill bookshop, she meets a handsome stranger who believes Nancy Mitford wrote a memoir during World War II that was never published; he would love to get his hands on that manuscript because of a family connection to the story. Katie is quickly absorbed by both the mystery of the manuscript and the charms of the man himself, and their literary investigations also inspire her to break free of the constraints of her life and writer’s block. Despite the complexity of the narrative structure, the novel seems somewhat one-note. The mysteries of the past are not overly gripping, though Nancy is an enjoyable character, as is the delightfully snooty Evelyn Waugh. But Katie elicits little deep interest, coming across as whiny and self-pitying.

Ultimately, the novel suffers from its split focus.

A SLOW FIRE BURNING
Hawkins, Paula
Riverhead (320 pp.)
$24.21 | Aug. 31, 2021
978-0-7352-1123-0

A young man has been stabbed to death on a houseboat...that much is clear. Hawkins’ third novel, after her smash debut with The Girl on the Train (2015) and a weak follow-up with Into the Water (2017), gets off to a confusing start. A series of vignettes introduce numerous characters—Irene, Deidre, Laura, Miriam, Daniel (dead), Carla, Theo, Angela (dead)—all of whom live or lived in a very small geographical
Get the ultimate inside scoop on the best new books.

New episode every Tuesday
In a new collection of stories, the Booker Prize finalist grapples with the complexities of love, illness, and identity

BY ROBERTO RODRIGUEZ

With *Filthy Animals* (Riverhead, June 22), Brandon Taylor follows up his Booker Prize–shortlisted debut novel, *Real Life*, with a collection of stories that are searing and nuanced, collapsing dichotomies of love and pain, joy and death, humans and animals. A sequence of four interlocking stories follows Lionel, a Black queer graduate student in pure mathematics who was recently released from psychiatric care after a suicide attempt. In “Pot Luck,” Lionel lingers awkwardly at a dinner party when he meets Charles, a bisexual dancer who unexpectedly follows him home. This love affair, however, is nothing short of complicated: Charles is in a nonmonogamous relationship with Sophie, who attempts to befriend Lionel, though the intimacy among the three only heightens Lionel’s anxieties and self-doubt.

Love, throughout the collection, is a terrain fraught with complexity. The protagonist of “As Though That Were Love,” Hartjes, understands love through the prism of violence and self-protection, having taught his childhood dogs to fight and hunt mercilessly; the collection’s title story follows a rowdy cohort of teenage boys as they navigate the social sphere of their small suburban town. How do we reveal ourselves to others honestly and sincerely when our identities are so constricted by social norms? Who are we when we dare to extricate ourselves from these pre-fabricated identities? Taylor spoke to us about these themes over Zoom from his home in Iowa City; our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

One of the central concerns of *Filthy Animals* seems to be mental illness, which is examined from many different angles.

One of my fixations is certainly how we live in a society in relation to other people, and how we make our interior selves known to others, and what a fraught and complicated process it can be to communicate something true about yourself. I’m also interested in the ways that trying to communicate something true about yourself is often acted upon by these social scripts that we’re constantly performing without knowing we’re performing them. So the character [of] Lionel is someone who has become aware only recently that his entire life is circumscribed by these scripts, and he doesn’t know how to be an honest and earnest and forthright person in the face of what you’re supposed to say, do, or think about how your illness manifests. He feels that he’s always being dictated to. In some ways, he’s trying to figure out how to live in the world and not do harm to others, but he doesn’t know how to do that because the scripts seem to almost require us to maim each other socially and interpersonally. It feels almost impossible, then, to live in an honest way without harming other people, so part of the solution is to just accept that as part of the social contract.

There’s an intimate relationship between love and violence throughout these stories. In what ways would you say they’re inextricable?
When I wrote the book, I hadn’t yet developed a rigorous or coherent language around what it was I was so frustrated with in literature and in culture. What I realize now is that these stories come out of the impulse to point out the ways that we as a culture limit the language [we use] to think about something. There’s this presupposition that when you love someone, you’re going to treat them in certain ways, or you’re going to do certain things to protect them, to inoculate them. But that set of presuppositions ignores the fact there are people who come from incredibly difficult or violent backgrounds and still feel loved or supported by their families or their social systems. That looks so different from what the polite, so-called civilized American ideal of what a family should be. So what I’m trying to do is portray a character’s subjectivity, a character at odds with a culture that they don’t feel a part of.

The concept of the human animal is also crucial to the collection.
I’m deeply interested in the human animal. One of the ways that culture chooses to degrade people is to call them animals. I remember being a kid and my grandma being appalled by these country boys being rough and dirty and smelly and tracking mud into our house, and her calling us a bunch of dirty animals. Calling someone an animal is a way of stripping them of their humanity. What I’m interested in is taking this idea and turning it inside out and pointing out the ways that we’re all animals. We all have parts of us that are feral. I think some stories in the book point to this feral nature as a thing to be feared, but there are others that view that as the true state. Becoming animalistic is part of being in tune with oneself.

This speaks really directly to the story “Little Beast,” in which a 20-something babysitter is overcome by the wildness of the little children she’s looking after.
Growing up I had a very rural childhood. I always associate childhood with playing under the pine trees and sloshing through the creek and throwing rocks into the pond. There’s this magical period when children just feel like life incarnate, in part because we haven’t taught them the rules of society. They’re alive and touching everything and putting things in their mouths—behaving in ways that are just pure sensation. In that story, I wanted to capture what it’s like to witness a child on the precipice of having to shed that wildness and enter the docility of living in the world. The little girl has a twin brother, and they’re White children; that little White boy is going to go off and do whatever he wants, but that little girl is going to have her identity constructed for her and is then going to be shoved into it like an ill-fitting support garment. The protagonist, Sylvia, is on the edge of some awful change in her life and sees that this little girl is about to be made docile. What do you do when you’re aware of the horrors of socially constructed gender norms?

There’s also this way that illness seem to put pressure on these characters and their desires. “Mass” and “What Made You Made Them,” for instance, are about characters dealing with terminal illness.
A big change that happened after the initial drafts of these stories was that I had several health crises, starting in 2019, that forced me to really think about my body. I went from writing about the body being out of control as an external phenomenon to it being visceral and embodied. When I went back to the stories, I had to look very deeply at the body as the source of our earthly experience. But what happens when the body goes awry or begins to fluctuate in ways you can’t control? How does it dovetail with other difficult things in your life? So in “What Made You Made Them,” I wanted to write a story that is about much more than someone dying of cancer. That story is ultimately about family and legacy and the body betraying itself, all complicated by and put under pressure [by] the protagonist’s increasing awareness of her mortality. I’m a writer who’s deeply rooted in the body. I don’t know how to write any other way.

Roberto Rodriguez is a Poe-Faulkner Fellow in Fiction at the University of Virginia. Filthy Animals received a starred review in the April 15, 2021, issue.
area and have overlapping connections and reasons to be furious at each other. We can all agree that the main question is who killed Daniel, the 23-year-old on the houseboat, but it is soon revealed that his estranged mother had died just a few weeks earlier—a drunk who probably fell, but maybe was pushed, down the stairs—and his cousin also fell to his death some years back. Untimely demise runs in the family. The highlight of these goings-on is Laura, a tiny but ferocious young woman who was seen running from Daniel’s boat with blood on her mouth and clothes the last night he was alive. Physically and mentally disabled by an accident in her childhood, Laura is so used to being accused and wronged (and actually she is quite the sticky fingers) that she’s not surprised when she’s hauled in for Daniel’s murder, though she’s pretty sure she didn’t do it. The secondary crimes and subplots include abduction, sexual assault, hit-and-run, petty larceny, plagiarism, bar brawling, breaking and entering, incest, and criminal negligence, and on top of all this there’s a novel within a novel that mirrors events recalled in flashback by one of the characters. When Irene reads it, she’s infuriated by “all the to-ing and fro-ing, all that jumping around in the timeline...Just start at the beginning, for god’s sake. Why couldn’t people just tell a story straight any longer, start to finish?” Hmmmmm. Overkill.

56 DAYS
Howard, Catherine Ryan
Blackstone (450 pp.)
$24.99 | Aug. 17, 2021
978-1-982694-65-4

A pandemic lockdown romance that ends very badly indeed.
It begins with a casual conversation about the Kennedy Space Center at a Dublin coffee shop. Architectural technologist Oliver Kennedy has never visited the place, and web services concierge Ciara Wyse thinks he really should. They take their

ONE MOMENT CAN CHANGE A LIFE FOREVER.

“A poignant and compelling narrative of a boy’s search for connection and meaning.”
—Kirkus Reviews

FLOATING TWIGS
A Boy, a Dog, and the Power of Love
CHARLES TABB


FOR ALL INQUIRIES, PLEASE EMAIL CTABB919@GMAIL.COM • HTTPS://CHARLESTABB.COM
coffees to a nearby park, they chat, he invites her to join him at a screening of a documentary about the space program. All super normal, apparently, but then comes the news of the first Irish Covid-19 infection, and then follows the first wave of restrictions, and the pair have to make a momentous decision. After a night at Ciara’s tiny flat, Oliver offers to share the relatively palatial digs his employer, KB Studios, has allotted him as part of his compensation package. The two of them stock up on every necessity they can imagine and prepare to hunker down in the Crossings till the storm has passed. But Howard, in a series of lightning dips into the past and future utterly characteristic of her suspense stories, has already broadcast the endgame for their affair: the arrival of Garda DI Leah Riordan and DS Karl Connolly at the Crossings, summoned by a neighbor alarmed by the telltale stench seeping from Oliver’s flat. The tenant, it turns out, was hiding a horrifying secret from Ciara and everyone else in Ireland, and there are depths still to be revealed beneath his deception.

Each new twist, dispensed with surgical precision, will keep you hooked, nostalgic for the days when Covid-19 was the worst threat.

“A HEART DIVIDED”
Jin Yong
Trans. by Chang, Gigi & Bryant, Shelly
St. Martin’s Griffin (400 pp.)
$12.99 paper | Aug. 24, 2021
978-1-2502-5013-1

A fresh installment in Jin Yong’s Legends of the Condor Heroes saga.

“It is no mean feat to come through the forest at night without getting lost,” quoth a mysterious old fellow, speaking with Jin Yong’s hero, Guo Jing. True enough, especially given that before even attempting to cross the woods, Guo Jing and his fellow martial artist Lotus Huang have had to battle their way past a skillful fighter-cum-sorceress named Madam Ying (“If it were not for the Competing Hands technique, which gave him the ability to cast two unrelated kung fu moves at the same time, he would have taken a nasty hit or two”) and outrun the Iron Palm Gang. All that comes in just the first signature of this fast-paced yarn. There’s much more: As the two wage war against a very bad fellow meaningfully named Viper Ouyang, they realize that they’re sweet on each other. Allowing for a plot-twisting misunderstanding or two, the lovebirds are a natural pair, capable of subduing entire empires: “I’ve got a present for you,” says Lotus. “What is it?” asks Guo Jing. “The city of Samarkand,” she replies. It helps that the two have the Golden Horde of Genghis Khan behind them, another happy relationship that involves a big backstory and all manner of diplomacy; as the story closes, Guo Jing takes a few moments to ask the dying Khan, “What is the point of occupying so much land, killing so many people and sowing so much misery?” The fierce Genghis doesn’t have much to say in response, but he might have said, “Well, it’s what I do.” There’s more adventure awaiting our happy couple, with the author’s trademark fists of fury and set-piece martial scenes piled on thick in this volume. It’s all good fun, though the plot sometimes seems contrived simply to provide an excuse for throwing punches with names like Haughty Dragon Repents and Cascading Peach Blossom Palm.

A treat for fans of Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Shaolin-style mayhem.

PARIS IS A PARTY, PARIS IS A GHOST
Kim, David Hoon
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (256 pp.)
$26.00 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-374-22972-6

A translator carries the burden of his girlfriend’s suicide through the City of Light and beyond.

Henrik Blatand, the narrator of much of Kim’s ethereal debut novel, is a Dane
of Japanese descent attending college in Paris, and he acutely recognizes the host of identities thrust upon him: “I feared I was no one, in the end,” he thinks early on. He has a girlfriend, Fumiko, who’s Japanese, but as the novel opens she rapidly succumbs to depression, locking herself in her room and ultimately killing herself. The story that follows is less a plotted narrative than a group of set pieces that underscore Henrik’s uncertain sense of both self and place before and after that event. He seems to find himself in dark, liminal places throughout the city: the catacombs, the Metro, a remote pocket of the city a Korean acquaintance insists is a secret enclave of North Korea’s elite. Fumiko’s presence lingers: Henrik mistakes another woman for her, and the medical student dissecting Fumiko’s corpse obsesses over who she was in life. Later, Henrik becomes godfather to a former classmate’s daughter, who’s being pressed to become an actress in B-list Italian horror films; subtly, the girl’s predicament stokes Henrik’s guilt over Fumiko. Kim is an elegant writer who knows how to set a mood, and the early portions of the novel thoughtfully interweave Henrik’s identity crisis and Fumiko’s loss without pat and easy gestures of grief.

But Kim is so determined to strip Henrik of conventional emotion that he becomes awkward and static. Later, Henrik says, “I don’t know what I am now. Nothing, I guess.” Kim is a talented observer, but the novel betrays a frustrating lack of forward movement.

An overly careful and restrained tale of a character who’s a constant expat, emotionally and physically.

**BILLY SUMMERS**

King, Stephen

Scribner (528 pp.)

$23.99 | Aug. 3, 2021

978-1-982173-61-6

The ever prolific King moves from his trademark horror into the realm of the hard-boiled noir thriller.

“He’s not a normal person. He’s a hired assassin, and if he doesn’t think like who and what he is, he’ll never get clear.”

So writes King of his title character, whom the Las Vegas mob has brought in to rub out another hired gun who’s been caught and is likely to talk. Billy, who goes by several names, is a complex man, a Marine veteran of the Iraq War who’s seen friends blown to pieces; he’s perhaps numbed by PTSD, but he’s goal-oriented. He’s also a reader—Zola’s novel *Thérèse Raquin* figures as a MacGuffin—which sets his employer’s wheels spinning: If a reader, then why not have he pretend he’s a writer while he’s waiting for the perfect moment to make his hit? It wouldn’t be the first writer, real or imagined, King has pressed into service, and if Billy is no Jack Torrance, there’s a lovely, subtle hint of the Overlook Hotel and its spectral occupants at the end of the yarn. It’s no spoiler to say that whereas Billy carries out the hit with grim precision, things go squirrelly, complicated by his rescue of a young woman—Alice—after she’s been roofied and raped. Billy’s revenge on her behalf is less than sweet. As a memoir grows in his laptop, Billy becomes more confident as a writer: “He doesn’t know what anyone else might think, but Billy thinks it’s good,” King writes of one day’s output. “And good that it’s awful, because awful is sometimes the truth. He guesses he really is a writer now, because that’s a writer’s thought.” Billy’s art becomes life as Alice begins to take an increasingly important part in it, crisscrossing the country with him to carry out a final hit on an errant bad guy: “He flopped back on the sofa, kicked once, and fell on the floor. His days of raping children and murdering sons and God knew what else were over.” That story within a story has a nice twist, and Billy’s battered copy of Zola’s book plays a part, too.

Murder most foul and mayhem most entertaining. Another worthy page-turner from a protean master.
“This psychological tone poem is a barbed and splendid meditation on peril.”

**INTIMACIES**

*Kitamura, Katie*

Riverhead (240 pp.)

$26.00 | Jul. 20, 2021

978-0-399-57616-4

A watchful, reticent woman sees peril and tries not to vanish.

“Every certainty can give way without notice,” thinks the narrator of Kitamura’s stunning novel, a statement both true and freighted. It’s a delight to accompany the narrator’s astute observational intelligence through these pages, as it was in *A Separation* (2017), which also unspooled completely in the mind of its speaker.

Both slim books are pared down, without chapter headings or quotation marks. A murder unsettles *A Separation*; a mugger destabilizes this new book. Its narrator is a temporary translator at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, where an unidentified head of state is on trial for atrocities in the months before the Brexit vote. The accused specifically requests the narrator to translate for him in a claustrophobic meeting with his defense team: “cross-border raid, mass grave, armed youth.” She hears and doesn’t hear the words amid her focus, just as she sees and doesn’t completely register events in her everyday life. “It is surprisingly easy to forget what you have witnessed,” she thinks, “the horrifying image or the voice speaking the unspeakable, in order to exist in the world we must and we do forget, we live in a state of I know but I do not know.” This is the crux of Kitamura’s preoccupation. She threads it brilliantly through the intimacies her character is trying to navigate: with new colleagues, women friends, and her beau, who goes away; with the work and with the nature of The Hague itself. Landscape holds a key, and on the final pages, the narrator intuits it might release her from some of the dread suffocating her. The novel packs a controlled but considerable wallop, all the more pleasurable for its nuance.

This psychological tone poem is a barbed and splendid meditation on peril.

**SOMETHING NEW UNDER THE SUN**

*Kleeman, Alexandra*

Hogarth/Crown (368 pp.)

$28.00 | Aug. 3, 2021

978-1-984826-30-5

An East Coast writer oversees the adaptation of his novel to film in a hellish version of Los Angeles.

Patrick Hamlin arrives in Hollywood to assume a vague role on the set of the movie version of his latest novel. But everything about the process is befuddling—the movie script barely resembles his story, and his role is relegated to listening to the semiphilosophical ramblings of the production assistants and transporting Cassidy Carter, the tempestuous former child actor-turned-B-lister that is starring in the film. Patrick is increasingly alarmed by the things he witnesses: Wildfires flare constantly; everyone drinks a luxe synthetic product called WAT-R that is “the same as water, just a little bit more so.” And there is a mysterious “dementia” that is afflicting people seemingly at random, regardless of age. As the surrealism of the film-set experiences blends with the nightmarishness of LA, Patrick is also coming unglued by developments at home: His emotionally fragile wife and their 9-year-old daughter are staying at an upstate New York commune, where they participate in group mourning rituals as a kind of ecological grief work. It isn’t long before everything in Patrick’s life feels like it’s spiraling toward disaster. Kleeman’s novel is idea-driven, a critique of the artifice of consumerism and Hollywood culture in which that artifice is heightened on each page, from characters talking in polished soliloquies to the ominous ubiquity of WAT-R bottles in everyone’s hands. Everything in this world is deliberately just a little bit off, like the slight telltale warp of a Photoshopped selfie. While some readers might find the
Two women fall in love on the New York subway in the latest romance from the author of *Red, White & Royal Blue*

BY LAURIE MUCHNICK

It turns out that Jane has been caught on the Q train since the 1970s, never getting older and never going anywhere. Can August and her friends figure out what happened and help Jane get off the train? The book brings Brooklyn vividly to life, though McQuiston wrote most of it while living in Colorado. Visiting New York to do research convinced her she was meant to be a New Yorker, and she moved just before the lockdown began last year. I spoke to her by Zoom from her new apartment in Queens; our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Your first book was about two men and your new book is about two women. How is it different writing about men falling in love versus women falling in love?

I think the beauty of the queer experience is that there is no one queer experience. I could write 300 books about women falling in love, and they would all be different and challenging in different ways. And, honestly, what was more challenging than gender or anything in this book was just trying to write a romance in which one person can’t leave the subway! But ultimately I think these are two very different books that make you feel the same way at the end even though they use two different equations to get to the same solution.

And how do you want us to feel at the end?

I want you to feel hopeful and happy and comforted. And like you’ve just eaten a really delicious cheeseburger.

There’s a lot of food in this book! Jane recovers her past through sense memories—smells, tastes, sounds.

Did you do a lot of research or just put in things you love?

It was both, but I did do a lot of research into, specifically, music that came out in the early to mid-1970s that I thought Jane would like. It’s hard because you
don’t want to pick something that’s super-clichéd, the first song you think of. So I did more figuring out what was No. 27 on the Billboard charts that week—not No. 1 but No. 27.

The way you write about the New York City subway is almost romantic, in spite of all the rats. I’m originally from Southern Louisiana, and we don’t have a lot of public transit, certainly not underground public transit. So the first time I came to New York, when I was a teenager, and experienced the subway, it was like, Wow, this is just like in a movie. It was very, very exciting, and there’s still a little bit of magic to it, even after living in New York for a while. I’ve had so many moments where you glance out the window and look into the window of the next train, and it’s just this one little glancing moment in time where your life and another 500 people’s lives cross for half a second. It feels so incidental, and there’s something I found really, really romantic and wistful and beautiful and poetic about that. I tried to put as much of that into the book as I could, even though I like to think this book is really honest about what the subway is like. There are terrible things about it, but yesterday I had this moment. I was coming back from the doctor’s office, and I was sitting across from a person who was traveling with a flowering tree. And there was a Brooklinen ad, which is mentioned in the book. It’s stuff like that that made me write the book, these weird serendipitous moments of fate.

Why did you pick the Q train? It’s one of the most picturesque lines—it’s aboveground for most of the way through Brooklyn. And it goes all the way to the beach but also hits Chinatown and Times Square, it really gives you all the greatest hits of New York. And I wanted to pick a line that was at least half aboveground because I didn’t want Jane to be in the dark all the time. She has to be stuck on a train—let her see some sights.

In each of your books, one of the protagonists is bisexual. Why is that? I think it’s funny, because neither of my books are ever described as bisexual books even though the leads are both bisexual. And I’ve been wondering what kind of book I could write that would be called a bisexual book. I mean, at some point, a romance is a happily-ever-after between two people, but I think that bisexual people continue to be bisexual, no matter who they’re with. I think bisexuality is a very specific queer point of view. And I don’t know how to write some-body who’s not bisexual because my characters will always be noticing that every person is hot, regardless of gender, because that’s just how I see the world.

Both your books are romantic comedies, but this one has elements of fantasy. Who are some of your favorite writers? I read really broadly—I have something for everyone back here [waving at bookshelves]. The thing I’m looking for, more than anything, regardless of genre, is books that have a specific point of view and really commit to it—they’re not going to pull any punches. My favorite romance writer right now is Talia Hibbert; everything she does excites me so much. I also love Alyssa Cole; she’s sharp and funny and voice-y. I really enjoy Sally Thorne and Helen Hoang and Jasmine Guillory. Olivia Waite has a bunch of lesbian historicals that are really fun.

Let me look at my bookshelves—I’m going to cheat! I love Abby Jimenez, she’s another super voice-y author. And oh! I love Emily Henry. She’s a relatively new voice in romance, and she has a really, really effective balance of poignant themes and themes of grief and family trauma and stuff like that with this really funny, clever narration. One of my favorite things about romance is this wonderful intersection of human pain and human joy. Those are the extremes of humanity, and romance writers manage to balance them in a fun, pastel-covered book that makes you really happy at the end.

One Last Stop was reviewed in the Feb. 15, 2021, issue.
A malfunction has caused a cargo vehicle to collide with the space station, seriously injuring one of Beckwith's two Russian crew mates. Blowing off both Houston and Moscow, who guarantee she will serve a long prison term if she disobeys orders to make the return trip, she draws the wrath of world powers invested in the space station. And in lobbying the U.S. government to cancel Brazil's new "consolidation" policy, which is to set massive fires in the jungle to clear out tens of thousands of tribespeople, she creates political trouble for the two-faced, misogynistic American president. He wants no part of any intervention even when he says he does. Her campaign, which makes her a sensation on social media, resonates most strongly with her niece Sonia, a young volunteer doctor in the rainforest. Kluger, a *Time* veteran who has written several books about space including *Lost Moon: The Perilous Voyage of Apollo 13* (1994) with astronaut James Lovell, fuels the narrative with fascinating technical details. And the action scenes, including a spacewalk in which a fever-ridden Beckwith must repair a coolant system leaking lethal ammonia, are pretty gripping. But the heroine is mostly a collection of righteous intentions, and with the exception of a 5-year-old Guarani boy in Sonia's loving care, Kluger gives no voice to the tribespeople, presenting them as faceless victims.

A good adventure story undercut by its dated point of view.

**SONGBIRDS**

*Lefteri, Christy*

Ballantine (336 pp.)

$27.00 | Aug. 3, 2021

978-0-593-23804-2

The disappearance of an immigrant working in Cyprus reveals secrets personal and political. Nisha is a migrant worker who left her home in Sri Lanka for a job as a nanny and housekeeper in Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus. Petra, a well-off optician who is Nisha's employer, is more dependent than she realizes on the nurturing, hardworking nanny. Yiannis, the tenant in an apartment in Petra's house, is having a secret affair with Nisha (which could get Nisha fired or even deported) and has fallen in love with her. When Nisha disappears without warning one night, Petra and Yiannis soon discover they don't know her at all. The novel brings a gradual revelation of Nisha's many secrets, and it uncovers Petra's and Yiannis' hidden pasts as well. Nisha, who left her own young daughter with family in Sri Lanka to find work, was the true mother figure to Aliki, Petra's 9-year-old daughter. Petra's relationship to the child has always been fraught; her husband was diagnosed with cancer weeks after she became pregnant, and he died before the baby's birth. Even before Nisha vanished, Aliki had stopped talking to her mother, and now Petra must examine her parenting. Yiannis left his rural roots behind to become successful in finance but crashed out of that career and now makes a living as a forager of wild foods for restaurants. He also has a lucrative secret occupation: poaching songbirds. Cyprus lies on major migration routes between Europe and Africa, and Yiannis and his fellow poachers catch thousands of the tiny birds.
with mist nets and glue sticks, then kill them and sell them as gourmet delicacies. Lefteri describes the poachers’ methods in disturbing detail, and the birds serve too as a metaphor for human refugees. Petra reports Nisha’s disappearance, but the police have no interest in looking for a missing migrant worker, so she searches on her own. Her quest leads her to a world of exploitation of migrants she never knew existed, and she and Yiannis join forces to try to uncover Nisha’s fate. Although the book’s dialogue can sometimes be stilted or preachy, its characters are engaging and its story moving.

This well-crafted novel puts a poignantly human face on often invisible migrant workers.

**LEAVE SOCIETY**

*Lin, Tao*

Vintage (368 pp.)

$16.00 paper | Aug. 3, 2021

978-1-101-97447-6

Lin’s new novel blends metafiction with commentary on modern medicine, with mixed results.

As in much of Lin’s fiction, the main character here appears to be a stand-in for the author: There’s a reference to protagonist Li spending a decade “writing existential autofiction,” and at one point he sends an email to his editor about “a nonfiction book on psychedelics” that sounds not unlike Lin’s book *Trip* (2018). In that same email, Li writes a summary of events we read about earlier in the book—a visit to his parents in Taiwan—making this a work of autofiction that is in part about writing a work of autofiction. That isn’t the only thread running through the book, however. Li is also coping with his
parents’ aging and his concern over their health, often via worrying about his father’s consumption of statins and inveighing against the toxins found in store-bought coffee. Li also spends time consuming cannabis and/or LSD, and some of the novel’s highlights come from passages that reflect a transcendent state of consciousness. “The city’s artificial lights, zooming by on cars, floating past on lamps, seemed pretty and affecting as near, teary stars.” Elsewhere, the prose can feel clunky or overly expositional—particularly an aside telling the reader that Wikipedia “aggregated the mainstream.” And a subplot about the growing relationship between Li and Kay, an editor, includes an email from Li which feels far too candid: “People used to do enemas a lot, it seems, but now they do it less, maybe due to fear of butts/poop.” Li’s interactions with his parents are unpredictable; the rest of this novel, however, feels oddly detached.

Ambitious in some places and quotidian in others.

“A loss of faith gives way to something much stronger.”

**GOD SPARE THE GIRLS**

McKinney, Kelsey

Morrow/HarperCollins (320 pp.)

$27.99 | Jun. 22, 2021

978-0-06-302025-2

A looming wedding, an extramarital affair, and a broken virginity pact: family drama with a born-again twist.

Caroline Nolan can’t wait to escape. It’s the summer before her freshman year of college, and she’s excited to leave her life as the daughter of Luke Nolan, head evangelical preacher in Hope, Texas, and start forging her own way. Caroline doesn’t want to follow in her mother’s footsteps as the preacher’s perfect wife; nor does she see a place for herself on her older sister Abigail’s path as the preacher’s perfect daughter. But then life as she knows it starts to crumble. On the evening after Abigail’s bridal shower, Caroline has sex with the son of a church elder and removes her purity ring—placed there by her father. She doesn’t feel the catastrophic guilt she had expected but instead starts to question who she is: “A good Christian would feel guilty. Caroline felt nothing at all.” Later, Caroline and her family must reckon with a far more disastrous event: Luke confesses to the church elders that he had an affair with Caroline’s fourth grade teacher. With their family life in ruins and their father’s career hanging in the balance, Caroline and Abigail—armed with a resounding feeling of betrayal—leave their parents’ home to stay at the ranch left to them by their grandmother. All the while their mother’s confusing words echo in Caroline’s thoughts: “This land hasn’t been kind to the women of our family. It holds a lot of bitterness.” The longer the sisters stay at the ranch, the more uncomfortable truths they uncover and the more they must grapple with their roles in the family and what they want for the future. The highlight of McKinney’s authentic narrative is her treatment of relationships, and Caroline and Abigail’s growing connection as the rest of their world threatens to fall apart is at once engaging, witty, and heartbreaking.

A loss of faith gives way to something much stronger.
dentist who’s the heir to a tobacco fortune and asking Mira to come to their wedding. Though Mira is shocked to discover that the wedding is taking place at a restored plantation now functioning as a sort of antebellum theme park, complete with locals playing the roles of slaves, she agrees to attend, partly because she wants to see Jesse, who’s Black and was formerly close to both her and Celine. Her friendship with Jesse fell apart when, as kids, they broke into the Woodsman Plantation, the same place the wedding is being held. Mira ran away because she thought she saw ghosts, and, soon after, Jesse was accused of killing a man whose body washed up in the river nearby. Returning to the plantation, Mira again strongly senses the presence of slaves who were killed during an attempted rebellion and feels that they are about to take revenge on the descendants of their former masters—a feeling that is borne out as the wedding goes awry in deadly ways. A subplot involving a romantic attraction between Mira and Jesse seems shoehorned in, and some of the later plot twists are more convenient than convincing. But McQueen carefully walks the line between visions and reality, weaving the voices and stories of the former slaves into the present-day lives and thoughts of her characters as history that has been denied and buried asserts itself.

An original, if sometimes melodramatic, look at how the past bleeds into the present.

**AN UNRELIABLE TRUTH**

*Methos, Victor*

Thomas & Mercer (349 pp.)

$15.95 paper | Aug. 17, 2021

978-1-5420-2266-8

Defense attorney Dylan Aster’s unblemished trial record is threatened by an impossible case he gets sucked into.

Madeline Ismera, a public defender in Oregon’s Jackson County, reaches out to a friend in the DA’s office of Nevada’s Clark County to ask Dylan for help exactly because of his stellar reputation. The defendant she’s
been assigned, diagnosed schizophrenic Arlo Ward, is accused of a horrific crime in Coyote Canyon: the slaughter, partial dismemberment, and lewd posing of three young campers (a fourth, Holly Fallows, escaped only by jumping off a cliff ahead of her shadowy pursuer). The police picked him up covered with blood very close to the crime scene, and he’s actually confessed to the murders in the hope of attracting media attention that will build the audience for the tell-all book he plans to write in order to leave the proceeds to his wife and daughter. Meeting with Arlo, Dylan and his law partner, Lily Ricci, quickly realize that the best defense they can possibly provide will have to contend with an obstacle even more daunting than ravenously competitive Jackson County DA Kelly Whitewolf: Arlo’s own refusal to plead not guilty. “I think he wants to believe he did this,” Madeline tells Dylan. What can a lawyer do when everyone he meets, from the prosecutor to the police to the witnesses to his own client, is determined to thwart his attempts to save the client’s life? The courtroom duels are correspondingly sharp even though the outcome seems like a forgone conclusion. Or does it?

A B-minus mystery that’s a straight-A legal thriller, with a final scene as satisfying as it is disturbing.

MY POLICEMAN
Roberts, Bethan
Penguin (304 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-14-313698-9

A woman looks back on her life with her husband and his gay lover.

Inspired by the love life of novelist E.M. Forster, Roberts’ new book captures an unconventional—and illegal—love triangle in 1950s England. Opening in October 1999, retired schoolteacher Marion is writing a “confession of sorts” to Patrick, her husband’s lover, for whom she is caring after a near-fatal stroke: “When I am finished, I plan to read this account to you, Patrick, because you can’t answer back any more.” From there, Marion’s letter travels back 48 years to when she met her future husband, Tom. She tells the story of her pining for Tom and how their friendship turned into (an oft one-sided) courtship. The narrative framing allows her to offer insight into her past from the perch of the present (“I remember that I once felt intense and secret things, just like you, Patrick”). About Tom and Marion’s whirlwind wedding, she writes, “At the time it was thrilling, this dizzy rush into marriage, and it was flattering, too. But now I suspect he wanted to get it over with, before he changed his mind.” Eventually, the novel switches perspectives and offers Patrick’s journal entries from the past. He writes about his beloved job as a museum curator; his relationship with Tom (whom he calls “my policeman”); and navigating his sexuality during a time when being gay was illegal. As their lives become more entangled, Marion slowly realizes the truth about Patrick and Tom. When a rash and unforgivable decision is made, their lives are changed forever. The novel’s dueling perspectives allow both Marion and Patrick to explore the pain and joy of loving the same man. Roberts beautifully captures the devastation of being unable or unwilling to live in one’s truth, and the quiet ending offers a poignant moment of respite for everyone. Marion, Tom, and Patrick haven’t led the lives they expected or wanted to, but there’s still time left. Nothing can be taken back, but perhaps the truth can begin to heal them all.

A melancholy story about love, loss, and unnecessary suffering.
Estranged childhood friends attempt to reconnect while walking the Thames Path.

Years ago, in their teens, Joel Thompson and Theo Hern promised each other that one day they would walk the entirety of the Thames Path together. Now, about to turn 30, they haven’t spoken in years and are in very different places in life. Theo moved back to his parents’ house after having a quarter-life crisis, and they’ve just served him an eviction notice a week before his 30th birthday. Joel, in London, has been doing extremely well—impressive career in television, loving relationship with his high school sweetheart—except for one piece of news he’s just received. Wanting to make things right with his old friend, Joel shows up on his doorstep on the morning of Theo’s birthday, imploring Theo to finally walk the Thames Path together. Despite his reluctance and the still-fresh pain from their past, Theo meets Joel at the trailhead and the walk begins. Along the way, old wounds will be reopened, but maybe that way they can finally heal. Writing with both great humor and heart, Roper has a light touch that keeps the reader laughing even while he gently pulls on the heartstrings. Theo and Joel have hurt each other in the past, and their history of miscommunication and trauma feels incredibly real, but their longing for reconnection and nostalgia for what they once were also shines through. Even in hard moments, there is an element of farce, especially in scenes when Joel, Theo, and Joel’s girlfriend, Amber, play around with who knows what secret. Although the end might not land with everyone, the story of two friends finding each other again will resonate with most.

A funny and poignant portrait of friendship.
“Lyrical, funny, smart, and heartbreaking.”

AMERICAN ESTRANGEMENT
Sayrafiezadeh, Saïd
Norton (192 pp.)
$25.95 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-0-393-54123-6

Seven thematically linked stories that explore the lonely schisms in American life.

Estrangement, the act of being separate from a person or group with whom you were once close, is the definitive condition of Sayrafiezadeh’s America and the binding agent of his lyrical, funny, and disquieting collection. In “Scenic Route,” a couple so incompatible that they’re dumped by their couples counselor try to heal their relationship by driving together across the United States—except the states are not united; visas are necessary; the state lines are guarded by border patrol agents; and as the couple progress westward, they encounter increasing antagonism, some of it generated by their incompatibility, the rest by the xenophobic land in which they once, as fellow Americans, belonged. In “Fairground”—another dystopian romp—our narrator is taken to a public hanging at age 6 or 7 or 8 by Mr. Montgomery, his stepfather at the time. Why go to a hanging? Because going to executions “was what fathers did with sons.” The hanging is in the high school football arena, and Mr. Montgomery buys the narrator a “jumbo-sized” popcorn and excitedly explains “how in his day they didn’t have hangings, but shot the condemned instead. In his father’s day, they were beheaded with silver sabers, and so on down the line: guns, swords, poison, fire.” Meanwhile, the narrator muses about Mr. Montgomery’s impermanence in his life, which is obvious to him if not to Mr. Montgomery. Sayrafiezadeh’s collection is mostly masterful and always fun, but its final story, “A Beginner’s Guide to Estrangement,” may be its most affecting. Here our narrator is Danush Jamshid, aka Danny McDade, who is nearly 35 years old and has seen his biological father only twice in the last 30 years. Now, despite the State Department’s level 4 travel advisory, he has flown into Tehran to visit his aging father. But given the fraught political history between the U.S. and Iran, and given the fact that Danny’s father abandoned Danny and his mother—well, both parties know this reunion, which is supposed to last just five days, constitutes their last chance to build what could have been a lifelong relationship. An elegy for a more united past? A warning against a less united future? A lyrical sequence of stories about infinitely various forms of personal and familial and political estrangement that we fragile humans allow to define our lives? All of the above? Check.

Lyrical, funny, smart, and heartbreaking.

SAFE IN MY ARMS
Shepard, Sara
Dutton (336 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Jul. 27, 2021
978-1-5247-4678-0

Three women who are new to a Southern California beach town are found at a crime scene and, as the investigation takes place, seek to hide the secrets that brought them to town.

Andrea Vaughan, a single mom to her son, Arthur; Ronnie Stuckey, mom to Esme; and Lauren Smith, mom to Matthew, are all new to Raisin Beach, a well-to-do community within commuting distance of Los Angeles. Each of their children is a student at the town’s expensive and elite Silver Swans Nursery Academy. But after each of the women receive an anonymous note trying to get them to leave the school, the school’s director, Piper Jovan, is violently attacked and left in a coma. Andrea, Ronnie, and Lauren were in the school’s hallway when it happened, though none of them saw, heard, or remembers exactly what transpired. And all three have secrets they’re trying to hide—and so does Piper. The story unspools from the various women’s perspectives as they try to keep their pasts from public eyes. The secrets are both large and small, deeply
hidden and almost transparent: a kidnapped child, embezzlement, work as a stripper, postpartum rage, being wealthy, and being transgender, among others. More than a narrative, the story splits and diverts into many streams before easing back to those few days that pass between the attack on Piper and the resolution of the police investigation. Coincidences abound, and readers are asked to take the deus ex machina moments without questioning the unlikelihood of their occurrences.

While there are parallels to Liane Moriarty’s Big Little Lies, this volume doesn’t reach the same heights.

A FIRE IN THE NIGHT
Swann, Christopher
Crooked Lane (288 pp.)
$26.99 | Sep. 7, 2021
978-1-64385-756-5

Life abruptly gets more interesting and more dangerous for a retired professor of medieval history. There are excellent reasons on both sides that Nick Anthony hasn’t spoken to his brother, Jay Bashir, for 20 years. So when Jay phones him out of the blue asking for help, Nick doesn’t just hang up; he rips out the phone in his North Carolina mountaintop retreat. Next thing he knows, he has two unexpected visitors. The first, Jackson County Deputy Joshua Sams, tells him that Jay and his wife, Carol, have been found dead inside their burned-out house in Tampa—Jay dead of smoke inhalation, Carol with her throat slit—and asks him if he’s seen their 16-year-old daughter, Annalise, who’s gone missing along
with her boyfriend, Eric Morgan. The second is Annalise herself, who’s followed her father’s urgent plea to deliver a mysterious map and thumb drive to her uncle she’s never met. Now that she’s made her way to Nick’s despite a raging fever, she’d just as soon that he didn’t say anything about her to the police. As it turns out, Nick, whose academic work was supplemented by his wildly improbable secret life as a CIA agent, has a few other people he can call on for help. And he’s going to need every one of them along with his rusty combat skills, because Cole, the freelance mercenary whose crew killed Jay and Carol and Eric in the search for the highly equivocal gifts Annalise brought her uncle, have set their sights on her, and her trail of course leads straight to Nick.

Highly proficient one-dimensional thrills for readers who’d rather do without all those complications.

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**SUMMER FUN**

Thornton, Jeanne

Soho (432 pp.)

$27.00 | Jul. 27, 2021

978-1-641-29238-2

While stranded at a dead-end job in the New Mexico desert, a trans woman practices witchcraft and writes letters to an enigmatic musical legend.

This wildly imaginative novel by a two-time Lambda Literary Award finalist is framed as a series of lengthy missives penned by Gala, who works a maintenance job at a hostel in Truth or Consequences, to B——, the former frontman of the Get Happies, a 1960s California pop band. “With this letter, a sorcery has come upon you,” Gala informs her correspondent. “You will listen to what I have to say to you. You have no choice.” Gala proceeds to recount to B—— an impossibly omniscient narrating of B——’s own life and career, from B——’s start as a sensitive, melancholy child with an abusive father to the formation of the band with B——’s brothers and cousin and the existential crisis that derail the recording of *Summer Fun*, their legendary unreleased album and possible masterpiece. In alternating letters, Gala describes her own daily life, including an ambivalent friendship with trans woman Ronda and a relationship with Caroline, a cis lesbian videographer who turns up in Truth or Consequences—or has Gala “summoned” her? The apparent inspirations for B—— and the Get Happies are Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys, although an author’s note clarifies that “the act of projecting one’s own context onto a myth does not make any truth-claims about the world or the characters in the myth.” Gala’s letters themselves could represent a fan’s projection of meaning onto the unreachable pop star, a vital act of creation in its own right and one that resonates intriguingly with the assertion of trans identity. Thornton’s writing is as rich as her ideas and spiked with wit, though the story frequently drags and is overstuffed with curiosities, such as the hovercraft that characters inexplicably drive.

Like the mysterious album of the title, a messy, mesmerizing, and deeply personal work of art.

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**The Abolitionist**

A Play

BARRY BENNETT BLANDER

ISBN: 1-4010-5311-4

“What a surprise. *The Abolitionist* has the power and inexorable movement of Greek tragedy.”

—Jennifer Blake, Former NYT Best Selling Historical Romance Writer

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**NIGHTBITCH**

Yoder, Rachel

Doubleday (256 pp.)

$25.95 | Jul. 20, 2021

978-0-385-54681-2

A new mother who fears she’s going through a frightening and exhilarating transformation leans into the feral side of motherhood.

In this myth-steeped debut, an unnamed artist and mother, not having had a solid night’s sleep since her son was born more than two years earlier, has begun waking enraged in the night. Her obli-
“An enjoyable adventure with a likable heroine in search of the life she really wants.”

THE OTHER ME

A struggling artist is thrown into an alternate life as a disappointed housewife in this debut novel. Art school graduate Kelly Holter is more or less contented with her life in Chicago. She’s single and she’s never exhibited her work in a gallery, but she has her best friend, Linnea Flood, a more successful artist, and her cat, Meeks. On her 29th birthday, Kelly is attending Linnea’s first solo exhibition when she walks through an ordinary-seeming bathroom door and is unexpectedly transported to a birthday party in her own honor at an Italian restaurant in Michigan. Michigan Kelly has a husband, Eric Hyde, a man she hardly knew in high school; a big extended family; a friendly dog named Bear; and art supplies she’s forgotten how to use. Unsettling memory glitches, a trip to Chicago to find Linnea, who may or may not remember who she really is, and a suspicion that Eric may be involved in whatever is going on send Kelly on a quest to discover how she ended up in a life she didn’t choose and isn’t sure she wants. Hidden document files, an unreliable artificial intelligence app, and an annoying voice-enabled refrigerator that tracks Kelly and Eric’s food purchases provide tantalizing clues. Convincing alternate-universe mechanics and a subtle lesson in the perils of manipulating other people to get what we want raise the bar in this fun, well-paced story.

An enjoyable adventure with a likable heroine in search of the life she really wants.
**MYSTERY**

**PARTNERS IN LIME**
Baker, Bree  
Poisoned Pen (352 pp.)  
$8.99 paper | Aug. 31, 2021  
978-1-72823-862-3

A strong woman with personal demons investigates yet another seaside murder.

Everly Swan’s Outer Banks tea shop is thriving. So is her romance with Detective Grady Hays. The only problems are her belief in the Swan curse—the men Swan women love die—competition from a new tea shop, and her penchant for meddling in murder cases. Delivering food to a rehearsal for *The Lost Colony*, she and Grady arrive to see Everly’s friend Matt Darning show off his prowess with a longbow, a skill that makes him a suspect when a surfer he was seen arguing with is found dead with an arrow in his back. Not only did Matt, a former pro surfer, have a long-running feud with Kai Larsen, but he was once married to Tara, Kai’s wife. Although Grady emphatically tells Everly to stay out of the investigation, her stubborn belief in Matt won’t allow her to quit despite the threat to their romance. Tara becomes a suspect when Everly sees an invitation to a divorce party to celebrate getting rid of her cheating husband. Although Matt’s very popular, the evidence piles up against him, and Everly must hunt for more suspects, putting her at cross-purposes with Grady, who’s furious when she’s threatened but won’t give up.

* A believable and determined sleuth whose life is far from perfect despite her laid-back beach lifestyle.

**CAMPUS BONES**
Barz, Vivian  
Thomas & Mercer (281 pp.)  
$15.95 paper | Aug. 24, 2021  
978-1-5420-2793-9

A psychic college professor held at gunpoint by a student pleading innocence in the death of his recent ex-girlfriend decides to look into the case once the would-be shooter is dead.

Fun-loving Samantha has had her fill of slumming it with the eco-interested at Lamount University. She’s on the verge of dumping her new friends when she’s dumped by longtime boyfriend Bryan McDougal. She’s not going to let that stand in her way of having a little fun and a few margaritas until…she can’t remember the rest. But her big night out becomes something much darker when her body is found in her room, making Bryan suspect No. 1.

Teaching assistant Jake Bergman relays this summary quickly to his mentor, professor Eric Evans, when Bryan accosts the two of them with a gun. Bryan thinks Eric can give him answers because Eric’s known for his psychic gift, so he must know that Bryan would never hurt Samantha. Eric can’t even begin to ponder the ethics of helping before someone knocks on the door and Bryan scoots out the window—and soon falls from the top of a parking garage in an apparent suicide. Eric and Jake aren’t so sure, and Jake suspects that both Samantha’s and Bryan’s deaths may relate to Samantha’s eco-hobby and membership with the eco-activists (or eco-terrorists?) in Defenders of the Earth. Eric shares his thoughts with his recent ex, Susan Marlan, who just happens to be an FBI agent working what could be a related case. Meanwhile, Jake investigates the old-fashioned way, by infiltrating DOTE, though doing so may be riskier than he imagined.

* Well-drawn and character-driven, even though the most interesting characters don’t outlive the first few chapters.*
“Lively and well plotted, with enchanting glimpses of life in Paris from an American’s-eye view.”

DESIGNS ON THE DEAD
Bernhard, Emilia
Crooked Lane (320 pp.)
$26.99 | Sep. 7, 2021
978-1-64385-826-5

An American expatriate investigates the death of a designer.

After living abroad for decades with her banker husband, Alan Field, part-time poet Rachel Levis has come to feel at home in Paris. But negotiating the labyrinth of tests and certifications required to get a private investigator’s license is still a challenge. Both her husband and her best friend, Magda Stevens, encourage her, and to her delight, Capitaine Boussicault of the local police is supportive, since he found her helpful in solving two of his previous cases. While she’s still navigating the system, a third puzzle drops into her lap: Roland Guipure, head designer of the House of Sauveterre, dies of a heroin overdose at his 40th birthday party at trendy LaLa Lounge. Rachel is leery when she reads that left-handed Guipure died of a fatal injection in his left arm, and the police soon confirm her suspicion that the heir to the fashion empire was murdered. With Boussicault’s blessing, Rachel and Magda interview beaucoup de suspects, including Roland’s twin sister, Antoinette, who handles the financial end of Sauveterre; his former lover Cyrille Thieriot; and aspiring biographer Gédéon Naquet. They offer a host of bogus cover stories, pretending to be old lovers, or as entertaining, as the truth: that they are filmmakers hoping to make a movie of his life story. But none are as outlandish, or as entertaining, as the truth: that they are ladies of a certain age who amuse themselves playing detective with an impressive record of success.

Lively and well plotted, with enchanting glimpses of life in Paris from an American’s-eye view.

MURDER BY THE BOOKEND
Black, Laura Gail
Crooked Lane (304 pp.)
$26.99 | Sep. 7, 2021
978-1-64385-826-5

A North Carolina bookshop becomes a magnet for murder.

Having cleared her name in the killing of her uncle, Paul Baxter, in For Whom the Book Tolls (2020), Jenna Quinn turns her attention to his shop, which she of course has inherited. First the name. To her ear, “Baxter’s Book Emporium” lacks pizzazz. So she rechristens Hokes Folly’s premier source of antique books “Twice Upon a Time.” Then the clientele. She invites the cream of local society to her grand reopening party, hoping to entice them with her rare and well-preserved wares. Of course many of Hokes Folly’s glitterati turn out to be pains in the parchment. Snooty Selina March makes snide comments about the food and tosses the fragile merchandise on the floor. Linus Talbot insists that the invitation’s plus-one entitles him to bring his dog, Eddy, decked out in a bow tie that matches his own. Thank goodness the crowd includes handsome Detective Keith Logan. Not only does Jenna take his presence as a sign that their budding romance is going well, but she’s able to call on his professional skills when Talbot turns up dead in the parking lot. Still, much as she’d like to sit back and wait for the police to solve the crime, Jenna can’t—not after a local reporter runs a story pointing out that this is now the third death tied to her shop. So along with her store manager, Mason Craig, and her best friend, Rita Wallace, she does what any small-town shopkeeper would do: hunts down the killer on her own.

A plot as well-thumbed as the heroine’s volumes and as likely to bring joy to true fans.

AN UNTIDY DEATH
Brett, Simon
Severn House (192 pp.)
$28.99 | Sep. 7, 2021
978-1-78029-128-4

Ellen Curtis, whose profession is decluttering her clients’ homes, cleans up a lot more in her second case.

It’s ironic that Alexandra Richards wants Space-Woman, Ellen’s company, to clean out her mother’s home in Brighton because Ingrid Richards herself seems to be the main thing clogging her daughter’s life. Ingrid has traveled the world as a flamboyant journalist, but she’s never taken proper responsibility for the daughter her brief relationship with fellow reporter Niall Connor left her with. Now that Niall has married celebrity Daily Mail columnist Grace Bellamy, everyone seems to be well over the birth of Alexandra, leaving Ingrid surrounded by unsorted papers and Alexandra left to solace herself with the smugly lukewarm endearments of computer repairman Walter Rainbird. Meantime, Ellen frets over the welfare of waitress Mary Griffin, whose abusive husband has been imprisoned since trashing her place, and her own children, remote, London-based Juliet and Nottingham Trent student Ben. Brett’s exposition is a model of effortless efficiency. In no time at all, he sketches out Ellen’s fraught relationship with the ex-actress mother she calls Fleur, details the 1986 hostage rescue in Beirut that left Ingrid scarred and BBC cameraman Phil Dickie crippled, traces Ellen’s uphill battle to declutter the household of widowed Edward Finch, who coyly intimates that he may have murdered his wife, kills off Ingrid in a sadly predictable house fire, and hints that her death may not have been accidental.

A neatly constructed whodunit punctuated by series regulars who periodically break in to speak their piece.
A SCONE OF CONTENTION
Burdette, Lucy
Crooked Lane (336 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-1-64385-624-7

A scone-by-scone tour of glorious Scotland.

Key West food writer Hayley Snow and police detective Nathan Bransford have recently married. Their honeymoon is a bit of an odd one, since Hayley’s neighbor, fellow Outlander fanatic Miss Gloria, and Nathan’s mother, Helen, are both accompanying them while they stay with Nathan’s sister, Vera, and her husband, William, in St. Andrews, Scotland. Vera, who’s working on a book project, plans to highlight thin places, mystical spots where heaven and Earth are close. William has made plans for Nathan that all involve golf, leaving the women on their own for parts of the trip that must dovetail with Vera’s schedule in order for her to finish up loose ends. A dinner party at the home of Vera’s long-time friend Ainsley, who’s organizing the project, introduces Glenda and her husband, Gavin, who are pushing the book in a totally new direction that includes virtual reality content. Hayley makes friends with Ainsley’s chef, who’s devastated when Glenda becomes ill and the police suspect poisoning. Further tragedy swiftly follows when someone is killed on a visit to the famous Falkirk Wheel. The trip continues, but the palpable tension encourages Hayley to investigate, putting her and Miss Gloria in danger.

Foodies and Outlander fans will rejoice in the references to both in this not-so-mysterious paean to Scotland.

THE DOUBLE MOTHER
Bussi, Michel
World Noir (480 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Aug. 17, 2021
978-1-60945-519-4

A daring robbery in Normandy gets tangled with a mystery of a much more unlikely kind.

Malone Moulin is only 3 1/2, but he tells everyone who’ll listen that his mother, Amanda Moulin, isn’t really his mother. One of the people who listens is school psychologist Vasily Dragonman, who brings the clues Malone keeps saying he hears from Gouti, his beloved stuffed agouti, to the attention of Capt. Marianne Augresse of the Le Havre police. The story is nonsense, of course—Amanda and Dimitri Moulin have extensive documentation going back to a birth certificate proving that Malone is their son—and at any rate Marianne is already preoccupied with the high-stakes robberies of four exclusive boutiques evidently planned down to the smallest detail by four thieves working together. Two of the presumed robbers, local lowlifes Cyril and Ilona Lukowik, soon turn up dead, and a third, Timo Soler, has gone to ground somewhere with a police officer’s bullet in his chest. But who is the fourth? Marianne suspects wanted killer Alexis Zerda, but her officers can’t find him.

As the search widens and the trail grows bloodier, Marianne, whose downtime from her job is fueled by her addiction to the interactive website www.want-to-kill.com, finds her questions multiplying until at length she realizes that the two cases she’s been struggling to juggle are one case after all. Bussi piles on the twists with a sovereign indifference to plausibility, though savvy readers will see many of them coming. What they won’t see in advance is the nuanced compassion for almost everyone involved in the mind-boggling fraud at the heart of the mystery.

THE SECRET STAIRCASE
Connolly, Sheila
Minotaur (304 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 24, 2021
978-1-2501-3590-2

An effort to turn a Maryland town into a Victorian living-history museum is stymied by murder.

Kate Hamilton is nearly overwhelmed by the sheer scope of the job her friend Lisbeth has talked her into. The Henry Barton Mansion is the centerpiece of Lisbeth’s effort to turn dying Asheboro into a tourist mecca. The first job is to find contractors to bring the electricity and plumbing up to code before the job of restoring the house, which is in remarkably good shape. With help from researcher Carroll Peterson and her own boyfriend, professor Josh Wainwright, Kate tries to find out more about the reclusive Henry and Mary Barton. After interviewing several contractors, Kate hires Morgan Wheeler, who’s respectful of the house and Kate’s plans. When work begins in the kitchen, Morgan sees that the proportions are off. Using a spy cam, he peers behind a false wall and discovers a corpse at the bottom of a closed-off stairway. Although the body has been there a long time, the police must still get involved, and Kate’s curiosity is piqued. One of Morgan’s subcontractors, a rather unpleasant plumber, is soon found dead at the bottom of the cellar stairs. The discovery of Mary’s diaries not only shines a light on the Bartons’ lives, but also provides a clue to murder.

Although the mystery has its moments, it’s the search for historical clues that keeps you turning pages.
“Slyly escalating head games that will make you think twice about booking that next getaway.”

HOW TO KILL YOUR BEST FRIEND

Elliott, Lexie
Berkley (320 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 17, 2021
978-0-593098-69-1

A group of university friends who've flown to an island paradise to mark the passing of one of their number finds that her death has brought the conflicts among the survivors to a boil.

Lissa Kateb, Georgie Ayers, and Bronwyn Miller were all competitive swimmers when they were in school together. So it seems especially ironic that Lissa has drowned in Kanu Cove, where her husband, Jem Kateb, manages a luxury resort. Now that the survivors have accepted Jem’s offer of free accommodations on the occasion of Lissa’s memorial service, cracks gradually begin to appear in their nostalgic group portrait. Years ago, Bron had cheated on her husband, Rob Miller, with Lissa’s first husband, Graeme Williams, who's since died. Eternal singleton Georgie’s friendship with Lissa looks more and more like a rivalry. Nor are all the group’s problems in the present. Someone attacks Georgie’s friendship with Lissa looks more and more like a rivalry. Nor are all the group’s problems in the present. Someone attacks Georgie—maybe a mugger, maybe someone after a bigger prize than her money; The sudden resignation of Jem's assistant manager, Cristina, coincides all too neatly with the news that the resort is bleeding money and that Lissa's high school buddy Duncan, a private equity powerhouse, has a larger stake in it than Georgie or Bron ever suspected. The question of whether Cristina has been embezzling only deepens when she turns up shot to death. As the paying guests drift away, the old school friends, left to ask how Lissa could possibly have drowned, realize that "once you suspect one of us, you have to suspect all of us."

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Slyly escalating head games that will make you think twice about booking that next getaway.

ONE FOR THE HOOKS

Hechtman, Betty
Crooked Lane (320 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-1-64385-732-9

Molly Pink and the Tarzana Hookers just can’t quit investigating murders.

Molly, assistant manager at a bookstore that includes a yarn area, has a complicated love life. Though she’s still not over Detective Barry Greenberg, she’s dating lawyer Mason Fields. Her life goes downhill fast when her son, Peter, and his supercious, pregnant girlfriend move in after the failure of a television deal leaves them with nowhere to live. Meanwhile, real estate agent Sloan Renner is helping Miami Wintergarten clean out an inherited house she plans to set up as a short-term rental, much to the fury of her neighbors, who wish she’d sell the place or give up on renting it. Among the house’s contents are many boxes of yarn, mostly one-of-a-kind skeins that are too small to make anything with. Soon after Molly has a brainstorm—mix them in a kit to make unusual scarves that will justify their reduced price—Sloan succumbs to a different kind of brainstorm when she’s attacked by a drone that dumps a bag of rotting seafood on her, killing her. Barry, whose controlling ways caused their breakup, asks Molly to chat up the neighbors while refusing the ever curious amateur sleuth any information. When Mason suddenly pops the question, Molly and her bestie must ponder her future while they work to catch a killer.

Plenty for series fans to enjoy as newbies jump into this pleasant yarn-centric mystery.

CLARK AND DIVISION

Hirabara, Naomi
Soho Crime (312 pp.)
$24.95 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-641-29249-8

When a young Japanese American woman is murdered during World War II, her grieving younger sister turns sleuth to solve the crime.

As she tells it, the story of young Aki Ito's family begins in Southern California in the 1920s. Mom emigrates from Japan in 1919 to marry Pop, who, starting as a farm laborer, rises to the post of market manager. Aki looks up to her elder sister, Rose, the star of the family. The bombing of Pearl Harbor changes everything for the family; they are sent to the Manzanar internment camp in 1942. Then, in June 1943, the War Relocation Authority recruits Rose to be one of the “loyal” nisei to move out of the camp and work in Chicago. Her boyfriend, Roy, follows a few months later. When the family is finally allowed to follow, they are greeted with the horrifying news that Rose is dead, killed by a subway train. Aki's decision to uncover the truth about Rose's death comes slowly. Hirahara immerses readers in this ignoble period in American history and in the family’s grief, presented from Aki's wary, wide-eyed perspective. Learning that Rose had an abortion accelerates Aki's desire to know the truth. She's unsettled even further when Rose's death is ruled a suicide. Subsequent chapters begin with passages from Rose's diary, providing a chilling backdrop to the truth that is gradually revealed. Getting a job at the Newberry Library puts Aki closer to the heart of the city and exposes her to the casual racism all around her. Roy's failure to offer support and the fear and evasiveness of Rose's roommate, Toshi Kawamura, only harden Aki's determination to find answers. Her investigation becomes her rite of passage into adulthood.

An effective whodunit that's also a sensitive coming-of-age story.
In dredging up the past, Konrád must also confront his com-
plex relationship with his own abusive father, whose murder
was unsolved as well.

The intricate plot poignantly depicts community cross-
currents, past and present.

The secret depths of Hotel 1911 finally reveal a glimpse of the hidden
past an employee has been desperately seeking.

Ivy Nichols’ family, the Morrows, once owned the mansion that is now
Hotel 1911, but her father refuses to discuss the past or the fate
of her mother, who left when Ivy was a child. Ivy, who’s prone
to panic attacks, is living at home while attending college and
secretly working at the hotel, whose employees all dress in period attire. Ivy, who’s a favorite of Mr. Fig, the butler, has
already saved the hotel chef, her friend and love interest George,
from a murder rap in the first book of the series, Murder at
Hotel 1911 (2020). The newest group of guests, members of the
Association for Gravestone Studies, include Dr. Borough, who
once stayed with the Morrows. When one of the guests is found
murdered, Mr. Fig is arrested despite being low on the list of
people who might have wanted Renee Gallagher dead. Deter-
minded to clear her friend of murder charges, Ivy uses her knowl-
edge of the hotel and the internet to start her own investigation.
She finds plenty of possible motives among the gravestone soci-
ety members and more clues to her own family’s past. She learns
that the statues on the grounds are actually grave markers and
discovers a hidden passage the killer used to sneak into Renee’s
suite before she finally confronts her father with the shocking
information she’s found while trying to stay a step ahead of a
killer who’s marked her for death.

The heroine’s path to truth and happiness is still ongoing. Perhaps all will be revealed in her next adventure.

An actress who scorned men onstage has 12 angry suspects when she’s killed
during intermission.

Getting last-minute seats for the
Hamptons’ hottest ticket, the one-
woman production of Twelve Angry Men,
is no big deal for Cat Cooper, whose nearest and dearest, Gilley,
needs a little pick-me-up. Cat’s got connections, after all, and
her boyfriend Shep’s sister, Sunny, is more than willing to grease
the wheels. Sunny is a longtime friend of the play’s author and
star, Yelena Galanis, and since Sunny’s stuck at home with baby
Finley while her husband is in LA yet again, it’s a favor to her
that Cat and Gilley can be at the show and support Yelena’s cre-
ative work. By the intermission, though, Cat’s not sure that she
wants to support Yelena. Scorned-women stories may be hot,
perhaps because he’s covered in blood. That’s weird enough, but
it’s even worse when she finds out that the second act has been
canceled because Yelena’s just been killed. It’s obviously not a
coincidence, but one could argue that there are 12 very obvi-
ous people who want Yelena dead. Some questionable overlap
between Yelena’s death and Cat’s flagging life-coaching busi-
ness puts her at odds with Shep in his role as the local detec-
tive. But the emergence of a new suspect close to Cat and Shep
offers hope that their shared interests will finally get them to
work together.

Heroine and author both shine in a tale that offers a good
time to everyone but the victim.
“Readers may never look at Halloween parties the same way.”

HALLOWEEN PARTY MURDER

Meier, Leslie & Hollis, Lee & Ross
Kensington (320 pp.)
$26.00 | Aug. 31, 2021
978-1-4967-3382-5

There are parties and then there are parties, as this trio of treats by Maine authors proves.

There’s nothing small towns love more than Halloween. In “Halloween Party Murder,” Tinker’s Cove hosts a haunted house. It’s Meier’s way of giving her series heroine, Lucy Stone, a chance to apologize to her neighbors Ty and Heather Moon for suspecting them of kidnapping her grandson. Lucy recruits the members of her Hat and Mitten Fund to populate the terrifying tableaux Ty creates in each room of his home. It’s all scary fun until the person playing drowned Ophelia fails to emerge from her bath. Hollis’ Bar Harbor offers locals a chance to go upscale, dressing up as their favorite spooks in “Death of a Halloween Party Monster.” The partygoers at the restaurant bash laugh uproariously at police chief Sergio Alvares’ fear of Pennywise until music teacher Boris Candy, who came dressed as Stephen King’s terrifying clown, turns up dead in the restaurant’s freezer, leaving chef Hayley Powell to discover his killer. Ross’ party in “Scared Off” is nothing like the other two official municipal events. Julia, whose family runs the Snowden Family Clambake in tiny Busman’s Harbor, gets a frantic call from her 13-year-old niece, Page. Page’s parents have allowed her to sleep over at ‘Talia Davies’ house with fellow middle schooler Vanessa. The three girls invite three other friends, and the six quickly turn into 60. When high school boys with beer kegs start showing up, Page knows she has to bail but worries because no one can find the Davies’ upstairs tenant, who agreed to watch the three girls for the night. When Mrs. Zelisko finally does turn up, it’s not good.

Readers may never look at Halloween parties the same way.

MURDER AT WAKEHURST

Maxwell, Alyssa
Kensington (304 pp.)
$26.00 | Aug. 31, 2021
978-1-4967-2074-0

Murder once more stalks the wealthy cottagers of Newport, Rhode Island. Reporter Emma Cross is a poor relation to the notable family whose head, Cornelius Vanderbilt II, has recently died, leaving her $10,000 plus 10,000 shares of New York Central stock, a goodly package in 1899. Vanderbilt’s estranged oldest son, Neily, is left a paltry half million plus a million in trust. An urgent request from Neily’s wife, Grace, to accompany them to a party at Wakehurst, even though they’re in mourning, lands Emma in a tricky position when she finds yet another dead body in the gardens. The dead man is Judge Clayton Schuyler, whose spoiled daughter, Imogene, has argued publicly with her fiance, Jerome Harrington. Emma, who has an eye for details, hopes to help the police solve the crime. To her dismay, however, her old friend Detective Jesse Whyte has been replaced by Gifford Myers, who has no interest in what Emma might offer. Neither Imogene nor her mother seems disturbed by the judge’s death, but others may have wished him dead since his recent ruling on a contentious case involving unions and coal companies. Jesse’s been shunted off to a clothing store robbery that turns out to be related to the murder. Emma, despite slights from many, uses her entree into society to prevent more murders.

Lifestyles of the wealthy combine with social commentary in a mystery set against the backdrop of Newport’s grand estates.

PANIC ATTACK

Palumbo, Dennis
Poisoned Pen (270 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Sep. 1, 2021
978-1-4642-1345-8

A professional-style execution in front of 20,000 witnesses kicks off a sixth walk on the wild side for Pittsburgh psychologist Daniel Rinaldi.

The Teasdale Tiger, the beloved mascot of Teasdale College, is shot and killed as Rinaldi, college dean Martin Hobbs, and thousands of football fans look on. The only apparent flaw in the sniper’s crime is that the man inside the tiger costume isn’t Jason Graham, the usual mascot, but Lucas Hartley, who paid Jason $500 to let him take his place to impress his girlfriend. Sgt. Harry Polk, of the Pittsburgh police, has hardly time to wonder whether the wrong man was killed when the sniper changes venues to murder bookkeeper Harriet Parr, attorney Peter Steinman, city councilman Gary Landrew, physician Francis Mapes, and then, in an act that would be more shocking if readers weren’t already numb, Martin Hobbs. Invited to join the task force trying to figure out whether these victims have anything in common that would allow the police to predict the Steel City Sniper’s next move and then abruptly terminated over his relationship with assistant dean Indra Bishara, who seems to be competing with her well-connected ex-husband, William Reynolds III, over which of them can behave worse, Danny, “who ain’t on the job but acts like he is,” persists in working the case even as every suspect in the task force’s lineup turns into the next victim. The discovery that most of the deceased were members of the De Gobineau Society darkens the mystery without resolving it; only a ticking-clock showdown will do that.

A high-casualty quest to identify a killer who can’t help being a disappointment.
**BE MY GHOST**

Perry, Carol J.

Kensington (320 pp.)

$15.95 paper | Aug. 31, 2021

978-1-4967-3135-7

A laid-off retailer left a property by a mysterious benefactor tries to make it a profitable business in spite of the dead man on the front porch.

Things aren’t looking good for Maureen Doherty. When her job at Bartlett’s disappears, she’s not sure where she’ll find another company willing to hire a women’s sportswear buyer, and the generous severance she’s been given still won’t cover the cost of heat for the cold Massachusetts winter ahead. But things turn around suddenly with a surprising envelope from a Florida law firm. A Penelope Josephine Gray has died and left her home and furniture and linens, but also in some of the staff, many of whom appear to have been taking advantage of the former proprietor. Of special note is manager Elizabeth Mack, who’s not only unfriendly to the changes Maureen tries to make, but also commits the cardinal sin of not liking dogs. Maureen tries to figure out how to wrangle staff and turn Haven House profitable in spite of the dead man on the porch who isn’t just sleeping….

Perry’s new series kickoff smartly doesn’t give away its biggest mysteries.

**GONE FOR GOOD**

Schaffhausen, Joanna

Minotaur (304 pp.)

$27.99 | Aug. 10, 2021

978-1-2502-6460-2

A dogged Chicago police detective becomes both hunter and prey in the search for a legendary serial killer. Annalisa Vega is rescued from yet another disappointing blind date by a call to a crime scene. The victim is Grace Harper, found dead on her spotless kitchen floor, and Annalisa’s rugged partner, Nick Carelli, is already on the scene. The M.O. indicates that the crime could be the work of the Lovelorn Killer, who bound and garroted seven women to death in the 1990s before going underground. Grace also bears a strong resemblance to Katie Duffy, a close friend of Annalisa’s who became the seventh victim. Annalisa has been haunted by her failure to catch the Lovelorn Killer ever since. Grace belonged to the Grave Diggers, a group dedicated to investigating cold cases. Had she discovered the killer’s identity? Revisiting the old crimes is a painful necessity if Annalisa is to find Grace’s murderer ahead of the FBI. The original investigators ignored many witnesses, and waitress Lora Fitz reported an encounter with the Lovelorn Killer shortly before Katie’s death. An additional thread is provided by Grace’s interspersed diary entries. As part of his pathology, the killer repeatedly contacted his would-be victims. Could the whispery voice calling Annalisa be his? Schaffhausen combines familiar tropes in an unsubtle but arresting way and concisely fleshes out the supporting cast, from Annalisa’s womanizing partner to her Pops, who’s battling Parkinson’s, to Police Commander Lynn Zimmer, nicknamed the Hammer.

Visceral chills, a colorful cast, and a handful of effective twists add up to a promising series debut.

**THE BITTER TASTE OF MURDER**

Trinchieri, Camilla

Soho Crime (321 pp.)

$27.95 | Aug. 10, 2021

978-1-641-29283-2

Scandal and murder rock a rustic Italian town. Luckily, a Big Apple sleuth is there to set things right.

After decades as a homicide detective in the Bronx, Nico Doyle is carving out a new life in the idyllic village of Gravigna in the Chianti hills of Tuscany. The latest gossip at Bar All’Angolo, where Nico regularly breakfasts with a group of villagers, revolves around arrogant wine critic Michele Mantelli, who raised local hackles by leaving his Jaguar parked in the middle of the piazza. Nico witnesses Mantelli in action later at Sotto Il Fico, the restaurant belonging to his late wife’s cousin. Mantelli tells the staff to stop buying the inferior wines of Aldo Ferri, who also happens to be Nico’s landlord and friend. Is this the trigger for the very public fight between Aldo and Mantelli that follows? Or is it the rumor that Mantelli’s having an affair with Aldo’s wife, Cinzia? When Mantelli’s car goes off a cliff in a suspicious accident, Aldo immediately becomes the prime suspect in what’s ruled a murder. Nico goes back to his detective roots to exonerate his friend. Trinchieri portrays Nico’s recovery from grief with care; his wife, Rita, is recalled frequently as Nico and one of the village’s biggest mysteries.
The third and final volume set in a high-fantasy world where women reign. In *The Women’s War* (2019), a discarded queen casts a spell that lets women decide when and if they have children. By the end of *Queen of the Unwanted* (2020), a plot to reverse the Blessing—or, as the men call it, the Curse—that set the first book in motion leaves that spell unchanged while seriously damaging the source of all magic in the kingdom of Aaltah. Fans of the first two novels will likely be satisfied with this concluding volume. Good is rewarded. Evil is punished. And the trilogy ends on a hopeful note that delivers on the feminist-lite promise with which the series began. As was the case in the first two installments, the emphasis here is on interpersonal relationships, palace intrigue, and political maneuvering among royals. Readers heavily invested, for example, Ellin’s marriage to Zarsha will get to spend plenty of time listening to them flirt and strategize over dinners in her private quarters. Readers more interested in action will likely conclude that Glass lingers over phenomena such as late-night pastries a bit more than is necessary. This would perhaps be less notable if there wasn’t a striking sameness to all these scenes. There are, evidently, a lot of royal banquets in Ellin’s world, and each time she is forced to endure one we are reminded that they are long and tedious and that a private meal with her husband is a luxury. While she enjoys this luxury, she and Zarsha have conversations into which the author weaves in backstory she’s already shared at least a few times. And this is the model that Glass uses for the many, many, many characters in this novel: Reintroduce the characters in the scene, show them doing something they’ve done several times before, and maybe inject one new detail that nudges the plot forward. There are exceptions to this rule, but not many, and the end result is a story that runs more than 1,800 pages across the whole series and still feels very small.

The lackluster conclusion to a trilogy that might have succeeded better as a single, heavily edited volume.

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**DEVIL IN DISGUISE**

Kleypas, Lisa
Avon/HarperCollins (384 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Jul. 27, 2021
978-0-06-237196-6

A Scottish distiller, a businesswoman in Victorian London, an explosive attraction.

Kleypas’ beloved Wallflower/Ravenels series crossover continues with the next generation of feisty descendants, this time Lord Marcus and Lady Lillian Westcliff’s widowed daughter. Drawn irresistibly to a client of her shipping company, Lady Merritt Sterling coaxes an equally smitten Keir MacRae to spend a night with her. While convinced that their unequal birth and upbringing make them ill-matched for a real relationship, Keir tells himself it’s a memory he can cherish forever. But disaster strikes soon after, allowing Kleypas to deploy the classic “nursing a hurt lover to recovery” trope, with a twist that turns Merritt and Keir’s bond into a variation of the second-chance romance. As the search for the cause of the attack on Keir leads to questions about his birth, a favorite Wallflower character looms large, with plenty of clues (including the title) to tell the reader why our hero is mistaken about his lineage. The third act is slightly anticlimactic, with all the nonromance action having occurred in Act 1 and served as a plot device to bring the romance and other relationships into being in Act 2. While Kleypas takes no risks to push her oeuvre in new directions, the novel abounds in the vintage pleasures of her writing: finely drawn characters; a tactile, sensuous style in both the sex scenes and the landscape descriptions; banter that illustrates the emotional compatibility of romantic partners; dual points of view that show both the hero’s and the heroine’s interior lives; moving moments of familial ties; and glimpses of couples from other novels to assure us that love lasts forever.

Undemandingly pleasurable and guaranteed to go on the reread shelf.

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**THE DATING DARE**

Lee, Jayci
St. Martin’s Griffin (320 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-2506-2112-2

A photographer on the verge of an international move and an ambitious craft-brewery owner agree to a casual fling that quickly grows into something more.

Tara Park doesn’t exactly hit it off with Seth Kim when she’s the maid of honor and he’s the best
man at her best friend’s wedding to his brother. She tells him to quit ogling her, and he claims he can’t help it: “I’m a photographer. It’s hard for me to ignore things of beauty.” What a line! But with the chemistry sparking, the two of them head to Tara’s craft brewery to continue the festivities—and a highly alcoholic game of truth or dare heats things up. When Seth dares Tara to go on four dates with him, her competitive nature makes her say yes, but they both know that time is fleeting. Seth is only in town to housesit while the newlyweds are on their honeymoon, and then he’s relocating to Paris. The California setting is vibrant, and the details about the craft-beer industry and Tara’s experience as a brewer are fascinating. It’s in the relationships, both romantic and platonic, where things go wrong. This isn’t a romance for the modern reader, as red flags from both characters are too easily explained away as the result of passion. Seth’s initially unwanted attention is quickly forgotten as the drinks start flowing, and Tara routinely acts petty and downright rude at the mention of Seth’s previous romantic partners even though she’s had plenty of physical connections with men. Both characters ultimately lack maturity, especially Tara, who repeatedly insists love doesn’t fit into her life. It’s hard to care when the main characters border on unlikable.

A frustrating read.

BOMBSHELL
MacLean, Sarah
Avon/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Aug. 24, 2021
978-0-06-305615-2

MacLean kicks off an explosive new series featuring a girl gang in Victorian London.

Thirty years old and single, Lady Sesily Talbot is no wallflower. Nicknamed “Sesily,” she’s known for being scandalous—and she knows how to keep a secret. Two years ago, heartbroken after having been rejected by American businessman Caleb Calhoun, Sesily was approached by the Duchess of Trevescan with a life-changing proposition. She joined a group of women collected by the Duchess who use their skills to take down evil men. Something between fixers and vigilantes, these ass-kicking women—besides the Duchess and Sesily, there are Imogen, “who came with an expertise in things both extremely useful and extremely dangerous,” and Adelaide, “whose meek exterior made her a superior thief”—are fearless and are also great friends to each other. Caleb spent most of the past two years across the Atlantic, but now he’s back in London. He’s always been irresistibly drawn to Sesily; and right away he knows she’s up to something. He has his own secrets to keep, though, which preclude him from pursuing a future with her. As they protect each other in dangerous situations, their secrets unravel and passion ensues. This book is a complete pleasure as it seamlessly shifts from nail-biting action to aching romance. It’s a celebration of finding joy through living and loving with truth and authenticity. The characters are rich and complex, and the pining between Sesily and Caleb is top-notch. MacLean fans will be thrilled with this much-anticipated pairing and eat up the cameos by characters from earlier books.

Another stunner from a Romancelandia favorite.

HOW SWEET IT IS
Newton, Dylan
Forever (352 pp.)
$13.99 paper | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-5387-5440-5

Worlds literally collide when an event planner known for showstopping romance gets tapped to handle a bestselling horror author’s book launch.

When it comes to pulling off the perfect “aww” moment, Kate Sweet has made a name for herself in the event world, with her creativity and attention to detail helping her orchestrate weddings to remember. When a cancelled wedding frees up some time in her schedule, her best friend, Imani, ropes her into handling the launch party for horror writer Drake Matthews’ next book, but Kate’s not so sure she’s cut out to work for the Knight of Nightmares—and not just because he’s actually drop-dead gorgeous. It doesn’t help that she practically ends up maiming him with her stiletto heel; she’s convinced that this is a match that might be made in hell. Drake has reached a point in his professional career where he’s feeling somewhat disillusioned with horror writing, and he’s been working on a secret project: his first romance novel. Meeting Kate, for whom he feels an attraction from the start, might just have given him the motivation he needs to really develop his idea, and as the two of them collaborate on the upcoming event, they notice they’re actually being inspired by each other in more than just a professional capacity. Newton’s debut romance is laugh-out-loud funny, with enough antics, fast pacing, and chemistry to keep readers as engrossed as any of her hero’s bestselling horror novels would. In fact, the only struggle with this exemplary standout comes when one reaches the very last page.

A hilarious rom-com romp that delivers on both sweet and heat.
BATTLE ROYAL
Parker, Lucy
Avon/HarperCollins (416 pp.)
$13.99 paper | Aug. 17, 2021
978-0-06-304006-9

Two British bakers with an antagonistic history and vastly different aesthetics vie for the honor of creating a royal wedding cake. Four years earlier, Sylvie Fairchild missed her chance to reach Operation Cake’s semifinals when her mechanical unicorn cake exploded over curmudgeonly judge Dominic De Vere. Though she didn’t go home a champion, her role on the show allowed her to open her own whimsical bakery, Sugar Fair, in Notting Hill. She had hoped not to have to deal with Dominic anymore, but with his own bakery continually beating her out on event contracts, their dislike for one another remains strong. Dominic is a baking purist, sticking to classic flavors and minimalist designs, while Sylvie’s aesthetic is more of a fairy tale come to life, complete with edible glitter. While Sylvie’s creations are an Instagrammer’s dream, social media momentum goes only so far. When Operation Cake asks her back to serve as a judge opposite Dominic, both the paycheck and the chance to get under her rival’s skin are too tempting to ignore. Not only must Sylvie and Dominic work together, but the bakers are anticipating the announcement of Princess Rose’s engagement, and they’re both ready to pitch their glamorous cake ideas for the royal wedding. Parker is a writer who knows her audience, and she keeps raising the bar when it comes to warm romances and charming tropes. Opposites attracting over delicious cakes and the fearsome thrill of competition are a heady combination as Sylvie and Dominic’s chemistry snaps, crackles, and pops off every page. The slow burn of the romance is tantalizing and well paced, though there is plenty of setting and detail to take in while readers await the inevitable happily-ever-after.

An utterly delicious romance that’s meant to be devoured.

THE HELLION’S WALTZ
Waite, Olivia
Avon/HarperCollins (272 pp.)
$4.99 paper | Jun. 15, 2021
978-0-06-293183-2

Instantaneous attraction drives the latest romance from the author of The Care and Feeding of Waspish Widows (2020) and The Lady’s Guide to Celestial Mechanics (2019). Sophie Roseingrave and her family are forced to leave London when a dishonest business partner ruins her father’s piano shop and her dreams of becoming a concert pianist. In the mill city of Carrisford, Sophie encounters the most beautiful woman she’s ever seen. It’s immediately clear to Sophie that Maddie Crewe is up to no good, but she ultimately learns that Maddie is up to no good for a good cause. She and her fellow weavers have hatched an elaborate plan to get even with a local merchant who’s been cheating them for years. This scheme is pure screwball comedy, and it sets the tone for a lighthearted story in which there are no barriers to love. Waite’s Regency England is placidly multicultural and liberal minded. The Roseingraves befriend a Black father and son. An Indian immigrant and a Jewish merchant seem to be close to an engagement by the end of the novel. Maddie shares a house with a polyamorous mélange. No one is the least bit perturbed by the idea of an affair between women. In fact, Sophie’s parents actively support her relationship with Maddie. Some romance fans may be dissatisfied by the speed and eagerness with which Sophie and Maddie become sexual partners, but others will likely be willing to trade the pleasures of the slow burn for heroines who experience neither confusion nor shame nor hesitancy in their intense mutual desire. This book is a bit lighter than the first two installments in the Feminine Pursuits series, but there are some tender moments that are truly affecting, and Waite’s prose is often quite striking. Consider, for example, this arresting image: “It gave Sophie a queer feeling in the core of her, as though she were trying to remember tomorrow night’s dream.” A disarmingly sweet Regency romp.
These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

FEAR OF A BLACK UNIVERSE by Stephon Alexander ............................... 43
ON THAT DAY by William M. Arkin ...................................................... 43
THE JUST by Jan Brokken; trans. by David McKay ................................. 46
YOU ARE YOUR BEST THING Ed. by Tanana Burke & Brené Brown .............................. 47
HOW TO MAKE AN APPLE PIE FROM SCRATCH by Harry Cliff ................................. 49
THE DIVIDE by Taylor Dotson ................................................................ 52
BATTLE FOR THE SOUL by Edward-Isaac Dovere ................................... 53
THE GALLERY OF MIRACLES AND MADNESS by Charlie English ........................................ 55
THE ARTIST AND THE ETERNAL CITY by Loyd Grossman ......... 60
I LIVE A LIFE LIKE YOURS by Jan Grue; trans. by B.L. Crook ........................... 60
FLASHERS OF CREATION by Paul Halpern .............................................. 61
THE STATE MUST PROVIDE by Adam Harris ............................................ 61
THE POWER OF STRANGERS by Joe Keobane ......................................... 64
THE BARCELONA COMPLEX by Simon Kuper ........................................... 64
THE ARBORMAUT by Mag Lowman ........................................................... 66
PUBLIC CITIZENS by Paul Sabin ............................................................... 73
THE AFGHANISTAN PAPERS by Craig Whitlock ........................................ 77
POWER AND LIBERTY by Gordon S. Wood ............................................... 79

REIGN OF TERROR
How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump
Ackerman, Spencer
Viking (448 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-1-984879-77-6

Donald Trump, writes Daily Beast senior national security correspondent Ackerman, “understood something about the War on Terror that [others] did not”—namely, that underlying it was the view that the enemy comprised non-White groups and nations “from a hostile foreign civilization.” Read: Islam. Certainly, that’s how many Muslims read it, and though Trump decried America’s foreign wars, he did little to rein in the hyperactive military. Anti-Muslim sentiment long predated 9/11, but when the towers fell, the resulting “Forever War,” its targets almost exclusively Muslim, backfired. It was ill defined and essentially unwinnable, “intolerable for a people accustomed to thinking of itself as exceptional.” While that war was fought abroad, it reverberated powerfully at home, where a surveillance state developed that had unprecedented police powers and “an atmosphere of paranoia that frequently turned conspiratorial.” As Ackerman rightly points out, the paranoia was directed toward Muslims but also toward liberals who were presumed to coddle the enemy. It was pointedly not directed at the domestic right-wing terrorists who have worked just as much mischief as al-Qaida. Immediately after the tragedies at Ruby Ridge and Waco, the National Rifle Association’s Wayne LaPierre denounced federal agents in their “stormtrooper uniforms” as enemies of “law-abiding citizens,” a view very much in evidence today. Meanwhile, hate crimes against Muslims have steadily risen, fueled by nativism, evangelical zealotry, and racism, all of which concealed in the cynical MAGA movement, which brought the world the spectacle of the right-wing extremist invasion of the Capitol and ongoing attempts to declare Trump the winner of the 2020 election—even as the Trump administration branded peaceful protestors as insurrectionists. Ackerman capably connects seemingly disparate elements without forcing issues so that readers will see how such matters as the Branch Davidian siege of 1993 helped fuel White supremacist movements today.

An intelligent, persuasive book about events that are all too current.
“Lush with ideas and bold in its analysis of the status quo, this book reorients our view of science and the universe.”

FEAR OF A BLACK UNIVERSE

An Outsider’s Guide to the Future of Physics
Alexander, Stephon
Basic (256 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 31, 2021
978-1-5416-9963-2

A renowned cosmologist argues that empowering scientific outsiders and taking risks on nontraditional ideas will result in transformative science.

“I hope to convince my readers that diversity in science is not simply a social justice concern, but that it enhances the quality of the science we accomplish.” So writes Brown University physics professor Alexander, the 2020 president of the National Society of Black Physicists as well as an electronic musician, at the beginning of this captivating scientific journey. He points out that diversity often results in innovation, and women and minorities often innovate more, leading to a logical conclusion: “Perhaps it is time to value and elevate minorities, thus enabling them to make major contributions, not in spite of their outsider’s perspective, but because of it.” The author’s own contributions include unraveling the mysteries of the early universe and advancing ideas relating to quantum gravity; and he deftly explains these and more in accessible and often personal prose. But it’s Alexander’s enthusiasm for seriously exploring theories on the frontier of physics that makes this more exciting than most similar books: Are life and the universe Lush with ideas and bold in its analysis of the status quo, this book reorients our view of science and the universe.

FOREVER FREE

A True Story of Hope in the Fight for Child Literacy
Bailey, Tracy Swinton
Other Press (224 pp.)
$25.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-63542-080-7

A self-proclaimed “educational abolitionist” reflects on her journey to becoming a children’s literacy advocate.

For as long as Bailey could remember, books offered a thrilling freedom she could not find elsewhere, and the African Methodist Episcopal church she and her parents attended exereted an equally powerful influence on her. Through it, she learned the importance of “elevat[ing] the status of the Black community.” Both would later become sources of the author’s strength in a world hostile to people of color and inspire her to pursue a career in education. She navigated a life that took her from a high school English teaching job to full-time motherhood to a doctorate in education. Her research led million-word dossier he has assembled on the 9/11 attackers and from the government record to deliver a chronicle that reveals several essential institutional breakdowns. One was the failure to honor “continuity of government” regulations that require those in the constitutional succession to the presidency to travel to safe locations in the event of attack. Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert complied while, “when the condition presented itself for the government to take action to increase its survival, leaders brushed the apparatus aside.” Another failure was to communicate effectively with both the nation’s allies and Russia. American military movements following 9/11 were so sudden and inexplicable that Russia interpreted them as signaling the outbreak of war between the superpowers. Meanwhile, Arkin notes, Donald Rumsfeld scribbled a revealing note just hours after the attacks: “Best info fast. Judge whether good enough to hit S.H. [Saddam Hussein] at same time. Not only UBL [Osama bin Laden]. Go massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not.” Clearly, then, the Bush administration was looking for a pretext to go to war with Iraq. The war that ensued, under the larger rubric of the war on terror, was undeclared. Even the rules of engagement on the day of the attack and its aftermath were ambiguous and variously interpreted—though Arkin reveals that it was generally understood that U.S. military aircraft were free to fire on civilian airliners suspected of posing threats. Whatever the case, Arkin writes in this relentlessly revealing narrative, 9/11 ushered in a war that has not stopped since, “evidence of the overreaction of a frustrated and humiliated Washington.” Nothing has improved in the years since, and the author clearly shows how the government’s failures on 9/11 were only recapitulated with Covid-19 as an exercise in feckless action.

A damming, essential study in misinformation, jingoism, bad intelligence, and other hallmarks of the recent American past.

ON THAT DAY

The Definitive Timeline of 9/11
Arkin, William M.
PublicAffairs (384 pp.)
$18.99 paper | Aug. 17, 2021
978-1-5417-0106-9

A damning account of the federal government’s response to 9/11 and the two-decade war that ensued.

National security expert and commentator Arkin works from a vast, meticulously assembled,
Welcome to the Pride Issue. It’s astonishing to me that LGBTQ+ rights are still a hot-button topic. Of course, the previous five or so years seemed to slow the momentum of progress, but that’s a discussion for another time. When we were tasked with choosing a few books to highlight for this important issue, my initial list quickly ballooned well into the double digits. I whittled it down to a lean four titles, all of which are can’t-miss examinations of contemporary issues involving LGBTQ+ pride. Enjoy! (All quotes come from the Kirkus reviews.)

I have to start with a title that wins my personal award for best memoir of the year so far: Brian Broome’s *Punch Me Up to the Gods* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, May 18), a viscerally page-turning, devastating exploration of “growing up Black and gay and finding a place in the world.” In that vein, it immediately reminded me of two of my favorite memoirs of the past decade: Kiese Laymon’s *Heavy*, a Kirkus Prize finalist, and Saeed Jones’ *How We Fight for Our Lives*, a Kirkus Prize winner. That’s impressive—and entirely deserved—company for a first-time author, and I agree completely with our reviewer’s assessment: “Beautifully written, this examination of what it means to be Black and gay in America is a must-read…. A stellar debut memoir.” (Read our interview with Broome on Page 50.)

I found another eye-opening journey of identity in Krys Malcolm Belc’s *The Natural Mother of the Child: A Memoir of Nonbinary Parenthood* (Counterpoint, June 15), “a powerful memoir in essays about the author’s experiences with nonbinary parenthood.” I admit that it’s a topic I had glossed but not considered closely, and Belc delivers a potent education. “Though the literature on parenthood is boundless, books on nonbinary parenthood are scarce,” writes our reviewer. “In his debut, Belc explores the universal emotions of ambivalence, joy, and occasional dread while simultaneously braiding in threads of his gender expression, partnership, and youth.” For anyone like me who is looking to learn more about the intricacies of nonbinary parenthood, this is an excellent place to start: “a candid, gritty, tender story that should garner empathy and understanding regardless of a reader’s background.”

Similarly, though I knew the general overview of ACT UP, the grassroots organization fighting the AIDS epidemic since 1987, I was ignorant of the level of impact of the organization’s work. Sarah Schulman’s *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, May 18) changed that, as the author “clearly demonstrates that ACT UP was founded in part to engender a relentlessly democratic and inclusive force of activism. That ideology explains the heft of this book, which isn’t written as traditional history but as a mashup of events witnessed by Schulman and oral history that’s truly all-encompassing. Readers are right there with activists, hearing their stories from them but also others who knew them.”

Speaking of being right there, Jeremy Atherton Lin’s “vibrant and wistful” *Gay Bar: Why We Went Out* (Little, Brown, Feb. 9) illuminates another vital element of the LGBTQ+ community, one that many readers may wrongly overlook as only entertainment. “In his first book, Lin examines queer history through the lens of what he sees as a vanishing institution: the gay bar, which, in recent years, has been ‘under threat not so much by police, but a juncture of economic factors like unchecked property speculation and an upsurge in stay-at-home gays.' With raw, voyeuristically explicit detail, the author escorts readers through the crowded, smoky gay bars of London before turning to erotic adventures in California, where he came of age in the early 1990s.”

Eric Liebetrau is the nonfiction and managing editor.
To the work of Paul Farmer, the head of Harvard Medical School’s Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, a leader in health and human rights. Galvanized by his example, Bailey organized an after-school reading program, Freedom Readers, at a public housing community. Her experiences with that program led her to the realization that low-income students needed strong literacy skills to “navigate a world where racism throws up barriers every day.” At the same time, she continued to see how easily the academic institution could derail the work in which she believed. A month before her graduation, the professors overseeing her dissertation tried to invalidate her research by saying the communities Freedom Readers served “didn’t need [her] to come in and fix them.” Bailey successfully deflected their criticisms and earned her doctorate, with a specialization in language and literacy, while continuing to expand an educational program that challenged both “white supremacy” and the anti-humanist leanings of a capitalist society. As it critiques modern American educational practices, this timely book makes an impassioned plea for the humane innovations needed to create a just learning system for all.

Inspiring reading for educators and anyone who cares about education.

**ALMOST HEMINGWAY**

*The Adventures of Negley Farson, Foreign Correspondent*

Bowman, Rex & Santos, Carlos

Univ. of Virginia (256 pp.)

$29.95 | Aug. 31, 2021

978-0-8139-4667-2

Portrait of a swashbuckler.

Negley Farson (1890-1960) was a daring foreign correspondent, ardent fisherman, and bestselling author of novels, adventure stories, and memoirs, notably a paean to fishing. “If any of Farson’s books can be said to contain incandescent prose,” write journalists Bowman and Santos, “Going Fishing is the one.” While Farson’s professional life flourished, his personal life was volatile: He was a womanizer, drank to oblivion, and was beset by self-hatred—qualities, along with his devotion to writing, that invite comparison with his more famous compatriot, Ernest Hemingway. Despite leg injuries that required repeated surgeries, bouts of malaria, alcoholism, and marital woes, Farson “lived each day as if it were a door that needed kicking in.” “Beneath the tilted brim of his fedora,” the authors write admiringly, “he squinted at life through a lazy whirl of cigarette smoke,” charming men, seducing women, “using his job as a globe-rovine reporter to carry out his boyhood wish to travel the world and write.” Although Farson “managed to hide the deepest parts of himself,” the authors draw on his memoirs, letters, and reportage to create a lively chronicle of his peripatetic adventures, which involved working in Russia for a shady arms merchant in 1915; becoming a pilot with the Royal Flying Corps; quitting his job as a Mack truck salesman to sail across Europe, with his wife, in 1925; traveling by mule through Spain; reporting from Turkey, London, and Rome; covering the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam, whale hunting off the Shetlands; interviewing Gandhi (and witnessing his arrest) in 1930; meeting Hitler and Roosevelt. Across the course of his many adventures, he tried several times to stop drinking. After treatment at a sanatorium in Germany, he stayed on the wagon through most of a trip through Africa in 1938, but his resolve didn’t last. Several more stays in asylums preceded his “total surrender to booze” before his death.

*A brisk tale of an eventful life.*
“Brokken brings these largely unknown men to vivid life, and few readers will come away from the book untouched by their stories.”

THE JUST
How Six Unlikely Heroes Saved Thousands of Jews From the Holocaust
Brokken, Jan
Trans. by McKay, David
Scribe (496 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-950354-56-6

The story of a Dutch businessman who helped Polish and Lithuanian Jews escape the Holocaust.

Jan Zwartendijk (1896-1976) was the head of the Phillips Radio factory and outlet store in Kaunas, Lithuania, when he was asked to act as Dutch consul for the country. In the first year of the war, it was still unclear what would happen in the Balkan countries, precariously poised between the Soviet Union and Nazi-occupied Poland. The previous consul was a Nazi sympathizer, and the Dutch government thought it best to replace him. Zwartendijk accepted the post without much knowledge about what it might entail. It was only when the German threat became imminent that he was approached by local Jews asking for visas to allow them to emigrate, their goal, Curacao, a Dutch colony in the Caribbean. To reach their destination safely, the Jews would need to travel through the Soviet Union, via the Trans-Siberian Railway, to Japan before taking a ship to their final destination. After getting their Dutch papers, they required a visa from the Japanese ambassador, Chiune Sugihara, who also proved willing to cooperate. Through the agency of these two men, several thousand Jews, perhaps as many as 10,000 were able to survive the Holocaust. Dutch writer Brokken traces the stories of Zwartendijk, Sugihara, and a number of those they aided, along with several other Dutch diplomats who added their help as the Jewish refugees continued their travels. The author has interviewed surviving members of Zwartendijk’s family and some of those he helped, and he has sifted through government documents in several countries to compile a complete picture of how these few men made a difference in a time when thousands of lives were in the balance. Brokken brings these largely unknown men to vivid life, and few readers will come away from the book untouched by their stories.

A deeply moving account of a few brave men who worked against the Nazi horror in the early days of World War II.

THE CULT OF WE
WeWork, Adam Neumann, and the Great Startup Delusion
Brown, Eliot & Farrell, Maureen
Crown (464 pp.)
$28.00 | Jul. 20, 2021
978-0-593-23711-3

A comprehensive report on the WeWork startup from windfall to downfall.

Wall Street Journal reporters Brown and Farrell recount their long-running media coverage of the melodramatic rise and fall of WeWork, another tech startup with lofty aspirations but dubious motivations and faulty executive leadership. The company debuted in 2010 in New York’s SoHo district as a shared-workspace venture led by charismatic CEO Adam Neumann, an Israeli businessman who got his start selling children’s clothing. The breathless narrative, propelled by diligent reporting, chronicles the startup’s rapid expansion worldwide, eventually becoming the most valuable startup in the country. Excessive spending, private jets, lavish corporate retreats, and outrageous employee perks followed, all buoyed by a “fund-raising conveyor belt” of nonstop investors, including the “second-largest private investment ever made in a U.S. startup,” courtesy of Japanese holding company SoftBank in 2017. The authors then chart WeWork’s inevitable decline once investors began balking at Neumann’s esoteric, obsessive business ventures and his obvious bouts of financial euphoria. Drawing from interviews with former WeWork and SoftBank staff,
rivals, friends, and family members, Brown and Farrell vividly piece together the details of how Neumann persuaded backers to invest in his company with minimal oversight while those same venture capitalists also believed WeWork was a remunerative tech firm rather than the perilous real estate company it truly was. In what the authors call a bait-and-switch debacle, tens of billions in company value evaporated in 2019, and the company immediately unraveled. There followed Neumann’s ouster, regulatory investigations, investor lawsuits, and banks running scared and reneging on lending agreements. The book’s coda includes an update on Neumann’s status: “Eager and full of energy,” he is “yearning to get back in the game” and attempting to reattract funders and staff “who hadn’t turned on him.”

A rousing exposé of extreme financial greed and yet another example of modern corporate hubris.

YOU ARE YOUR BEST THING
Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience
Ed. by Burke, Tarana & Brown, Brené
Random House (258 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-0-593-24362-6

Essays on shame and vulnerability from a diverse array of Black thinkers.

“White supremacy,” writes co-editor Burke, “has added another layer to the kind of shame [Black people] have to deal with, and the kind of resilience we have to build, and the kind of vulnerability that we are constantly subjected to whether we choose it or not.” Burke teams up with researcher and bestselling author Brown in a collection of 20 essays by Burke, actor Laverne Cox, scholar Imani Perry, writers Kiese Laymon and Jason Reynolds, and a host of educators, artists, activists, and

“A combat veteran’s astute look at the Vietnam War, both captivating and emotionally forthcoming.”

—Kirkus Reviews
other thought leaders who explore the Black experience with shame resilience and vulnerability. They frame the issues through a variety of lenses, including mental illness, masculinity, religion, disability, addiction, queer identity, academia, and grief. In a stunning essay among many standouts, Sonya Renee Taylor writes, “My mommy was dead in every city of every nation on the planet and that truth bulldozed me.” Fittingly, the title of this extraordinary collection is derived from a line from Toni Morrison’s Beloved, a novel about the nature of freedom and the reclamation of self. Tanya Denise Fields, founder and executive director of the Black Feminist Project, deconstructs the shame she felt as a victim of intimate partner violence, and Reynolds reckons with a shameful moment in his relationship with his beloved mother. Austin Channing Brown writes about “foreboding joy” and the moment she saw her toddler son’s reflection in the mirror; he was wearing a hoodie and looked like a tiny Trayvon Martin. Penned by a refreshing blend of well-known and lesser-known contributors, these compact, deeply reflective essays pack emotional punches usually found only in full-length memoir. The writers powerfully articulate not only their challenges, but also their hope, resilience, and practical wisdom.

An impressive, intimate, inclusive, truth-telling treasure.

PRESUMED GUILTY
How the Supreme Court Empowered the Police and Subverted Civil Rights

Erwin Chemerinsky
Liveright/Norton (320 pp.)
$24.95 | Aug. 24, 2021
978-1-63149-651-6

The veteran legal affairs expert offers a powerful attack on a judiciary committed to advancing the police state.

There was little in the way of formal policing in this country until the later 19th century, writes Chemerinsky, who has authored multiple notable books on systemic legal problems in the U.S. Before that, municipalities relied on night watchmen who might occasionally arrest a presumed wrongdoer, a system that “was cheap to administer.” An important consideration is that these police were not subject to the guarantees of the Bill of Rights and later amendments. Instead, the supposition all the way up to the level of the Supreme Court was that only the federal government was bound to honor unreasonable search rules and the like. “For a very brief time in the 1960s,” he writes, “the Warren Court expanded...constitutional rights and sought to significantly limit certain types of police misconduct. But overall the Warren Court was an aberration in American history.” Instead, the court has taken steps to make police immune from being sued for damages, a matter now being tested in the George Floyd case. However, Chemerinsky observes, the very restraints that were used on Floyd were approved by a court ruling in 1983, such that “federal courts cannot hear cases that challenge the chokehold and seek to stop it from being used.” (The logic behind the court’s ruling, writes the author, is particularly contorted.) Even equal protection rules are overlooked while it is statistically inarguable that most police violence is directed toward minorities. “In 2016,” to name just one year, “Black males between fifteen and thirty-four were nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed by law enforcement officers.” Chemerinsky does not join the call to defund law enforcement agencies; he argues the police would merely be privatized to serve the rich. Instead, he suggests that because the Supreme Court will not restrain the police, “state courts can and should invoke state constitutions in order to do so.”

Necessary reading for civil libertarians, public defenders, and activists.

THE FLOWERING
The Autobiography of Judy Chicago

Chicago, Judy
Thames & Hudson (416 pp.)
$39.95 | Jul. 20, 2021
978-0-500-09438-9

A new autobiographical work from the renowned American feminist artist. Chicago (b. 1939) explores her life and career from the perspective of a female artist in a male-dominated art world. In addition to countless personal and professional details, this book also includes vivid full-color photographs of her work and a foreword by Gloria Steinem, who writes that Chicago “spent her life not only inventing Feminist Art, but inventing a feminist way of creating art.” The author opens with details of her early childhood, attributing her strong sense of self to her father’s encouragement and interactions with her. Initially, Chicago’s matter-of-fact tone and self-praising comments make her words feel cold. However, as she begins discussing her time spent teaching the Feminist Art Program at Fresno State College, aimed to empower future female artists, her tone warms, and her passionate personality emerges. Like many women artists, Chicago’s experiences have taught her that she has to fight marginalization in the art world. As she chronicles her rise in an arena controlled by men, she also explores the genesis of the works that stemmed from those experiences. The author shows how her art was often received poorly, seemingly due to her depictions of the female experience and form in a graphic manner. She explains many of her major works, including The Dinner Party, the Birth Project, and the Holocaust Project, the challenges she faced during the creation of each, and the reception each received. Fortunately, as Chicago notes, the public perception of her work has shifted with time; she was recently named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by Time magazine. Additionally, works of hers that were once criticized or dismissed are finding new and receptive audiences. Overall, Chicago’s narrative speaks to the power of persistence and remaining true to yourself, especially important in the art world.

An unapologetic examination of the life of an artist dedicated to following her passions.
THE MASTER
The Brilliant Career of Roger Federer
Clarey, Christopher
Twelve (352 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 24, 2021
978-1-5387-1926-8

A deeply reported and researched portrait of one of the greatest tennis players ever.

Clarey, a veteran tennis writer for the New York Times and International Herald Tribune, has interviewed Roger Federer many times in the past three decades. One of his subject’s most striking qualities is “that he will ask about you first and not in a perfunctory manner: inquiring about your own journey to this particular place, your own perceptions of the tournament, the country, the people.” That fundamental empathy and courtesy, Clarey later adds, makes Federer a born politician in the best sense—a fine attribute given that he is now deeply engaged in philanthropic work in South Africa. But Federer will be remembered foremost as a tennis player, and Clarey paints an incisive portrait of the abilities that made him a star: intentionality, focus, and attention. “Federer is widely perceived as a natural,” writes the author, “and yet he is a meticulous planner who has learned to embrace routine and self-discipline, plotting out his schedule well in advance and in considerable detail.” This is all the more remarkable because Federer is essentially his own manager, though he was well trained over the years by coaches who helped him become more analytical. The biographical rundown is by-the-numbers but cliché-free. Of more interest is Clarey’s framing of Federer’s career in the context of his competition. “When Federer emerged,” he writes, “the best players of the previous generation—Agassi and Sampras—were aging or in decline.” No such luck for Federer, for hot on his heels came Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal, a triumvirate vying for the title of best tennis player of all time. “Federer versus Nadal has been the contemporary rivalry that attracted the most attention inside and outside tennis,” writes Clarey, “but Djokovic versus Federer close behind.” By his lights, it’s the last that’s the most meaningful.

A fine work of sports journalism, well worthy of its estimable subject.

HOW TO MAKE AN APPLE PIE FROM SCRATCH
In Search of the Recipe for Our Universe—from the Origins of Atoms to the Big Bang
Cliff, Harry
Doubleday (400 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-0-385-54565-5

An entertainingly accurate account of how everything in the universe came to be, as told by a leading experimental physicist and popularizer.

Carl Sagan once said, “If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.” On July 4, 2012, the scientific community celebrated Higgsdependence Day, when the more than 10,000 physicists from around the world who had worked together for more 15 years announced conclusive

“Gift of the Swan: The Swan of Swan Lake Iris Gardens in Sumter, South Carolina.”

“...A debut collection of full-color photographs, inspirational quotes, and information about the breathtaking waterfowl of Swan Lake Iris Gardens in Sumter, South Carolina.”

“This lovely, easily browsable assemblage also contains some compelling information that may be useful to young students....
A peaceful stroll for waterfowl lovers.”

— Kirkus Reviews

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The author of the memoir *Punch Me Up to the Gods* is redefining Black masculinity

BY KAREN SCHECHNER

**Punch Me Up to the Gods** (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, May 18) opens with author Brian Broome watching a Black father and son at a bus stop. The toddler falls headfirst on the sidewalk, and the father yells at the wailing boy, “Stop cryin’...Be a man, Tuan!” Broome writes, “I am witnessing the playing out of one of the very conditions that have dogged my entire existence: this ‘being a man’ to the exclusion of all things.” The memoir details Broome’s coming-of-age as a dark-skinned gay man in Ohio and Pennsylvania and the ways his father’s and others’ beliefs about Black beauty and masculinity denied and shaped him. *Punch Me Up to the Gods* earned a rave from our reviewer: “Beautifully written, this examination of what it means to be Black and gay in America is a must-read.” Here we talk with Broome, 51, about heroism, Lil Nas X, and prioritizing mental health; the conversation (conducted over email) has been edited for length and clarity.

You mention that James Baldwin isn’t your favorite writer but is your hero. Which of Baldwin’s many heroic qualities do you most admire?

My admiration for James Baldwin extends far beyond the page. I have spent countless hours watching video clips of him on YouTube. I have watched him speak truth to power as if he wasn’t afraid of anyone. I don’t know if I believe that he was actually unafraid. He had to have been scared sometimes, right? But he rarely seemed it. I marvel at how he was hardly ever rattled or at a loss for words. He stood in the power of truth, and the truth was enough to keep him standing there. I hope someday to be as strong as he was.

In the introduction to *Punch Me Up to the Gods,* poet and artist Yona Harvey says that your “unapologetic recollections of the past—some of them cringeworthy—liberate us to view our pasts as well.” Why do you think an author’s painful recollections help readers process their own?

I think that other humans’ recounting their painful recollections out loud is a great service to others. When I went to rehab, I was full of secrets and lies, and the shame of those secrets and lies kept me sick. I used to misrepresent who I was with enormous whoppers....In one of my first group sessions in rehab, the counselor introduced himself. His last name was Graham. He told us—a group of strangers—that he used to tell people he was a millionaire because his family invented graham crackers. He laughed about it, but I sat there with my mouth agape because I couldn’t believe he was admitting to such a grandiose lie.

It was the same kind of lie I used to tell. In that moment, I knew that if I was going to get better, I’d have to start telling people the truth. I’d have to tell them that because of my background—I’m from, who I’m from—I used to think that I was the lowest of the low. I used to believe that I had to compensate for my
Blackness and the fact that I come from a poor family. I thought if Mr. Graham could admit to such a thing, so could I. There’s a James Baldwin quote I like: “You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive.” Now I don’t believe that there is anything that I’ve ever done that is singular in its cringeworthiness. I am not special. Most of us aren’t.

You describe being on a Pittsburgh bus when Jovan, a beautiful regular at the gay clubs, is queer bashed. He manages to escape, and he delivers a “Fuck you!” to the young men who beat him and also to you for not intervening. The book feels like an apology to him and a way to support future Jovans.

I recently watched the controversial music video by Lil Nas X “MONTERO (Call Me by Your Name).” In the video, he pole dances, wears high heels, and, toward the end, gives Satan a lap dance. I was surprised by my immediate reaction. It made me uncomfortable. I realized the discomfort was the same feeling I had when I was on that bus with Jovan. This feeling that he shouldn’t be dressed that way and acting that way because it will make “all of us” look bad. I felt the feeling rising up in me that as part of the “out group,” we should be doing everything we can to act “normal” and nonthreatening. I thought that I had eradicated this feeling within me, but it’s buried deep, and it still rears its ugly head from time to time. I recognize that it is my duty to fight this shame with everything I have every time it shows itself. So yes—the book is an apology to all the Jovans of the world, because they possess a strength that most people don’t. The strength to be yourself no matter what anyone else says. I still struggle with this.

Your attempt at heterosexuality failed hilariously (“Every time I look down you lookin’ at my pussy like it’s made out of math,” one woman said to you). Was it hard to find a balance of humor and devastation?

It’s not hard to see the humor in retrospect. At the time, I thought I was going to die of embarrassment. But everyone has a story like that. It helps that I’m still great friends with the woman in that story, and we’re able to laugh about who I was at the time and how young we were. There are moments of humor embedded in personal devastation, but they’re always easier to spot after the fact. For me, the balance is struck only after I pull back far enough to see the bigger picture. When writing about my attempt at heterosexuality, I had to stop thinking about how embarrassed I was and simply read the room. Something genuinely hilarious was happening in that room.

Near the end of the memoir, you say, “I have only recently begun to factor my mental health into the act of living.” How are you doing that, and how has the pandemic affected that practice?

I see a therapist regularly. I take my medications. I think that doing these things for yourself is unusual for men and, specifically, for Black men. We have always been taught to “walk it off” or “rub some dirt in it” when it comes to our pain. I realize that I wasn’t doing either. I was just covering the pain up with booze and drugs and sex, and by doing so I hurt a lot of other people. I try to be self-reflective because I believe that recognizing that my life isn’t really the center of anything helps me to become a better person. The pandemic has given me time alone that I hadn’t planned for. It has forced me to sit with myself without the option of calling up a friend to go to a noisy restaurant. It’s shown me how fortunate I am.

Karen Schecbner is the vice president of Kirkus Indie. Punch Me Up to the Gods received a starred review in the April 1, 2021, issue.
Cliff, a particle physicist at Cambridge and researcher at CERN’s Large Hadron Collider in Switzerland, brings physics down to Earth and persuades us that even if one can easily buy fruit and pies crusts, we should still care about their deep origins. Through a clear knowledge of many areas of physics as well as individual physicists, years spent in hands-on work at CERN, the instincts of a good storyteller, and a wicked sense of humor, Cliff draws readers into the bizarre and beautiful world inside the atom, offering an accessible education on the “standard model—a deceptively boring name for one of humankind’s greatest intellectual achievements. Developed over decades through the combined efforts of thousands of theorists and experimentalists, it says that everything we see around us—galaxies, stars, planets, and people—is made of just a few different types of particles, which are bound together inside atoms and molecules by a small number of fundamental forces.” In addition to the ins and outs of the Standard Model, this outstanding book, sometimes as funny as The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, will also teach readers why experimental subjects are often called “guinea pigs.”

The book for anyone who wants to understand some of the world’s most important scientific questions.

LADYPARTS
A Memoir
Copaken, Deborah
Random House (496 pp.)
$29.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-984855-47-3

A bestselling author and former war photographer chronicles a decade of personal traumas by examining the malfunctioning body parts associated with each new upheaval.

Copaken, author of both fiction and nonfiction, reflects on personal crises by connecting bodily sites and their roles in her life. She begins with the graphic story of how, in the middle of a divorce, she suffered a “vaginal cuff dehiscence: the clinical name for uh-oh, the stitches where they sewed up the top of your vaginal canal have come undone, and now you’re a blood clot howitzer.” The closing image of that section—in a hospital, “bleeding body on a slab, arms spread, wrists bound”—establishes the primary textual metaphor of the suffering female body. The author then explores other afflicted body parts and the troubles that dominated her life. In discussing her uterus, for example, she recalls how a hysterectomy coincided with both the end of her marriage and the death of her mentor and friend Nora Ephron. This was followed by a breast lump and the financial problems causing by marital separation. By 2014, at age 48, after she lost a job and started to date again, Copaken developed the heart palpinging, and dancing to create an atmosphere conducive to cure, hoping to stop the disease from metastasizing “with a firewall of meds and positive vibes.” Writing poetry, he realized, had the power to rescue him “from catatonic shock and stasis” by opening up “a psychic space of awareness” of the world around him. Intertwoven with his illness narrative, D’Aguiar shares some of his poems along with recollections of his childhood in Guyana, tales of the trickster god Anansi, and reflections on inequality in the health care system and the plight of Black men in America.

A visceral account of personal illness and social ills.

YEAR OF PLAGUES
A Memoir of 2020
D’Aguiar, Fred
Harper/HarperCollins (336 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-06-309-153-5

A chronicle of a year of trauma.

In the fall of 2019, British Guyanese poet, novelist, and playwright D’Aguiar, a professor of English at UCLA, was diagnosed with prostate cancer, the first of three plagues that he recounts in a memoir notable for its uncommon candor. If cancer was the most immediate threat to his life, Covid-19 proved no less fearsome. To undergo tests in a hospital, he had to enter “spaces dominated by the pandemic.” The virus, he writes, assumed “the role of an aid to my cancer.” Equally assaulting was the “society-cancer” of anti-Black racism, as evidenced by the police killings of George Floyd and others. D’Aguiar reports in detail the trajectory of his illness from the time he first noticed bladder problems through the tests that confirmed the existence of cancer. He also writes about the four drugs—and their insidious side effects—that he took to control it and the eventual surgery to remove his prostate and the lymph nodes to which the disease had spread. Cancer affected both body and spirit: Because one of the drugs blocked the production of testosterone, for example, he began to experience hot flashes and to develop breasts, a disturbing side effect that challenged his “male gender outlook.” Trying to marshal “restorative powers” of mind, the author took to chanting, singing, and dancing to create an atmosphere conducive to cure, hoping to stop the disease from metastasizing “with a firewall of meds and positive vibes.” Writing poetry, he realized, had the power to rescue him “from catatonic shock and stasis” by opening up “a psychic space of awareness” of the world around him. Intertwoven with his illness narrative, D’Aguiar shares some of his poems along with recollections of his childhood in Guyana, tales of the trickster god Anansi, and reflections on inequality in the health care system and the plight of Black men in America.

A visceral account of personal illness and social ills.
A sharp portrait of our deeply fractured political system.

Our current political polarization is neither unique nor intractable, notes social sciences professor Dotson, who details measures that can engender a genuinely democratic ethos. It is not too much democracy (or politics) that thwarts us but too little, writes the author—and not nearly enough plurality in our dialogues or the processes of designing and enacting policy. Critiquing the notions of objective fact or incontrovertible truth and upending much contemporary thinking on the choice between the expertise of elites and populist-driven concepts of governance, Dotson locates the impediments we face in our reliance on calcified beliefs, outmoded constructs, and the demonstrably faulty procedures we cling to. No segment of American society escapes his scrutiny: liberals, conservatives, moderates, fundamentalists, libertarians, defenders of the free market, and advocates of science above all. Each makes fundamental errors in assaying the problems we confront and the path forward, leaving us confused, frustrated, and fatalistic. We suffer due to our fear of conflict and simplistic calls for “civility,” longing for an age of certitude (that never was), and insistence on thinking our opponents are either corrupt, ignorant, or brainwashed. The much-derided “soft” sciences offer some keys to achieving balance, as does heightened participation in democratic processes by every portion of society. Dotson advocates for a less authoritarian approach to politics that embraces the life experiences and skills of everyone, regardless of political conviction, and that blends these perspectives with those of acknowledged experts and involves the widest spectrum of citizens in every facet of developing policy. He knows his prescriptions for change, however logical, will be challenging to implement. Perhaps some
of them are unattainable, but his arguments are cogent, his optimism profound.

An important demonstration that to thrive—indeed, to survive—our fissured democracy must be far more democratic.

**BATTLE FOR THE SOUL**

*Inside the Democrats’ Campaigns To Defeat Trump*

Dovere, Edward-Isaac

Viking (528 pp.)

$30.00 | May 25, 2021

978-1-984878-07-6

A carefully structured account of the many moving parts that turned the Democratic Party into a resistance movement against Trump.

Barack Obama, writes *Atlantic* lead political correspondent Dovere, “never understood why people disliked [Hillary] Clinton so much. He could also never get over how bad a campaigner she was.” He didn’t do much to help in her campaign until it was too late. Somehow Trump managed to squeak by her even as Obama finally told aides, “do you really want a psychopath sitting at that desk?” and ordered them to do something to get that message through to voters. Yet, Dovere writes, there was a certain continuity to a vote for Obama in 2008 and a vote for Trump in 2016: Both were outsiders running a populist campaign, if of very different dispositions. Obama tried to guide Trump to effectiveness after the election, suggesting that he “make a few patches to Obamacare and call it Trumpcare” and warning him not to hire Michael Flynn, whose Russian connections were already well known. Trump ignored the advice. His intransigence emerged early, moving Nancy Pelosi to challenge his claim that he had won the popular vote. Trump was great for Obama, Dovere notes, retrospectively erasing the errors he made in office, while resistance to Trump soon became marching orders for party stalwarts.

Some of the newsworthy items in this book: Clinton contemplated running again in 2020 only to conclude that if she did, Bernie Sanders would be the guaranteed candidate. She hoped instead for a deadlocked convention by which the Democrats would call her back by acclaim. It was to the Democrats’ good fortune, Dovere suggests, that Trump was so inept, especially with respect to the pandemic, and that the Republican Party “was defining itself as the check against America’s changing.” That America was changing seems to have eluded them all, leaving Trump a loser “on the biggest stage of his life.”

A wide-ranging history of a tangled campaign—catnip for politics junkies.

**THE GIRLS WHO STEPPED OUT OF LINE**

*Untold Stories of the Women Who Changed the Course of World War II*

Eder, Mari K.

Sourcebooks (400 pp.)

$26.99 | Aug. 3, 2021

978-1-72823-092-4

A chronicle of a group of courageous women whose contributions to World War II “put comic book heroines to shame.”

“The story of the war will never be fully or fairly written if the achievement of women in it are untold,” writes Eder, a retired Army major general, in the introduction to this enthusiastic collection of their exploits. Most did not seek fame and were not “trailblazers by choice,” but readers will share the author’s outrage upon learning that many were deliberately written out of history and treated badly even as they served. When the Air Force began accepting women for flight training in 1976, it announced proudly that this was the first time it had permitted women to fly; angry Women Airforce Service Pilot veterans pointed out the error. These included Ola Mildred Rexroat, who joined in 1944, trained, and flew for the Air Force within the U.S. Like all WASPs, she was denied military status, paid less than male pilots, and ineligible for veteran’s benefits until 1977. Perhaps Eder’s most famous character, Virginia Hall, risked her life in Nazi-occupied Europe, first for Britain’s Secret Operations Executive, and then the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, despite being easily identifiable because of her limp. Alice Marble, the world’s amateur tennis champion, was shot while carrying out a successful espionage operation in Switzerland. Throughout the war, nurses played an essential role, and Katharine Nolan’s experiences in a field hospital make gripping reading. Other important women assembled the first computers that cracked complex Axis codes (see Liza Mundy’s *Code Girls*), drew essential maps, or risked and often lost their lives in the resistance. Several of Eder’s women simply survived imprisonment or concentration camps, no mean feat. The author fills her accounts with invented dialogue and novelistic thoughts, but her subjects worked hard, often behaving heroically and suffering for it, so that’s a minor quibble.

Inspiring stories of women warriors who deserve greater attention.
THE GALLERY OF MIRACLES AND MADNESS
Insanity, Modernism, and Hitler’s War on Art
English, Charlie
Random House (336 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-0-525-51205-9

A powerful and disturbing portrait of a devastating chapter in the history of Nazi terror.

In the fall of 1939, Hitler began a program to cleanse Germany of those he deemed “unworthy of life”—particularly individuals diagnosed with mental illness, epilepsy, “feeblemindedness,” or alcoholism or engaging in criminal or anti-social behavior, however minor. Although an extensive sterilization project already addressed the problem of procreation, Hitler preferred killing, thereby saving the nation the cost of supporting “useless” individuals. Identified by eugenicist physicians and psychiatrists, the individuals were sent to a country mansion to be gassed with carbon monoxide. The euthanasia program had begun earlier with the killing of children identified by midwives as suffering from “certain conditions, including ‘idiocy and mongolism’ (especially cases involving blindness and deafness); microencephaly; severe or progressive hydrocephalus”; or physical “malformations of any kind”; some were condemned because their parents were Jewish. About 6,000 babies were murdered, either by injection or, often, starvation. As journalist and arts editor English reveals in an absorbing contribution to the horrific history of Nazi Germany, the program that began in 1939 was complicated by Hitler’s fraught connection to art. Rejected for admission to Vienna’s stodgy Academy of Fine Arts in 1907, Hitler portrayed himself as an artist for the rest of his life, and he saw art as a potent cultural force. Not surprisingly, he vilified modernist artists—such as Max Ernst, Paul Klee, and Egon Schiele—who exalted the irrational, primitive, and mad. As a prominent theme in modernist art, insanity found a champion in the psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn, a leading...
As a Woman: What I Learned About Power, Sex and Patriarchy After I Transitioned (Atria, June 1) makes good on its title. A scion in a line of fundamentalist ministers, Paula Stone Williams had a pulpit-level vantage on an institution invested in maintaining male power. When Williams came out as trans to her evangelical peers in 2012, her high-ranking jobs, lifelong relationships, and sizable income vanished within a week. It will come as no surprise to feminists—of which Stone is a vocal one, lecturing on gender equity—that many of the lessons she gleaned even before she transitioned touch on family: her 40-year marriage to Cathy Williams; her relationships with daughters Jana and Jael but especially son Jonathan, a pastor in New York City. Paula Stone Williams is a pastoral counselor and still preaches at a Longmont, Colorado, church. In 2018, Paula and Jonathan tag-teamed the delivery of a TEDWomen Talk; with more than 1.5 million views, their duet remains as tender as it is illuminating. This conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

What were the especially dark moments you had to lean into to write the memoir?
I think the hardest part to lean into became very apparent to me when I was doing the audio version of the book three weeks ago—because I just sobbed. [The audio engineer] said, “You know, we’ll just let it go, and then we’ll decide later whether we want to go back and pick it up again.” It was every place about the family on the whole—but particularly Cathy and Jonathan.

Much of the writing about your relationship with Cathy seems to reflect a desire to pay tribute to that marriage. How did you navigate that with her?
Jonathan and I had agreed after our TED Talk to do Jada Pinkett Smith’s Red Table Talk with the people who used to produce Oprah’s show. They were very persistent about the things they wanted. And Cathy was very adamant: She did not want to be involved. There was a point at which they were asking for pictures. She was out of town, and I gave them some photos. She was pretty upset when she saw the pictures.

Ouch.
She was like, “Don’t ever do that again. I didn’t want to be in the show.” That really said to me—and I had just started writing the book—you can’t put anything in here she’s not good with. So she read every bit of it. She corrected me on the very few occasions that my memory didn’t serve me well. She read every single bit of it—and it was pretty hard for her.

In the many versions of coming out, the family comes out as well. And—
You explode the family narrative. It’s what you do whether you want to or not....I’m sorry, I interrupted.

Not at all—this is a conversation. In the TED Talk with Jonathan, there’s a moment when he’s started telling his story and you look at him with such tenderness. From the
online comments, it’s clear a lot of people got teary.

[Pauses a few beats.]

Speaking of getting teary.
He’s a good son. That for us was very cathartic, healing, precious.

What have you learned about empathy?
Having a more vulnerable body stops you from striding through the world. I was talking to my former executive assistant [recently]. She said, “You know, the women who worked closely with you in the office, we adored you because you stopped for us. You were present to us.” Now that happens far more easily. It’s just because you’re walking through life more gently and more gingerly, frankly.

How did your understanding of privilege—male but also White—change as you transitioned?
I was just like most White guys, not being at all aware of my privilege. Knowing I was more sensitive than most of the alpha males I worked with—who were my friends—I thought, Yeah, I’m pretty good at this. The empathy takes you more deeply into the pain of the world—and it’s not really pleasant. It’s necessary, but it’s not pleasant. I think, for me, there was a blessed defeat of sorts in getting fired from all my jobs right away. (Not that I think any of it was justified.) There’s that. Also, you can—and I’ve seen this with some trans women—become more narcissistic than you were before, or you can stop and take stock of how close you are to the dirt now and yet also realize how much of your privilege you retain.

A kinship with the Apostle Paul seems to hover over your journey as a pastor. When you were transitioning, did you know that you were going to simply add that A to your name?
Watching The Merv Griffin Show [with Christine Jorgensen in 1970] was when I first thought, Oh, people actually do this. You could actually do this. But I just stuffed it away. When it started to come back as this tiny possibility, I thought, Oh, what would your name be? And just out of the blue? I said, Oh, it would be Karen.

You dodged a bullet.
I know, seriously. But I have two friends named Karen, and I thought, You don’t choose the name of one of your friends. Once I got serious about it, then there was just no question that it was Paula because the continuity was important to me. As I say, in the memoir, integrating the two halves of my life.

As a therapist, were you in any way better prepared to understand transitioning and coming out?

I was not. There is just no way you can transition—in either direction—and not have to go through a second puberty. Your body changes massively. Testosterone is an incredibly powerful substance, so its loss is seen in every part of your being. Not just your physiological being. We are psychospiritual, somatic beings. I think there was a period of time where I was the giddy, self-absorbed 13-year-old girl. That wasn’t a long period of time because I also was going through the trauma of the loss of everything and everybody from the evangelical world.

In the context of your spiritual journey, where does this book fit in? It feels like an extension of pastoral care.
Oh God, if it could be that. I would love it if people experienced it that way. I remember watching a Sunday morning TV show. It might have been the Charles Kuralt show back in the day. Somebody was saying that all great leaders have a phrase and that people need to know what their phrase is. And I remember thinking right away [that mine could be], He—it was be at the time—lessened spiritual suffering.

It’s a real thing, spiritual wrestling....
It is a real thing. It’s part of why I stayed in the fundamentalist world for a long time. I could be a more liberal voice. But looking back now, I should not have stayed because theologically I was selling my soul. I wasn’t helping as much as I thought. And now I’m freely able to say, I believe in God most days except for Tuesdays and Thursdays and any day I’m on the New Jersey Turnpike.

Lisa Kennedy writes for Variety, AARP.com, the Denver Post, and other publications. As a Woman was reviewed in the May 1, 2021, issue.
intellectual in the 1920s who saw striking works among his own mental patients. Collecting samples from asylums, he published *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, a volume celebrated by modernists. Many of the artists Prinzhorn discovered—men Hitler damned as “degenerates and lunatics”—became victims in the eutanasia program, which the author trenchantly brings to life.

A revelatory look at the “gangplank for the Holocaust.”

**THE TIGHTENING DARK**

*An American Hostage in Yemen*

Farran, Sam & Buchholz, Benjamin

Hachette (320 pp.)

$28.00 | Jul. 27, 2021

978-0-306-92271-8

A Muslim American Marine veteran recounts his impressive life story and his six-month captivity in Yemen.

A former military officer, interpreter, and security specialist in the Marine Corps, Farran was born in Lebanon, the son of a spectacularly workaholic father who traveled the Arab world as a laborer, opened a restaurant, and accumulated enough money to immigrate with his large family to the U.S., where he continued to labor and open other restaurants. The author was 10 when they arrived in the U.S. Writing with Buchholz, the former chief of attaché operations at the U.S. Embassy in Yemen, Farran delivers an amusing account of his culture shock, but mostly he thrived. He became fascinated with the Marines and joined out of high school in 1978, along with a friend from his adopted home of Dearborn, Michigan. He served as a translator/interrogator in the First Gulf War in 1991 and joined the Defense Intelligence Agency, where he was soon promoted to military attaché working out of embassies in Arab-speaking nations—after 9/11, exclusively in Yemen. Leaving active duty in 2004, Farran became a security manager for private companies, returned to Yemen in 2009, and started his own security company. Farran provides an expert portrait of this little-known nation, a fractious collection of rival tribes governed by a long-standing autocrat supported by the U.S. who also trained his army and police force until he was nearly assassinated in 2011 and fled the country. In 2014, Farran left as instability worsened, and the U.S. Embassy closed soon after. Yemen descended into chaos, where it remains as the “world’s worst humanitarian disaster.” For reasons that aren’t completely clear, Farran returned in 2015. He was arrested, brutally beaten, imprisoned for six months, and then released, more through the efforts of friends than the U.S. government. He is now safely retired in Lebanon while Yemen remains a dangerous failed state.

A fine memoir and a disturbing hostage drama with a happy ending.

**DECODING GREATNESS**

*How the Best in the World Reverse Engineer Success*

Friedman, Ron

Simon & Schuster (288 pp.)

$27.00 | Aug. 3, 2021

978-1-328-58784-8

Don’t quit your day job just yet, but do prepare to “harness the future and the past” to change the world and make yourself a superstar.

Friedman opens with a well-known moment in the history of technology: when Steve Jobs called out Bill Gates for supposedly stealing Apple’s software to build Windows. “I think it’s more like we both had this rich neighbor named Xerox,” Gates coolly replied, “and I broke into his house to steal the TV set and found that you had already stolen it.” True enough, but even as Xerox snoozed, both Jobs and Gates had reverse-engineered their inventions from the Xerox original, “systematically taking things apart to explore their inner workings and extract new insights.” Though Friedman’s definition of reverse-engineering gets more metaphorical as the narrative proceeds, his fundamental lesson holds: If you want to be a novelist, you pick apart the work of eminent models to figure out their tricks; if you want to be a musician, you try to learn to think like Paul McCartney. Whatever the pursuit, writes the author, the race is on, since if you’re alive and working, you’re “facing significantly more competition than your colleagues did a decade back.” Greatness, Friedman holds, hinges on the mind, both creative and detail-oriented, that can see what someone else has done and do it better—or do something that the other thing does not. Drawing on examples from Jeff Bezos to Judd Apatow, Malcolm Gladwell, and Vincent Van Gogh (women, regrettably, don’t often figure in Friedman’s pages), the author examines how these creative minds think and counsels readers to ask interesting questions, solicit and interpret feedback (but not too much), develop meaningful metrics, and set goals.

A meandering yet mostly engaging prescription for getting ahead in business and life.

**WE’RE NOT BROKEN**

*Changing the Autism Conversation*

Garcia, Eric

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (320 pp.)

$27.00 | Aug. 3, 2021

978-1-328-58784-8

In his first book, a journalist on the autism spectrum combines memoir and a wide-ranging critique of how America is failing autistic children and adults.

Noting that autism advocacy has become a minefield of conflicting views, Garcia plunges into the fray with two broad
but blunt messages for the families and friends of people with autism. First, “stop trying to cure autistic people and instead help autistic people live fulfilling lives.” Second, include autistic adults in policymaking decisions that affect them. Drawing on his experiences as a millennial third-generation American of Mexican ancestry and on sources ranging from the TV show The Good Doctor to journals like Molecular Autism, Garcia explains why he believes attitudes or policies must improve in seven areas of society that are rife with myths or misimpressions: work, housing, education, health care, relationships, gender, and race. At times, the author overgeneralizes and repeats or appears to contradict himself: He faults the media’s “single-minded focus on autistic men” but says that for years Temple Grandin “was perhaps the most famous autistic woman in the world” and that today, Greta Thunberg is “perhaps the most famous autistic person in the world.” But the media have given both women far more attention than most autistic men. Nonetheless, Garcia makes solid points when he recalls his personal challenges with dating and work or demystifies government programs, such as Medicaid’s Home- and Community-based Services waivers (which has such a heavy backlog of applicants that in New Mexico, people have waited 13 years to enroll). The author also chronicles his interviews with experts such as Julia Bascom, executive director of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, and autistic adults who are Black, LGBTQ+, and married and single. Although he documents his sources clearly, there are sure to be readers who disagree with some of his arguments. Given that the issue is such a “battleground,” that’s to be expected.

A well-researched survey of autism that will spark debates among autistic people and their allies.

BREATHE
A Life in Flow
Gracie, Rickson with Maguire, Peter
Dey Street/HarperCollins (288 pp.)
$27.99 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-0-06-301895-2

A jiu jitsu and mixed martial arts legend delivers a prideful account of his accomplishments inside and outside the ring.

Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1958, Gracie never met a fight he didn’t like. A couple of generations back, his ancestors fell in with a Japanese immigrant who taught them jiu jitsu, a battlefield martial form, and judo, “created in the late 1880s as a safer, more sporting, weaponless alternative.” Gracie took up the family martial arts tradition, and though he tempered the fierce warrior attitudes of jiu jitsu with the laid-back ethos of a surfer, he was a fighter from elementary school on. Some of Gracie’s life lessons are humdrum: “Meals were spaced five hours apart to allow the body to absorb the nutrients from the food.” Others are more in the ascended-master vein: “When I put physical pressure on students, I see their true personalities because they immediately show me things that they are able to hide when they’re not on the mat: their state of emotional
balance, their ability to manage pressure, and many other things." One constant is self-regard, and Gracie airs numerous grudges. For example, in one match, he defeated Chuck Norris “in about a minute,” though Norris went on to train with a rival branch of the family. The author also recounts his rocky relationship with his brother, who once had a “monopoly” on jiu jitsu training in the U.S. “When my brother lost control of me,” he writes, “I became his greatest adversary, because I had the image, ability, and leadership skills that he lacked, and worst of all, everyone knew it.” A little of this boasting goes a long way, and there’s a lot of it, though peppered with interesting, hard-won insights on the psychology and philosophy of martial arts. Jocko Willink provides the foreword.

Read between the braggadocio and clichés to find some useful lessons.

A vibrant journey to Baroque Rome. Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), acclaimed as the “genius of the Baroque,” is the focus of Grossman’s engaging, sumptuously illustrated history of 17th-century Rome, when grand architectural and artistic projects, commissioned by a succession of popes, transformed the city dramatically. The son of well-regarded sculptor Pietro Bernini, Gian’s talent was evident when he was as young as 11. By the time he was in his 20s, he was a recognized master, and his career soared during the 21 years of the papacy of Urban VIII, when “a flood of papal commissions” made him spectacularly wealthy. Even under Innocent X, Urban’s successor and foe, Bernini managed to navigate political intrigue and turbulence to maintain his status as Rome’s preeminent sculptor and architect. His most important patron, however, was the physically frail Alexander VII, and the power of France’s Louis XIV growing, Alexander “turned ever more inward, lavishing more time, attention and money on his projects for Rome.”

Public works of art, he believed, reflected his spiritual and diplomatic power, and he saw in the swirling, sensuous, theatrical Baroque a style focused only on “heightening the drama of life.” Grossman portrays Bernini as a self-promoter with a “prodigious” work ethic; a man who could display “arrogance, quick temper, and sharp tongue” but also a tendency to be self-critical. A self-portrait, reproduced in this book, shows “piercing eyes, a dark piratical look, and a sense of tremendous physical and intellectual energy.” He directed that energy toward managing a huge workshop, which, at one time or another, employed “almost every sculptor of talent in Rome.”

An added bonus, Grossman’s guide to an Obelisk Walk of Rome, appended to his narrative, highlights many of Bernini’s works.

A fresh look at Rome’s vast grandeur during the 17th century.
FLASHES OF CREATION
George Gamow, Fred Hoyle, and the Great Big Bang Debate
Halpern, Paul
Basic (304 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 17, 2021
978-1-5416-7359-5

An expert and entertaining account of the first great controversy in cosmology. Physics professor Halpern, who has authored many books on cosmology and the universe, has chosen irresistible material for his latest book. Unlike relativity, the origin and fate of the universe is a fairly easy topic to understand, especially for those versed in the basics of physics. Even better, both of the author’s vivid subjects wrote for a popular audience and had no inhibitions about conducting their debate in the media. George Gamow (1904-1968), born in Odessa, was a brilliant theoretical physicist who moved to the U.S. in 1934. After making important discoveries in nuclear physics, he turned his attention to cosmology, combining Einstein’s description of the existing universe with refinements by other brilliant (but less media-savvy) scientists to become the leading proponent of the Big Bang theory. Despite the popular image, this was not an explosion but the spectacular origin of everything—including time and space—from an infinitesimal point. British physicist Fred Hoyle (1915-2001) was already a leading figure in his field when the origin of the universe became a major topic of debate after World War II. Dismissing the Big Bang theory as a quasi-religious form of divine creation, he and colleagues proposed a steady-state theory in which matter appeared spontaneously as the universe expanded. Ultimately, the Big Bang theory won out due to evidence, especially the 1964 discovery of the cosmic microwave background radiation, the cooling remnant of an ancient, dense, hot universe. While many popular histories of this debate portray Gamow and Hoyle spending their lives debating this question, Halpern’s nuanced biographies give equal space to their other accomplishments, which were not only important, but Nobel-worthy. Although they never collaborated, their work explained how all the heavier elements originated from primordial hydrogen. Gamow showed how helium emerged in the Big Bang and Hoyle, how all the others formed from stars.

Two iconic scientists come together in an outstanding dual biography.

THE STATE MUST PROVIDE
Why America’s Colleges Have Always Been Unequal—and How To Set Them Right
Harris, Adam
Ecco/HarperCollins (256 pp.)
$27.99 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-0-06-297648-2

How the legacy of discrimination still affects opportunities for Black students in the realm of higher education. Atlantic staff writer Harris, a former reporter at the Chronicle of Higher Education, makes his book debut with an illuminating examination of Black students’ access to college, arguing forcefully that integrated colleges have failed Blacks. Even though Black colleges “educate 80 percent of Black judges, 50 percent of Black lawyers and doctors, and 25 percent of Black science, technology, math, and engineering graduates,” they remain
severely underfunded. The author traces the history of educational opportunities for Blacks beginning in the 19th century, when two noted institutions were established: Oberlin, in Ohio, and Berea, in Kentucky. Both were determined to offer interracial education, often flouting local laws—and, in Berea’s case, the wrath of slaveholders—to do so. Berea’s original structure was “burned to the ground by slaveholders and their supporters.” After the Civil War, 45 Black colleges opened, but Blacks were barred from attending even public, land-grant colleges. The Plessy v. Ferguson decision of 1896 upheld segregation, allowing states to pass laws making it illegal to educate Blacks and Whites together. Harris recounts lawsuits by students petitioning to attend all-White schools. In 1948, for example, when Ada Lois Sipuel sued to be admitted to the law school at the University of Oklahoma, the Supreme Court ruled that Oklahoma “was required to provide her a legal education.” In response, Oklahoma quickly established a law school at the all-Black Langston University. Later, when the University of Oklahoma grudgingly admitted Black students, it sat them at the back of the classroom or set up railings to separate them from Whites. Harris suggests ways that the government can offer reparations for its history of hampering Blacks’ education—perhaps as “targeted debt cancellation and tuition-free college,” cash transfers to students, or the redistribution of endowments—but discrimination is still widespread, “bending and twisting until it fits within the confines of the system it is given.”

A well-researched, potent, timely investigation of yet another element of systemic racism.

French and Germany, the Reformation converted Scandinavia with much less bloodshed. This proved critical when Catholic armies of the Holy Roman Empire were rampaging across Lutheran Germany. Their only opposition were forces led by Sweden’s King Gustavus Adolphus (1594-1632), who won spectacular victories that preserved Protestantism in Germany and may have made him Holy Roman Emperor—if he hadn’t died in battle. Herman then fast-forwards to the 19th century, when population and poverty grew and immigration to the U.S. became a major force. In the middle third of the book, the author describes Scandinavia’s contribution to America, which includes a significant chapter on the Civil War and long biographies of famous Scandinavian Americans, including Charles Lindbergh, Thorstein Veblen, Knut Rockne, and Carl Sandburg. In the 20th century, aided by the decision to stay out of World War I and escaping lightly from World War II, Scandinavian nations prospered into some of the world’s wealthiest and most socially progressive.

A fine history of a people who deserve more attention.
incredibly more important?” His book, featuring more than 100 full-color photos, is its own answer, and though sometimes a touch too purple, his argument makes a good case for why we should care.

Readers will gain a new appreciation of these magnificent ruminants through Kantner’s sharply focused eyes.

THE IRISH ASSASSINS
Conspiracy, Revenge and the Phoenix Park Murders That Stunned Victorian England
Kavanagh, Julie
Atlantic Monthly (416 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-8021-4936-7

A historical true-crime tale revisits three notorious Victorian-era murders that shocked Britain and dealt a body blow to the cause of Home Rule for Ireland.

In painstaking and sometimes-harrowing detail, journalist Kavanagh examines the fatal 1882 stabbings of Lord Frederick Cavendish and Thomas Burke, Britain’s Chief Secretary and Undersecretary for Ireland, in Phoenix Park in Dublin. Five men—all with ties to the American-funded terrorist group known as the Invincibles—were tried and hanged for the crimes. A sixth, who had turned queen’s evidence, was instead put on a ship to South Africa, giving rise to an Agatha Christie–esque twist involving disguises, fake identities, and a shipboard murder that caused Queen Victoria to write in her journal: “Well-deserved, but shocking!” The attacks were a fateful setback for a secret “truce” being pursued by Prime Minister William Gladstone and Irish leader Charles Stewart Parnell, whose mistress and her husband acted as go-betweens. The author sets the stage for the tumult by casting the Donegal town of Gweedore as a microcosm of an Ireland in which, decades after the Great Famine, horrific poverty still prompted desperate responses to the barbarous evictions and other abuses of “‘landlordism,’ an entirely pejorative word implying abuse of authority, from rack-renting to mercilessly arbitrary evictions.” To depict broader crises, Kavanagh uses “the shifting episodic structure of today’s television dramas,” or quick cuts from country to country and character to character, which makes it hard to follow the sprawling plot and cast. Yet Kavanagh’s keen sense of Ireland’s pain—and the damage England inflicted on itself with its handling of it—ultimately justifies her conclusion, which approvingly quotes Roy Jenkins’ Gladstone: “What vast benefit would have followed from an Irish settlement in the 1880s, thirty years before the Easter Rising.”

A cinematic, multilayered revenge tragedy centered on Ireland’s fraught quest for independence.

THE ENABLERS
How Team Trump Flunked the Pandemic and Failed America
Kellerman, Barbara
Cambridge Univ. (320 pp.)
$24.95 | Aug. 31, 2021
978-1-108-83832-0

A pointed, dispiriting examination of the rings of supporters who surrounded Donald Trump and abetted his countless misdeeds.

The Germans of the Third Reich are the textbook case of those who “were only following orders,” writes Kellerman, who was the founding executive director of the Harvard Kennedy School’s Center for Public Leadership. Hitler could not have carried out his horrific campaigns without layers of willing enablers—“followers who allow or even encourage their leaders to engage in, and then to persist in behaviors that are
“Possibly life-changing ideas supported with extensive sociological research, lively storytelling, and contagious jollity.”

**THE POWER OF STRANGERS**

**The Benefits of Connecting in a Suspicious World**

Keohane, Joe

Random House (352 pp.)

$28.00 | Jul. 13, 2021

978-1-984855-77-0

After a year of quarantine and masks and years of severe political division, journalist Keohane shows us why it’s vital for us to come together.

“You cannot hope to be a good citizen,” writes the author in his first book, “you cannot hope to be a moral person, if you do not first make an effort to see that the world is a very different place for the person sitting next to you. That their strangers are not necessarily your strangers. And the way to understand this, across social boundaries, or racial boundaries, or ideological boundaries, or any other boundary that has been thrown up to keep us apart, is to talk to them.” Keohane seeks to teach readers how to have those conversations, joining him on his adventures — e.g., cross-country train trips, seminars abroad — after a year in lockdown is a strange experience at first, but by the end, it makes the prospect of reentry even more exciting. Reading this book is like taking a college course that becomes a cult favorite because the witty, enthusiastic professor makes the topic seem not only entertaining, but essential. Keohane has some of the mannerisms of that popular professor — e.g., describing the process as “our journey” — and liberally dousing the data with asides and wisecracks. When he quotes Jane Goodall on destructive.” Though the author notes that Trump was no Hitler, he was undoubtedly a destructive, feckless, and ultimately failed leader. Kellerman examines the circles of powerful men and women who surrounded Trump by virtue of professing loyalty to him, a requirement for access — along with physical attractiveness, Kellerman adds, in the case of inner-inner circle members such as Ivanka Trump and Hope Hicks. With that loyalty came the fervent suspension of disbelief and surrender to the lies and fear by which Trump wielded power. Kellerman goes on to examine Trump’s base, made up of segments of the electorate who shared in common Whiteness and fear of losing what can only be described as White privilege — even though so many of its members are far from privileged. Most provocatively, the author delivers a scathing critical exam of the people who assisted Trump as he blundered his way through the pandemic. One who receives praise is Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who realized he was being played and “made as loud and clear as he could without crossing the line into insubordination that he viewed Trump’s leadership as deeply if not fatally flawed.” And one who comes in for close questioning is Anthony Fauci, who, Kellerman suggests, did harm by not “being more direct, less circumspect, less political.”

An eye-opening look at how bad leaders — one in particular — rely on bad followers.

**THE BARCELONA COMPLEX**

**Lionel Messi and the Making—and Unmaking—of the World’s Greatest Soccer Club**

Kuper, Simon

Penguin Press (304 pp.)

$27.00 | Aug. 17, 2021

978-0-593-29771-1

Veteran soccer correspondent Kuper delivers an account over three decades of the fortunes of a leading European club.

Barcelona FC, Barça to its fans, was once an anomaly among professional soccer organizations; it is owned by citizens of the city, and it calls itself, in Catalan, més que un club, “more than a club.” Attached to it is an academy called the Masia, or “farmhouse,” where aspiring team members come to train, for many years under the tutelage of Johan Cruyff, whom Kuper calls “distinctly batty.” Cruyff certainly shrugged off the received rules and opinions, and as his colleague and fellow coach Pep Guardiola says, “he built the cathedral.” One of the players who came to the Masia was an Argentinian teenager named Lionel Messi, who adopted Cruyff’s doctrine of “total football,” which means “that every player attacked and everyone defended,” all while exercising a kind of sixth sense about where the ball was going to be three seconds in the future. No one had seen soccer of the sort that Barça played, or Messi’s on-field magic, and the team soared from backwater bit players to European champions. Alas, as Kuper chronicles in a narrative as swiftly moving as a tournament, Barcelona FC became victim of its own success: Messi was its star player for years, but as he aged and commanded a higher salary (thanks to his scheming father, who managed him), there was no money to hire players to support him. Meanwhile every other soccer club on the continent had incorporated Cruyff’s one-radical rulebook, with doctrinal points such as, “There is only one ball. If we have it, the other team can’t score.” It’s a fine cautionary lesson, and though this book is likely to appeal primarily to soccer fans, readers need not follow the sport to enjoy it. The opening cast of characters and “Barcelona Lexicon” are particularly helpful.

A smart, engaging look at soccer as both game and business.
PUTTING IT TOGETHER
How Stephen Sondheim and I Created Sunday in the Park With George
Lapine, James
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (416 pp.)
$40.00 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-374-20009-1

Conversations with the creators of a landmark American musical.
Lapine was “an accident of the theater,” an Ohio native whose first Broadway experience was the time when, at age 11, his parents took him to Bye Bye Birdie and he clumsily thrust his souvenir program at star Dick Van Dyke and gave him a paper cut on the nose. He had intended to pursue a career in photography, but he became an off-Broadway playwright, work that attracted the interest of Stephen Sondheim. Their first collaboration, Lapine’s debut as a writer/director, was Sunday in the Park With George (1984), a musical inspired by Georges Seurat’s pointillist painting A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte. This delightful book revisits the two years they spent telling a fictionalized version of Seurat’s life. Lapine conducted conversations with around 40 people involved with the show to create “a mixed salad: one part memoir, one part oral history, one part ‘how a musical gets written and produced.’” Among the participants are Sondheim, stars Mandy Patinkin and Bernadette Peters, and musical director Paul Gemignani. The result sometimes feels like a mutual admiration society, with the casting director saying Sondheim was “incredibly generous to all of us,” Lapine saying how much he learned from Peters and Patinkin, and so on. But fans will find much to love, including the complete text of Lapine’s script and Sondheim’s lyrics and reproductions of handwritten notes, sheet music, drawings of costumes, and more. A highlight is the long section in which Sondheim describes his process of composing a song. The author is refreshingly candid about his role in his actors’ frustrations—a continuation of his childhood clumsiness—as when he told cast member Brent Spiner, “You’re not a character, you’re a color,” to which Spiner replied, “Would you mind telling me what color?” As Lapine admits, “I wasn’t the most popular guy in the room.”

Art isn’t easy, as this entertaining look at the making of a cultural touchstone amply demonstrates.

THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ESSAY
Ed. by Lopate, Phillip
Anchor (624 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-525-56732-5

The esteemed anthologist and Columbia professor compiles another vast array of American essays.

“What makes this period so interesting,” writes Lopate, “is the mélange of clashing generations and points of view” as well as the rise of the personal essay: This period opened the door to a range of diverse, powerful voices, many of which have been underrepresented in many anthologies of the 20th century. Lopate begins with a piece by Hilton Als, who creates a lovely autobiographical portrait of actor Louise Brooks, written from her point of view: “I was asked to perform with the Ziegfeld Follies; I was the most hated Follies girl, ever (too well-read, too much attitude); I was loved then and only then by several lesbians of intellectual distinction and many fairy boys who drank and wrote.” Next is Nicholson Baker’s reflective series of vignettes, “One Summer,” in which every paragraph begins with those two words. Anne Carson’s somber “Decreation” delves into the lives of three women who “had the nerve to enter a zone of absolute spiritual daring” while Terry Castle’s lighthearted, confessional “Home Alone” explores her vice for alluring interior decorating magazines. Sloane Crosley’s witty “The Doctor Is a Woman,” describes the process of freezing her 67 remaining eggs, “a gaudy amount of eggs for a human to produce.... I am not a woman—I am a fish.” In “Matricide,”
Meghan Daum writes affectingly about her mother’s passing, and death appears again in poet and undertaker Thomas Lynch’s comforting “Bodies in Motion and at Rest.” Sleight-of-hand modernism scatters about in Ander Monson’s “Failure: A Meditation, Another Iteration (With Interruptions).” Lopate makes an appearance in “Experience Necessary,” responding to an essay by Montaigne. As in previous volumes, the list of contributors is enviable: Patricia Hempl, Barry Lopez, John McPhee, Joyce Carol Oates, David Sedaris, Alexander Chee, Eula Biss, Margo Jefferson, Yiyun Li, Darryl Pinckney, Rebecca Solnit, etc. . .

There's something for everyone in this sumptuous collection.

**THE ARBORNAUT**

*A Life Discovering the Eighth Continent in the Trees Above Us*

Lowman, Meg

Farrar, Straus and Giroux (368 pp.)

$28.00 | Aug. 10, 2021

978-0-374-16269-6

A riveting memoir from “Canopy Meg,” a pioneer in treetop science. Lowman, biologist and director of the TREE Foundation, points out that a scientist learning about a tree by studying its trunk makes as much sense as a doctor examining a patient by examining the big toe. But that’s how it was done for centuries. Just as scuba gear inspired more advanced ocean research during the 1950s, ropes and harnesses opened up treetops in the 1980s. Calling forest canopies the eighth continent is no exaggeration. “Upward of half of all terrestrial creatures,” writes Lowman, “live about one hundred feet or more above our heads….Across more than sixty thousand species of trees, nearly every one hosts unique communities.” The author excelled in a discipline in which she was often the only woman and succeeded despite encounters with discouragement and harassment. Obtaining an undergraduate degree in the U.S., a masters in Scotland, and a doctorate in Australia, Lowman plunged into field research, teaching, speaking, and becoming the “mother of canopy research.” Her obsession became foliage—not a gripping subject except in her hands. Part of a complex architecture, leaves on a single tree differ dramatically. Larger and darker lower leaves efficiently use tiny amounts of light that filter down. Top foliage is smaller, thicker, and bright green: a high-powered chlorophyll factory suited to hot, sunny conditions. Eventually, Lowman turned her attention to the universe of largely unknown insects that feed off the leaves. While some publications cite about 5% to 8% annual defoliation, the author discovered that canopies routinely suffer up to 25% damage. Lowman ends her chronological account halfway through, devoting the remainder to lively descriptions of her discoveries, educational activities, and conservation advocacy. With more than 15 billion trees cut down each year and climate change accelerating insect losses, she urges advocates of protecting endangered animals to pay more attention to the destruction of the forests they inhabit.

**THE HISTORY OF BONES**

*A Memoir*

Lurie, John

Random House (448 pp.)

$28.00 | Aug. 17, 2021

978-0-399-59297-3

The artist, director, musician, composer, and founder of the Lounge Lizards assesses his life and work. “My hope is, as with all my work, that this book will be something people find uplifting,” writes Lurie—but by the time he titled this memoir, he likely realized that it had become a compendium of the bones he has to pick with the army of people who have wronged him. The story begins well, as the author wryly details his youth in Worcester and his early years in New York City. He was a major player in the artistically charged, drug-addled 1980s downtown scene, where all the painters had bands and all the musicians made movies. It is around this point that, despite many avowals—“I have been kind to some people who, year later, when I was in trouble, were heinous to me”—the author sheds the kid gloves. Halfway through, “The World’s Longest Footnote” introduces his beef that he is being “disappeared” from the story of his friend Jean-Michel Basquiat and identifies his nemesis, Jim Jarmusch. Though he didn't mean to “slag Jim off,” he writes, “I feel like I have to hurry up and get this book published before Jim Jarmusch gets hold of it and puts it out as his own memoir.” From there, Lurie delves into the pitfalls of the touring musician (“I really do remember every bad gig we ever did, and nine out of ten times it was caused by not being able to hear ourselves onstage”), the nightmare of mixing albums, and the difficulties of acting. Of Willem Dafoe: “He never complained, which is something that is completely beyond me.” On Page 306, he issues a warning to readers: “if this shit bugs you, you may skip to the next chapter.” He wisely cuts off the story sometime in the 1990s. Thankfully, the author’s self-aware humor makes the bone-picking bearable.

Overlong and sometimes overbearing but will appeal to Lurie fans and students of the 1980s downtown NYC scene.
Is the cry to defund the police mere rhetoric? No way, this book makes clear.

Political science professor Maher looks at recent events to deliver a stern shot across the bow. “In the history of the United States,” he writes, “nothing has provoked mass rebellion more consistently than police brutality.” That brutality, he argues, isn’t a bug but a feature built into the essence of policing and a society built around the need for it. Why? Because, he writes, capitalism and its manifold inequalities demand the coercive force that the police represent. Maher extends his argument widely to include forces that control the border, especially the southern border with Mexico, meant to contain the very people who are driven from their homelands as a result of imperial capitalism itself. Meanwhile, as to the police themselves, Maher argues that they are agents of White supremacy—and expensive ones at that. Citing figures from the Urban Institute, he calculates that they are agents of White supremacy—and expensive ones at that. Citing figures from the Urban Institute, he calculates that “state and local spending on the police increased astronomically from 1964 to 2020.” Though not fully taking into account inflation and other similar matters, Maher does make the inarguable point that American police have become increasingly militarized and that, quite clearly, if you’re a young male and a member of an ethnic minority, you stand a far greater chance of being jailed or killed by police than if you belong to the privileged majority. The author is quite literal in his call to abolish the police, holding that “the only focus. At her best, she ably conveys the confusion and pain of the first days of the pandemic, moving month by month and sometimes day by day through a period of time when medical workers couldn’t figure out where to get protective gear. They hid masks in their workroom ceiling at the hospital, where a “dead calm” concealed frantic activity and the first Covid-19 death led to many more. “The first encounter with this pandemic was fraught with fear and gusto,” writes Mahmood, “and the initial confusion ironed out into a semblance of intelligibility and eventual boredom for some.” As a neurology resident, she was not on the front lines of the pandemic, but her life was profoundly altered nonetheless. The necessity of masks made it nearly impossible to communicate effectively with stroke patients, and the author was forced to move out of her parents’ house because they were “in a concerning age bracket, with associated comorbidities.” Intertwined, not always smoothly, with the story of her life as a physician during the pandemic is that of her experience as a second-generation immigrant from Pakistan. Her physician parents also did their medical residencies at Detroit hospitals, and Mahmood hints at, but doesn’t explore in-depth, the “microaggressions” she experienced. When the author moves away from documenting the pandemic, the prose becomes florid and unnecessarily scholarly—e.g., how “imagination gave a parthenogenetic birth to the twins of fact and fiction.” Mahmood often abandons the central subject to discourse on Joan Didion, Beyoncé, and David Foster Wallace, likely frustrating readers interested in how hospitals functioned during the pandemic. A more fleshed-out version of that part of the book would have been more satisfying.

A provocative but scattered account of medicine in crisis mode.
to stress chronic inflammation’s role in cancer, heart disease, diabetes, colitis, mental illness, dementia, and even aging, although they give it perhaps more credit than it deserves. They are rigorous scientists, so readers will learn a great deal as they describe human biological systems, focusing on the damage inflicted by inflammation but casting a wide thematic net. The chapter on the reproductive system eschews parallels with Orwellian awfulness, the authors propose not mass action but “deep medicine.” They write that individuals can be healthy “only when the entire community is also healthy…this is achievable only through social, economic, political, ecological, and cosmological spheres working in an integrated fashion for the benefit of all.” This may remind older readers of the ideals of universal harmony and spiritual growth that marked the 1960s, but the authors are persuasive in most of their arguments about the deleterious physical and mental effects of capitalism and colonialism.

A valiant effort to link medicine and injustice: thought-provoking, knowledgeable, and ripe for debate and further study.

“Set aside those bulky how-to handbooks for this healthy balm of common-sense wisdom, inspiration, and encouragement.”

**What About the Baby?**

**What about the baby?**

McDermott, Alice

Farrar, Straus and Giroux (256 pp.)

$27.00 | Aug. 17, 2021

978-0-374-13062-6

A master class in fiction writing, taught by a National Book Award winner. Fans of McDermott’s fiction should flock to this sprightly collection, which demonstrates that the author expects “a lot” from the craft. The first of 14 essays lays it on the line. Drawing on passages from fellow writers Mark Helprin, Philip Roth, and Eudora Welty, among others, McDermott writes that she’s always looking for “solace in art.” In addition, she looks for pain and the sweetness of life; authentic, memorable characters; and well-crafted sentences; but ultimately, “I expect fiction to seek to make sense of life and death—yours, mine, and everybody else’s.” High standards, indeed. McDermott ponders the importance of openings—“how many ways can a story seduce you into reading it”—as well as the necessity of a “hint of magic” and a “surge of joy” and how a satisfying ending casts us back to the beginning. Throughout, she draws on personal stories and numerous quotes from writers she admires. After exploring the nuts and bolts of what makes a good sentence, she delivers a healthy dose of Nabokov. McDermott’s simplest advice for fledgling novelists is “for God’s sake, read what you’ve already written” to see how everything connects. She writes about telling a bunch of groan-inducing third graders that “to be a writer was to have homework due for the rest of your life.” When suffering writer’s block, “sometimes nothing short of starting over will do.” In “Faith and Literature,” McDermott explores what it means to be a Catholic writer. Later, she offers a quick piece of priceless advice: “no inanimate object…in a story or a novel is arbitrary.” She tells her students, “Embrace the astonishing reality of a vivid world, a created world, formed only of words on a page. It’s a gift.”

Set aside those bulky how-to handbooks for this healthy balm of common-sense wisdom, inspiration, and encouragement.

**Honor Bound**

**An American Story of Dreams and Service**

McGrath, Amy with Peterson, Chris

Knopf (272 pp.)

$27.99 | Aug. 3, 2021

978-0-525-65910-5

A former Marine reflects on marriage, motherhood, military culture, and politics.

In her debut memoir, written with Peterson, McGrath recounts a career marked by determination, grit, and admirable accomplishments. She grew up in a middle-class Kentucky suburb where her mother, a pediatrician, and father, a high school English teacher, instilled in her the values of “patriotism, service, and sacrifice.” Surrounded by “faithful churchgoers and devout believers,” McGrath often turned to the church for solace and insight. As a young teenager, intent on becoming a fighter pilot, she set her sights on attending the U.S. Naval Academy, where she excelled, blazing the trail for other women—which she has done in every area of her life. One of the first women “to get a shot at fighter training,” she vowed “to do everything right.” She was deployed to Iraq after 9/11 for combat in a war that she believed in, largely because of Colin Powell’s testimony. But dropping bombs unnerved her, making her “hungry for spiritual affirmation.” Her stint as a congressional fellow intensified a growing disillusionment with America’s policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Washington, D.C., McGrath observed that lawmakers, informed by young and inexperienced staffers, knew little about war and the complexities of combat; committee assignments were “badges of honor” to fill out a resume; lobbyists wielded undue influence; and politicians spent more time on fundraising than digging into issues. Trump’s election impelled her to enter politics herself. She lost by two percentage points in her bid for a congressional seat from Kentucky and barely lost when she challenged Mitch McConnell—“a cunning and vicious political operator”—for the Senate. Married and a mother of three, McGrath writes that she is thinking about “the next steps that will allow me to have the greatest impact.” If she decides to compete again for public office, this book would serve adequately as a campaign biography.

A straightforward, sturdy account of an impressive career defending America.
EVERY MINUTE IS A DAY
A Doctor, an Emergency Room, and a City Under Siege
Meyer, Robert & Koeppel, Dan
Crown (256 pp.)
$28.00  |  Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-593-23859-2

A heroic physician navigates the pandemic.

Meyer, an emergency room physician, teams up with his cousin, New York Times journalist Koeppel, to create a dramatic first-person account of the doctor’s experience during the first six months of the pandemic at Montefiore, the largest hospital in one of America’s poorest urban counties, the Bronx. Despite 25 years practicing his specialty, Meyer admits that March 2020 caught every hospital unprepared. “The members of this community,” he writes, “were ready for a terrorist attack, a bombing, a mass shooting, even a chemical or biological attack, but they were not ready for a virus. Covid-19 is virulent. It is highly contagious. It can kill fast, sometimes within hours. No hospital in America was ready for that.” After a quick history of the genesis of the virus, the authors hit the ground running. The city’s most overwhelmed hospital, Montefiore jumped from three admissions at the beginning of March to more than 1,000 by the end. Readers will encounter sadly familiar scenes that have been described in news reports: lines of ambulances carrying patients to the hospital, rows of refrigerated trucks carrying the dead away, mourning family members gathered at the entrance, denied entry for fear of exposure. Perhaps most tragic, Covid-19 patients die alone; even those caring for them wear protective gear that hides their face. Inevitably, most of the book consists of anecdotes of victims from the community and hospital employees. The first months saw mostly deaths, confusion, and exhaustion from caregivers, but a learning curve took hold. By summer, more patients were surviving in a better-prepared hospital, and cases were declining. The book is the result of interviews with a cross section of hospital personnel, and the testimonies are moving and heartbreaking, delivering a realistic portrait of a city hospital in crisis. It’s possible that some workers did not measure up, but everyone described by the authors performed superbly.

Touching evidence of compassion and sacrifice during the worst of the pandemic.

BY WATER BENEATH THE WALLS
The Rise of the Navy SEALs
Milligan, Benjamin H.
Bantam (640 pp.)
$30.00  |  Jul. 20, 2021
978-0-553-39219-7

An ex-Navy SEAL digs into the agency’s origins and development.

Milligan delivers a well-researched history beginning after Pearl Harbor, when the Marine Corps commandant learned that the president was “much interested” in the use of commandos. In August 1942, Evans Carlson (“Carlson’s Raiders”) led a raid on Makin Atoll designed to take pressure off Marines at Guadalcanal. It was a poorly organized debacle in which a dozen men were left behind to be captured and beheaded. Some successes followed, but all commando forces were disbanded after 1945, although the Navy retained two specialized units, which foreshadowed the SEALs. They were the Underwater Demolition Teams, who performed heroically in reconnaissance and clearing obstacles before landings in Normandy and the Pacific and the continued development of the Seabees, “the Navy’s builders.” Except for improvised raids during the Korean War, the usual peacetime deterioration followed until the arrival of John F. Kennedy. Though his love of special forces was mostly focused on the Green Berets, the first SEAL team was commissioned on Jan. 1, 1962. Special units flourished during the Vietnam War, but they had little effect on the outcome. Perhaps luckily, the SEALs’ commitment never exceeded 150 during that time. The Green Berets (well over 1,000) specialized in winning hearts and minds and recruiting Indigenous fighters, with spotty success. With no specific role, the SEALs acquired a reputation as pure fighters, and Milligan devotes most of the final 150 pages to small-unit actions, not all of which involved SEALs or ended well. By the war’s end, SEALs were established as America’s elite go-anywhere warriors. Since this book describes their “rise,” the narrative ends with Vietnam. Milligan has scoured archives and turned up much unpublished material. He describes far more small-unit battles and lives of obscure but colorful men (all men) than a focused history requires, but few readers will complain.

Good history with plenty of special-ops fireworks.

THE DEBT TRAP
How Student Loans Became a National Catastrophe
Mitchell, Josh
Simon & Schuster (272 pp.)
$27.00  |  Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-5011-9944-8

Thoroughgoing report on the student-loan crisis.

Wall Street Journal writer Mitchell writes that student debt in this country
“is the size of Canada’s economy,” amounting to $1.6 trillion. That debt is coupled with crippling terms that burden many borrowers with payments that will last throughout their working lives, mostly to service interest, and higher education has not delivered jobs that pay enough to cover them. Indeed, “far from making college affordable, student debt enabled schools to raise their prices in perpetuity, creating a higher education industrial complex that has driven up the price of college—and graduate school—to unprecedented levels.” It’s a vicious chicken-and-egg situation: Student loans are easily obtainable, so easy that many workers in stressful economic times return to school simply to qualify to take out loans to survive; because the money is so abundant, schools, underfunded in the case of most public institutions, feel no restraint to curb their costs. Mitchell tells the story of one woman who married a man who took advantage of her financially, then returned to school in order to better her job prospects and wound up owing a huge debt. She was one of the few to be allowed to discharge her debt legally, but only because a collection agent sympathized with her as she battled cancer. Such circumstances of emergency were not in the design of the loan program, which dates to the administration of Lyndon Johnson. As its founder told the author, “we unleashed a monster.” It’s a monster indeed, and no president since has done anything to tame it. Mitchell notes that under the Obama presidency, “Black families got into debt more than families of any other racial or ethnic group.” This urgent report makes a convincing case for reforming the loan program to allow students “a fair shot at college, at a reasonable price.” An alarming study of an economic crisis long in the making—and entirely avoidable.

The threads of risk are spun out over decades, even centuries, until they crescendo into a disaster.” In the past decade, we have experienced record-strength hurricanes, forest fires, and floods. These follow from the burning of fossil fuels, so climate change is far from a future problem. Like countless scientists before her, she notes that “it’s not a question of if we will experience the consequences of climate change, but rather how bad it will be.” The author offers lucid accounts of how people respond to disasters (they rarely panic—Hollywood gets it wrong again—but rush to help) and how expert disaster management can mitigate future disasters, relieve suffering when they happen, and manage future recovery. Although Katrina is center stage, Montano illustrates her points with other disasters, most of which received inadequate responses. Hurricane Maria, which ravaged Puerto Rico in 2017, was far more damaging than Katrina, and government response was slower. It’s hardly news that the Covid-19 pandemic was handled poorly, but Montano contributes more disheartening details. Most books on disaster end with hope, but the author will have none of it. She exhorts readers to take action but doesn’t claim to see light at the end of the tunnel.

Painful but essential reading.

DISASTEROLOGY
Dispatches From the Frontlines of the Climate Crisis
Montano, Samantha
Park Row Books (352 pp.)
$28.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-7783-1103-4

An expert in disaster management explains her specialty.

As a fiercely public-spirited teenager, Montano, who teaches emergency management at Massachusetts Maritime Academy, joined volunteers pouring into New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Although numerous writers have described the misery that she witnessed there, readers will encounter a few jolts. However, some may be surprised to learn that, more than 15 years later, volunteers still travel to New Orleans to work; although commercial and wealthy areas are up and running, poor, largely Black neighborhoods remain blighted. The experience inspired Montano to obtain an advanced degree in disaster management, and she delivers plenty of insights into 21st-century catastrophes. She writes that while Hollywood disasters happen fast, “every disaster you have yet to experience in your lifetime has already begun.

The Uncommon Knowledge of Elinor Ostrom
Essential Lessons for Collective Action
Nordman, Erik
Photos by Reblando, Jason
Island Press (275 pp.)
$35.00 paper | Jul. 8, 2021
978-1-64283-155-9

A professor of natural resources management and economics explores the work of Elinor Ostrom (1933-2012), the first woman to win the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, for her work focused on the governance of commons.

As Nordman notes, the term common (also known as common-pool resources) refers to goods that can be depleted if overused but which are difficult to exclude people from using, such as water, fish, and land. Prior to Ostrom’s work, the methods for managing commons were largely influenced by the work of ecologist Garrett Hardin. In his 1968 essay “The Tragedy of the Commons,” he argued that overpopulation was a large part of the problem and believed that the only ways in which common-pool resources could be properly managed were through market forces or governmental regulation. Ostrom felt that there was another way. Based on her research, she argued that communities were capable of solving their own resource problems without restrictions or government intervention. In this compelling work, Nordman explores numerous examples that support Ostrom’s claim, such as the coordination of groundwater withdrawals in Los Angeles, the formation of “lobster gangs” in Maine, and the ancient water court in Valencia, Spain. “Each Thursday at noon,”
writes the author, “as they have for the last one thousand years, members of this unique court conduct a public hearing in which they resolve disputes over irrigation water.” As Ostrom noted, institutions that have successfully managed their communal resources tend to follow a recognizable pattern. These principles emerge organically through community interactions over time, and those institutions that do not succeed are frequently missing one or more of these principles. In clear language, Nordman details and examines these principles and communities that have successfully adopted them. He also shares details of his interviews with members of other communities that have created collaborative systems for sharing their resources.

An intriguing exploration of pioneering research in natural resource management and the economist who led it.

“Makeup is a simultaneous reflection of our understanding of the world around us and a presentation of sense of self within that world,” fashion journalist Nudson writes early on in this incisive sociological study. The author examines how makeup has been used to acquire, wield, and retain authority throughout early and modern society and how it relates to creativity, self-worth, image, and artistic fun for the user. She cites examples of how it can be both “required and stigmatized” in certain social circles and has evolved past the notion of rules for gender expression, femininity, identity, and sexuality for both heterosexual and queer communities. Nudson looks at a variety of interesting, historically relevant eras: among them, World War II, when men in the U.S. entered the workforce in greater numbers; ancient Egypt, where men and women were “well known for using eye makeup”; and 1990s Japan, characterized by a massive recession, when some heterosexual men, dubbed “herbivore men,” began exploring a softer masculinity using makeup and androgynous looks. While acknowledging that everyone is a participant in the theater of “appearance politics”—a societal arena fraught with double standards, racial misconceptions, and often impossible expectations for women—Nudson presents the flip side as well. He also shares details of his interviews with members of other communities that have created collaborative systems for sharing their resources.

An intriguing exploration of pioneering research in natural resource management and the economist who led it.

How the use of cosmetics influences personal performance, culture, and society.

“An exuberant critical study of how cosmetics and beauty culture shape the world and everyone in it.”

ALL MADE UP
The Power and Pitfalls of Beauty Culture, From Cleopatra to Kim Kardashian
Nudson, Rae
Beacon Press (216 pp.)
$26.95 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-0-8070-5968-5

Incorporating studies, historical research, and entertaining anecdotes, Nudson offers a narrative that will provoke discussion and illumination for readers interested in how cosmetics influence global culture.

An exuberant critical study of how cosmetics and beauty culture shape the world and everyone in it.

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing
Perry, Bruce D. & Winfrey, Oprah
Flatiron Books (304 pp.)
$28.99 | Apr. 27, 2021
978-1-250-22318-0

A collaborative look at brain trauma and methods to alleviate the potentially lifelong effects.

Child psychiatrist and neuroscientist Perry teams with Winfrey to examine traumatic injury caused by an abusive childhood. The book is formatted in a conversational interview format, with Perry sharing his insights on stress, brain biology, and physiological response, offering new approaches to emotional and psychological pain. Using medical models, Winfrey’s personal experience, and Perry’s years of research, the authors demonstrate the brain’s resilience and ability to adapt to traumatic situations, particularly when paired with psychopharmacological remedies, natural interventions, and behavioral treatments. This process of neural recalibration works wonders in instances of deeply embedded trauma and abuse, allowing people to live better lives through newly invigorated self-worth. Winfrey candidly shares difficult memories of a childhood where regular whippings (as early as age 3) were “accepted practice” and there were expectations of silence and a smile in their aftermath. In addition to this early trauma, she recounts her difficult adult relationship with her mother, which culminates in a powerful scene in a nursing home when Winfrey froze at her mother’s bedside, unable to address her. She admits that while collectively these events manifested into her adult relationships and behavior, she eventually processed and embraced the trauma as an opportunity for healing and a way to move forward. With proactive conviction, the authors help readers to recognize their own internalized trauma and encourage the reshaping of personal paths toward wellness and “to excavate the roots that were put down long before we had the words to articulate what was happening to us.” Through therapeutic frameworks and the curative power of community, belonging, human connection, and mindfulness, the authors show how renewal of mind and spirit is attainable.

A candid guidebook to exorcising mental trauma.
DIRTY WORK
Essential Jobs and the Hidden Toll of Inequality in America
Press, Eyal
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (320 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 17, 2021
978-0-374-14018-2

A probing investigation of the morally ambiguous tasks that are done with our tacit consent.

Press opens by recounting the story of sociologist Everett Hughes, who visited Germany soon after the end of World War II and encountered professionals who, while repudiating Nazism, also quietly noted that there was a “Jewish problem” that simply met the wrong solution. Hughes returned from the conversation with the idea that the Nazis were enabled by an “unconscious mandate” from German society. From this, Press builds a case that enfolds the “dirty work” conducted by our contemporary mandate—not the grimy work of mechanics and garbage collectors, but instead that of drone operators, prison guards and staff, and meat packers. All of these, writes the author, were considered “essential workers” during the pandemic, if low-paid ones and often without health care benefits, paid leave, and protection from the virus. In the case of the slaughterhouse workers—overwhelmingly members of ethnic minorities and often in the country illegally—the plants in which they labored were “ordered to stay open even as scores of laborers died and tens of thousands fell ill.” Slaughterhouses—and prisons and drone facilities—are tucked away in mostly poor, mostly minority communities to keep them from troubling the consciences of the more privileged. Most of these people would rather be doing something else, of course. The prison workers Press profiles, for instance, are inclined to settle their own consciences via liberal self-medication of drugs and alcohol, and they suffer suicide rates far higher than those in the general population. All this dirty work, Press writes, is enabled by “passive democrats” who are perfectly content not to know about the unpleasant details of jobs done on their behalf. He closes his account, meaningfully, with a ceremony at a VA hospital in which soldiers confess their “moral transgressions” while civilians acknowledge, “We share responsibility with you.”

A provocative book that will make readers more aware of terrible things done in their names.

UNSTRUNG
Rants and Stories of a Noise Guitarist
Ribot, Marc
Akashic (226 pp.)
$24.95 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-61775-930-7

A widely varied collection of writing by a guitar master whose vast contributions are especially renowned among fellow musicians.

Ribot might be best known to crate-diggers and other musical cultists who pay attention to liner notes. By any measure, he has enjoyed a singular career: a catalyst in the musical progressions of Tom Waits and Elvis Costello, a favorite among visionary producers, an experimenter in countless styles, and a downtown New York fixture of the “no-wave” fusion of jazz, punk, funk, industrial, and other genres. It’s fitting that his book debut is so characteristically unclassifiable, blending memoir, music writing, fairy-tale fantasy, political manifesto, savage social satire, and even some parenting advice and tips on how to bring a landlord to his knees. The results are uneven, as perhaps they should be, but the book will find a home with other guitarists and iconoclastic artists of all stripes. Ribot offers lovely tributes to guitar virtuoso Robert Quine, producer/conceptualist Hal Willner, and bassist Henry Grimes, and there are provocative essays fusing ethics and aesthetics in a way that provides underpinnings for his sonic excursions. Perhaps the most sustained highlight is the section entitled “Film (Mis)Treatments,” many of which illuminate life on the road of the midcareer, mildly successful sideman. The pitches range from a reframing of Titanic to a bloody action romp through the great restaurants of Europe to a couple of different scenarios to fit our current era of reality TV. Ribot admits that he’s a hustler of sorts, as most artists must be, and he’s open to possibilities that can turn his experience into money without betraying his version of a moral code. With his first book, the author extends his brand, seeking fresh life and a larger readership for pieces originally published in niche journals.

Ribot is an all-American original, and this collection provides plenty of insight into his fascinating mind.

THE AMBASSADOR
Joseph P. Kennedy at the Court of St. James’s
1938-1940
Ronald, Susan
St. Martin’s (464 pp.)
$29.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-250-23872-6

A close look at a devastating diplomatic failure.

British American biographer and historian Ronald examines two calamitous years in the life of
business mogul, serial philanderer, and overbearing patriarch Joseph P. Kennedy (1886-1969), during which he served as America’s ambassador to the Court of St. James’s as Europe became engulfed in war. The coveted ambassadorship was a position Kennedy had lobbied for and believed he deserved as a reward for backing Franklin Roosevelt’s election bids in 1932 and 1936. Roosevelt wanted to count on Kennedy’s loyalty—and the 25 million Catholic votes he could bring if the president decided to run for a third term—while at the same time getting the opinionated businessman out of the U.S. Drawing on biographical and archival sources, Ronald portrays the gruff, egotistical Kennedy as spectacularly unsuited to a diplomatic post. Blunt, outspoken, and tactless, he was adept at films and finance but knew little about foreign policy. The author’s detailed, well-populated narrative traces Kennedy’s daily doings, family relationships, self-serving projects, womanizing, and fraught service, in which he repeatedly proved to be an embarrassment, making public statements, for example, without government approval. Quickly, he was “deemed insufferable” by the White House and the State Department. British officials called him “the worst sort of self-promoter.” As German aggression intensified, Kennedy remained staunchly isolationist, partly because he wanted to keep his eldest sons out of combat, partly because of his fascist and antisemitic sympathies. He insisted that war could be averted by making sweeping economic and political concessions, such as letting Germany take over Europe. He hacked Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement policy and loudly insisted that Britain would be roundly defeated. Once Britain entered the conflict, Ronald writes, Kennedy “seemed incapable of understanding that Britain was at war for its very existence.”

A well-researched history of an egotist who toyed with world affairs.

PUBLIC CITIZENS
The Attack on Big Government and the Remaking of American Liberalism

Sabin, Paul
Norton (224 pp.)
$26.95 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-0-393-63404-4

A focused study of 1960s and ’70s American politics and the effects of the public interest liberalism that emerged.

Most histories of this period explain that the liberal heirs of the New Deal overwhelmingly supported government programs. This may be the popular view of events, but history professor Sabin, who directs the Yale Environmental Humanities Program, tells a different and disturbing story. Many readers only recall the vivid civil rights and anti-war campaigns of the era, but the author emphasizes equally influential—and liberal—movements that attacked government itself. He reminds us that Rachel Carson’s bombshell, Silent Spring (1962), blamed the massive damage caused by insecticides on dimwitted bureaucrats who were supposed to be “looking after things.” In the same vein, Jane Jacobs’ The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961) attacked government planners who bulldozed vibrant neighborhoods in favor of immense, sterile landscapes. Sabin directs much of his attention to Ralph Nader, whose 1965 book, Unsafe at Any Speed, criticized government traffic safety agencies, entirely subservient to an auto industry that denied responsibility for injuries and deaths from accidents and proclaimed that driver education was the key to saving lives. Nader devoted the rest of his life to denouncing the government, becoming a major figure in the rise of public interest law. The Clean Air Act (1970) and Clean Water Act (1972) would have been weaker if Nader’s activists had not passed over Republicans and polluters and attacked liberal Democrats for their modest commitment. Stung, they denounced Nader but passed laws with more teeth. Despite approving these liberal movements, Sabin comes to the grim conclusion that “Nader and his fellow activists helped destroy a political economic system that served the working class” and “helped fuel a corrosive antigovernment legacy.” That may be a tough pill to swallow for progressive activists today, but the author’s cogent history is timely and likely to be enduring.

An insightful and squirm-inducing account of how the good guys won and then lost.

VALEDICTORIANS AT THE GATE
Standing Out, Getting In, and Staying Sane While Applying to College

Sabky, Becky Munsterer
Henry Holt (240 pp.)
$24.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-250-61903-7

A look at the complex process of college admissions.

Drawing on 13 years of experience as an admissions officer, most spent at Dartmouth, Sabky offers practical, down-to-earth advice about choosing a college, navigating the application process, and deciding which college to attend. Like Frank Brunil’s Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be, this book emphasizes that an Ivy League school may not be the best choice for everyone, nor does rejection stamp a student as unworthy. College admission, writes Sabky, “is a business at nearly every institution,” with decisions “based on the whole of each candidacy, the depth of the pool, and the desires of the institution.” Highly selective schools actively recruit as many students as possible in order to keep their admissions rate low, with the result that many outstanding students are rejected. Nevertheless, to help students be as competitive as possible, Sabky gives tips on “self-marketing” in a process that “has become one of the most complicated hurdles of the American education system.” That process often begins with a campus visit (or online visit for students unable to travel), during which the author advises that students range off the prescribed path to see parts of the

An insightful and squirm-inducing account of how the good guys won and then lost.
campus that really interest them. For the application—which she typically would spend about 12 minutes reading—she has thoughts on the transcript, recommendations, extracurricular activities, test scores, alumni interviews, and especially the importance of authenticity in the personal statement. That essay, she writes, should “share a story, a vision, a thought. The purpose of an essay was never to win an award.” Sabky regrets that the admission process turns students “into laser-focused robots for a chance at the college dream” and glorifies the Ivy Leagues. “There’s no need to turn into an Ivy clinger,” she writes reassuringly, “when there are thousands of wonderful colleges and universities in the United States.”

Sound advice for prospective college students and their families.

**WHAT IS A DOG? A Memoir**
*Shaw, Chloe*
Flatiron Books (224 pp.)
$24.99 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-250-21074-6

In her first book, Shaw reflects on the meaning of canine companionship and how dogs transformed her life. After the family dog, Booker, died, a grieving Shaw began contemplating not only what her beloved canine did for her, but also the fears that had been her constant companions. The author was an only child, and her mother’s Afghan hound, Easy, became her first “Dog-Sister” and helped her navigate the space between loving parents who avoided strong emotions. Later, a Scottie named Agatha 2 became the first canine to get “lodged in my heart.” The pair grew so attached that the author herself was almost indistinguishable from Agatha 2, with relationships to her “humans” that mirrored those her Scottie had with them. Yet Agatha 2 could not save Shaw from the anxiety that gnawed her from within and manifested as “horribly ravaged fingernails” in an otherwise well-groomed adolescence. Her first teenage love, Josh, taught her how to intimately know herself but caused her guilt for spending time away from an aging Agatha 2. Her dog’s death coincided with a cancer diagnosis for Josh’s mother and high school graduation. Shaw decided to break up with Josh, and when she fell in love again, it would be with her future husband and Booker, a dog she realized had united the “Dog, Girl, Woman, Wife, Mother,” only to shatter her with his death.

“Just as Booker’s life so exquisitely fused my separate selves,” she writes, “Booker’s death left me splintered all over again.” Forced to confront her anxiety, Shaw came to understand that the only way to remain whole was to “let in the dogs” of her own fears and feelings. This poignant and gracefully written memoir amply embraces the complexities of the human-dog relationship in a uniquely personal way, and it’s also a moving story of self-acceptance.

A dog lover’s warmhearted delight.

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**WARMTH Coming of Age at the End of Our World**
*Sherrell, Daniel*
Penguin (272 pp.)
$16.00 paper | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-14-313653-8

A young activist’s fresh take on climate change.

Readers reluctant to open another discouraging scientific explanation or call to action may perk up to discover that this is neither. In his first book, Sherrell, born in 1990, reveals that he has been obsessed with human-induced climate change for a decade. For the past five years, he has worked as an organizer at NY Renew, a statewide coalition aiming to reduce carbon emissions, mostly by lobbying New York’s government. A workaholic who spends his days on the phone, answering emails, attending meetings, and planning demonstrations, the author is deeply committed to fighting what he calls “the Problem”—and unlike many in his position, he understands that victories are few and less than complete. Here, the author unburdens himself, demonstrating the creativity that won him a Fulbright grant in creative nonfiction. Rather than delivering a polemic, autobiography, or confession, Sherrell structures the narrative as a long letter to a hypothetical child that he hasn’t yet decided to bring into this fraught world. He is careful to note that “my aim here is not to wield you as a political cudgel.” Readers may approach the book as memoir since he recounts details of his background, education, social life, beliefs, and doubts, sometimes through conversations with friends, parents (sympathetic), therapists, and colleagues, sometimes through the words of poets, scientists, novelists, and the occasional guru. Although the author refuses to despair, he readily accepts the grim scientific evidence and that matters will get worse before they get better—if they ever do. Mostly, he addresses his unborn child, less to apologize for delivering it into a miserable future than to examine the value of his own life. As he writes, sagely, “a letter to you really just becomes a letter to me, replete with its own misfirings, its own blend of hurt and care.”

Insightful reflections from a thoughtful, energetic activist.
Financial history expert Silber recapitulates a course in risk assessment, showing that generals and politicians no less than investors “take daring chances” in the absence of other options.

There are upsides when people are willing to game the chances of “downside protection,” writes former NYU economics professor Silber. For example, patients with terminal illnesses are crucial to the practice of medical experimentation, since many figure they don’t have much to lose. That decision, writes the author, is very much like the star quarterback who throws what Roger Staubach christened “the Hail Mary pass.” Never mind that the risk is turned all the way up. “The Hail Mary connects less than one in twenty times,” writes Silber, “which may be okay at the end of a football game, but not as a steady diet in life.” Yet the moral equivalents of the Hail Mary are frequent in our history: Silber suggests that having nothing to lose led Rosa Parks to refuse to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. Similarly, Woodrow Wilson sent American troops to World War I not in 1915, when it could have ended the war sooner, but in 1917, after he had won reelection and didn’t have to fulfill his campaign slogan of avoiding war. Writes Silber, sagely, “second-term presidents should come with a warning label: Do not provoke a lame duck.” Desperation will drive people to extraordinary measures, of course, including attempting to enter a country illegally and, in the case of rogue trader Nick Leeson, taking advantage of the fact that his employer, Barings Bank, “encouraged traders to become daredevils, ignoring the fallout.”

A brisk look at times when it pays off to take a chance.
A literary scholar and cultural critic argues that democracy is better served by hashing out conflicts than by compromising. Ranging widely in art, literature, popular culture, philosophy, and politics, Smith mounts an impassioned critique of compromising, which she insists is "unsatisfying, awkward, boring, haphazard." Compromises, she writes ruefully, "might be the best we can get, but they do not and should not please us." Although she admits that compromises are sometimes necessary, she rejects them "as a value, as a way of appealing to moderation" and avoiding radical solutions. They are designed to preserve the status quo of hierarchies and power. "People do lose in all compromises," she asserts; "it's just a matter of who feels it." Accused of being "hostile, critical, even mean" when talking with people whose ideas she opposes, Smith admits that she is drawn to "uncompromising figures"—such as editor Margaret Anderson, who advertised her modernist literary magazine *Little Review* as aesthetically uncompromising, or even far right icon Ayn Rand—and to illiberal forms, "from the polarizing rhetoric of manifestos to the brutality of minimalist sculpture, from the strident aesthetic of punk to the categorical abstraction of the Russian avant-garde." The author praises those willing to take strong stands, change their minds, and argue forcefully for a new position rather than those who believe "that unsatisfactory things can be made satisfactorily, at least temporarily. That

the pain and loss generated by a bad situation can be managed, or made fair, or tolerable, even if the underlying conflict remains." Democracy, she asserts, is messy and contentious; it involves confronting pain and realizing the limits of our ability to solve every problem with a compromise. Democracy suffers "when we are asked to compromise on our principles in advance in order to be practical, palatable, or unthreatening to those who want to maintain systems of injustice."

A thoughtful, defiant polemic that should provoke heated discussions.

**ON COMPROMISE**
*Art, Politics, and the Fate of an American Ideal*

Smith, Rachel Greenwald
Graywolf (208 pp.)
$16.00 paper | Aug. 3, 2021 978-1-64445-060-4

A real-life legal document that, absent the requisite love story, could be a James Grisham whodunit.

Acting as an expert witness, former government official Speth provides a background chronicle for the constitutional case called *Juliana v. United States* (2015), which "is no ordinary lawsuit." The case holds that the government has known since at least the early 1960s that increased atmospheric carbon dioxide causes climate change. In almost every administration, environmental scientists and federal officials have issued relevant reports, and Congress has mulled over them, so that any protestation of ignorance (no excuse in any event) is simply not true. Moreover, in *Juliana*, the plaintiffs are young people who "are especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change." Some children mentioned in the case live in places such as Hawaii, where storm patterns are intensifying in strength; some have had to abandon their homes in low-lying coastal areas in the face of rising sea levels. Speth, who co-founded the National Resources Defense Council, convincingly establishes that the government knew long in advance that these eventualities were likely to occur: He recounts that Daniel Patrick Moynihan told Richard Nixon in 1969 that the trends in rising temperatures were likely to raise sea levels by 10 feet. Wedded to the fossil-fuel economy, however, several administrations simply tucked the reports into a desk drawer. Others, particularly the one headed by Donald Trump, seemingly took delight in contravening any efforts at conservation and instead opened federal lands to further extraction. Ronald Reagan's government essentially did the same while George H.W. Bush, despite talking a good game, helped weaken international conventions so that they contained no binding targets. Not surprisingly, Barack Obama "did more than any other president to address [climate change]." Though the case was dismissed in 2020, the *Juliana* argument is convincing, and even if an appeal is denied, it makes for eye-opening reading. A rousing condemnation of a system bent on short-term gain against long-term health.
“By this authoritative account, the Afghanistan War has been a colossal failure that should have been ended years ago.”

**THE AFGHANISTAN PAPERS**

**THE STAR BUILDERS
Nuclear Fusion and the Race To Power the Planet**

Turrell, Arthur

Scribner (388 pp.)

$28.00 | Aug. 3, 2021

978-1-982130-66-4

An expert account of the immense international research effort to develop practical nuclear fusion.

Physicist and science writer Turrell reminds readers that burning fossil fuels provides 86% of the world’s energy. Scientists warn that we must massively reduce this number in order to avoid climate catastrophe, but it’s still growing. The author and the researchers he has consulted have a low opinion of renewables such as solar, wind, and hydropower. They feel that atomic power is a good method despite its problems, including public relations problems and issues related to scale. One possible solution is controlled nuclear fusion. Fusion produces 10 million times the energy of coal. Turrell explains that the process of two hydrogen atoms slamming together to form a helium atom releases immense energy but also requires titanic pressure and heat. Scientists can achieve fusion in the lab, but this requires expending energy. It happens deep within the sun, so current research projects require confining hydrogen under immense pressure and at millions of degrees of temperature. Since no container could survive contact with such material, this must take place in midair. Traveling the world, Turrell describes wildly complex efforts to achieve this with combinations of magnetism, inertia, pressure, and lasers. These efforts sometimes work, but only for short periods. No project has yet produced more energy than it consumes, but scientists are optimistic. One famous quip notes, “Fusion is the energy of the future...and always will be.” A diligent journalist, Turrell does not overhype his subject, delivering a painless education with asides on the history of the universe, the life cycle of stars, and the dismal consequences if we don’t stop burning fossil fuels. According to the author and countless scientists, this can only happen if nuclear fusion succeeds. “The ingredients of even the most basic form of fusion...could last us around 33 million years,” he writes.

**LIFELINES
A Doctor’s Journey in the Fight for Public Health**

Wen, Leana

Metropolitan/Henry Holt (352 pp.)

$27.99 | Jul. 27, 2021

978-1-250-18623-2

A provocative exploration of public health from an immigrant physician and expert’s point of view.

Wen arrived from China in 1990 at the age of 7. After two pleasant years in small-town Utah, where her mother was studying, the family moved to Los Angeles and fell on difficult times. No jobs existed for someone with her mother’s doctorate, and her engineer father had trouble learning English. Consequently, they remained impoverished. Despite their trying circumstances, Wen praises the support system in the U.S.—food stamps, Medicaid, free public education—without which they may not have survived. Once her mother obtained a teaching credential and her father a solid job, the family entered the middle class, allowing Wen to begin the long pursuit of becoming a doctor. Following medical school and study at Oxford after she won a Rhodes scholarship, she began her career advocating for family-centered care. Then she became health commissioner of Baltimore, serving from 2014 to 2018, followed by a year as the head of Planned Parenthood and the arrival of Covid-19, which she calls a “once-in-a-generation public health catastrophe.” Wen is at her best describing the years in Baltimore, where her idealism bumped up against politics, necessitating compromise. She writes how officials seemed willing to kill a good program rather than eliminate a single feature, but ultimately, national organizations honored her achievements. Unfortunately, Wen’s flexibility didn’t work at PP, long attacked by right-wing politicians and pundits for performing abortions (only a minor part of its health services). PP’s core supporters wanted a leader as pugnacious as their enemies, and she was forced out. At the dawn of the pandemic, she took up her present position as professor of public health at George Washington University, and even readers familiar with criticisms of the Trump administration’s sluggish response will be unsettled by the author’s detailed, well-informed condemnation of its aggressive opposition to public health basics as well as anything related to reproductive health care.

A moving account of an impressively fruitful life.

**THE AFGHANISTAN PAPERS
A Secret History of the War**

Whitlock, Craig

Simon & Schuster (368 pp.)

$30.00 | Aug. 31, 2021

978-1-982159-00-9


The war in Vietnam was always controversial. The longer quagmire of Afghanistan, writes Whitlock, “was grounded in near-unanimous public support” when it began in 2003. There was no need, then, for the Pentagon brass to lie about the war, but lie they did, despite that fact that there was not a clearly articulated mission. The mission crept into a vaguely defined exercise in nation-building even as more than 775,000 U.S. troops cycled in and out of the country. Whitlock’s impressively documented book contains interviews with more than 1,000 participants in the war. The author also examines a report titled “Lessons Learned,” which, though inches thick, seems to have emerged
only long after the damage was done (and $1 trillion disappeared into the ether). One curious diagnostic among many uncovered in this comprehensive overview: Early on, American troops had to fly their laundry to Uzbekistan, since there were no facilities in Afghanistan, whereas the base at Bagram soon sported “a shopping mall, a Harley-Davidson dealer and about 30,000 troops, civilians and contractors.” Bush administration officials could never wrap their heads around the fact that the Taliban and al-Qaeda were distinct entities and were convinced that anyone willing to fight against them was a friend of the U.S. Those presumed allies milked a gullible U.S. dry One interviewee notes that the U.S. misadventure could have ended in weeks if direct negotiations with the Taliban had been undertaken. Instead, enemies were misidentified and innocent people killed so frequently that one officer reported that some units were “focused in consequence management, paying Afghans for damages and condolence payments.” That Joe Biden was able to order America’s withdrawal redefined the terms of victory to say that the U.S. “had achieved its original objective long ago by destroying al-Qaeda’s stronghold in Afghanistan”—rather than acknowledge that the Afghans had defeated their second superpower.

By this authoritative account, the Afghanistan War has been a colossal failure that should have been ended years ago.

**IN KILTUMPER**

*A Year in an Irish Garden*

*Williams, Niall with Breen, Christine*

*Illus. by Breen, Christine*

*Bloomsbury (304 pp.)*

$27.00 | Aug. 17, 2021

978-1-63557-718-1

A celebration of the solace of country life.

In 1985, Williams, a novelist and playwright, and Breen, a novelist and memoirist, moved from New York to the west of Ireland, to land that had been in Breen’s family for generations. In their latest co-authored chronicle, they recount one year’s rhythms and pleasures, marked by worries, too, over Breen’s health—she has had bowel cancer and is being treated for severe osteoporosis—and the imminent arrival of wind turbines 500 meters from their home. To deliver the machinery, stone walls had to be demolished and their narrow country road widened—regrettable changes. Once the turbines are running, the authors are not sure they will be able to live with the noise. Although they acknowledge the peril of climate change and recognize the need to stop using fossil fuels, the proximity of the turbines feels invasive. Williams is in favor of wind energy “in the ocean. As is the case off the east coast of America, where they have put the turbines fifty-six kilometres out to sea, so they cannot be seen from the land.” Later, he wonders, “How much of the world do we have to spoil in order to save it?” These concerns, however, don’t diminish their delight in their garden, which they describe in graceful, evocative prose. Breen, Williams admits, is “the real gardener,” with a “whole-garden view” and intuitive connection to soil and plants. Williams is the “groundsman,” a role Breen underscores. Both in their 60s, they also reflect on family (their grown children live in New York), loss, and the passage of time, “something a garden keeps redefining in plant terms, not human ones.” Country living, Breen reflects, teaches “about darkness and stars, about sunlight and silence, about things out of your control”: about the inevitability of change. The book includes Breen’s elegant botanical drawings.

A warm homage to a piece of beloved Irish land.

**AUDACIOUS AGITATION**

*The Uncompromising Commitment of Black Youth to Equal Education After Brown*

*Willis, Vincent D.*

*Univ. of Georgia (228 pp.)*

$29.95 paper | Aug. 1, 2021

978-0-8203-5968-7

A history of the Black student activists who challenged inequality in Georgia’s schools.

Willis, who teaches race and gender studies at the University of Alabama, draws on archival sources and oral histories to examine the consequences of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of May 17, 1954, which outlawed segregation. Focusing on Tifton, Americus, and Moultrie counties in southwest Georgia, the author looks closely at how Black and White Georgians responded to the decision, with particular attention to Black students’ efforts to effect change. “While *Brown* undoubtedly was a momentous legal victory,” writes Willis, “the burden of making desegregation a reality and addressing other historical educational injustices was placed largely on the shoulders of black youth.” These young men and women were faced with the results of intransigent racism: dilapidated schools, lack of facilities such as playing fields or laboratories, and out-of-date textbooks that had been cast off by White schools. Not all activists called for desegregation,” however. In Tifton and Moultrie, for example, students did not press to attend White schools—they were proud of their schools and Black teachers—but rallied to make sure those schools were equally funded. While White Tiftonians focused their efforts on circumventing *Brown*, Black students, after many frustrations, gathered to march and picket. “They stood in front of county buildings and in areas white Tiftonians frequently visited with various symbols to declare the educational cost of white comfort,” writes Willis. After media coverage publicized their demands, Tifton enacted some improvements. In Americus, students faced a more hostile, often violent environment, where “white supremacy and black subjugation were publicly displayed.” Here, students fought for desegregation, a difficult challenge, even with the support of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. “White opposition,” notes the author, “was constant, fierce, and taxing” to the participants. Nevertheless, in all three counties, more than striving for education reform, young Black activists were “fighting for their humanity to be recognized.”

A fresh investigation of systemic racism.
The story of the musical collaboration between Eric Clapton and George Harrison, which sparked romantic melodrama and songs that have lasted far longer than the relationships that inspired them.

Anyone with a passing interest in rock gossip knows about Clapton’s infatuation with Pattie Boyd, the wife of his good friend Harrison and muse for “Layla,” which Clapton wrote for the Derek and the Dominos album, *Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs*. She also inspired the Harrison-penned Beatles song “Something.” But this book isn’t about that romantic triangle, except in passing; nor is it about the personal friendship of the musicians, a bond so deep it endured after the breakup of Harrison’s marriage and the marriage of Clapton and Boyd (which didn’t last). Music historians and Beatles experts Womack and Kruppa mostly look at the development of a musical relationship. Clapton played on Harrison’s songs, Harrison was featured on one of Clapton’s with Cream, and both left their respective bands within the musical upheaval of the end of the 1960s. The authors deliver laborious accounts of the recording of Harrison’s *All Things Must Pass* (on which Clapton appeared) and Derek and the Dominos’ *Layla*, featuring musicians who had also contributed to the Harrison sessions. The narrative is only intermittently insightful in the critical sections, and the authors draw heavily on Clapton’s autobiography and the wealth of literature on Harrison and the Beatles. Readers won’t learn anything deeper about the friendship or the music of the early 1970s. This is more of a historical account, drawn from secondary sources, of minutiae from the recording of two landmark albums—who played on what and when, etc.—making it most appealing to die-hard Clapton and Harrison fans.

A few chapters from the lives of artists who have had richer and deeper books written about them.

**POWER AND LIBERTY**

**Constitutionalism in the American Revolution**

Womack, Kenneth & Kruppa, Jason  
Chicago Review Press (304 pp.)  
$28.99 | Jul. 20, 2021  
978-1-64160-325-6

The Pulitzer and Bancroft winner delivers another masterful book of Revolutionary War-era history. No historian knows more about the founding years of the U.S. than Wood. In his latest, he once again demonstrates his characteristic clarity in an examination of the origins and growth of American constitutional principles from the Stamp Act crisis of 1765 into the 19th century, “the most creative period of constitutionalism in American history and one of the most creative in modern Western history.” This introduction to the formative half-century of American history maintains a taut focus on the nation’s early constitutional development. While that emphasis comes at the cost of attention to social realities, the author sharply clarifies the stages that the founding generation went through to create their governments and the struggles to understand what they were doing. To Wood, America’s growing realization during and after the Revolution that they had to discard the Articles of Confederation for a new frame of government constituted “a momentous change, and one not at all anticipated in 1776.” As the author notes, it created “a radically new government altogether—one that utterly transformed the structure of central authority.” In what’s likely to be the most controversial aspect of the book, Wood finds the origins of this transformation not in an economic and social crisis prior to 1787 but rather in the maturation of American constitutional thought. The author shows that the Constitution didn’t arise out of social and economic turmoil; instead, it emerged from constitutional, legal, and structural realities as well as innovative thought. Wood’s argument is the most potent in the brilliant two chapters on the judiciary and the distinction between public and private spheres of life. While he may receive criticism for overlooking much of the social and cultural history produced by other historians, no one will be able to ignore the power of his arguments.

*A fresh, lucid distillation of Wood’s vast learning about the origins of American government.*
EVA EVERGREEN AND THE CURSED WITCH

Abe, Julie
Illus. by Jiang, Shan
Little, Brown (368 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-316-49394-9
Series: Eva Evergreen, 2

Eva Evergreen summons her courage and her magic to stop the Culling once and for all in this exciting sequel.

Eva has finally achieved her dream of becoming a Novice Witch by helping protect her assigned town, Auteri, from the Culling, a mysterious, disastrous, magical storm. On top of that, her mother has been accused of using rogue magic, passing it on to Eva, and bringing about the Culling. When the parents of two of Eva’s friends from Auteri go missing, she attempts to locate them, in the process uncovering who might actually be behind the Culling—something she reveals to the queen and Inner Council. In retaliation, the suspect casts a curse, which costs Eva’s mother her magic, and then disappears. With the culprit on the loose and the Culling worsening, Eva is assigned a critical mission. With the help of her friends and her red-gold flamefox, black-haired Eva must find the courage to find the truth behind the Culling before it destroys the whole realm.

With curses, rogue magic, and secrets, this sequel is a little darker than its predecessor but still as captivating and charming as before. Abe’s descriptive writing takes readers on a compelling, suspenseful adventure in a spectacular magical realm full of “impossible possibilities.” Japanese names and manga-style spot art add to the atmosphere.

An enchanting, magical read. (Fantasy. 8-12)

AMAZING RIVERS

100+ Waterways That Will Boggle Your Mind

Agnone, Julie Vosburgh
Illus. by Hyndman, Kerry
What on Earth Books (64 pp.)
$24.00 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-912920-26-6
Series: Our Amazing World

Fascinating facts about rivers.
In the vein of the publisher’s Amazing Islands, by Sabrina Weiss and also illustrated by Hyndman (2020), this volume describes freshwater waterways around the world. Opening
with a page of general definition, Agnone and Hyndman go on to use more than 100 examples of rivers from around the world to explain topics such as source and flow, what and who can be found in and around rivers, how they’re used, how they’ve been spanned or channeled, threats, and gems, ores, and other treasures. There are plentiful examples of wildlife, human activities, and natural wonders, including caves, waterfalls, ice pancakes—even a river that reverses its flow seasonally. The Colorado, Tigris and Euphrates, Amazon, Yangtze, and Li rivers get chapters of their own. Each big subject is addressed in short, titled paragraphs set on colorful, stylized illustrations on a double-page spread. The layouts are varied, with close-ups and vignettes as well as maps and broad river scenes. There is interesting use of shadow and texture. The people shown are racially diverse. At the center of the book, a foldout map of the continents of the world shows all the rivers described. Sadly, the index doesn’t include them all. The text may be challenging for some readers, but the presentation has plenty of browser appeal. There’s an extensive list of sources, all available on the internet.

An intriguing package for curious readers that both celebrates and informs. (Nonfiction. 8-11)
Taking the pulse of LGBTQ+ children’s books makes me a little jealous of my colleague Laura Simeon, who works with books for teens—there is an embarrassment of riches for readers of queer YA. However, “fewer” does not mean “none,” and some of what we’ve seen recently is quite terrific. In addition to Rob Sanders and Robbie Cathro’s Two Grooms on a Cake (Little Bee, May 4), which uncovers the true story of a 1971 wedding of two men and is the subject of one of our Pride Issue features (see Page 94), we’d like to shine the spotlight on a few other great recent LGBTQ+ releases.

Essie and Ollie meet when Essie’s dad temporarily moves to North Carolina in Ami Polonsky’s Spin With Me (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Feb. 16). Both kids are involved in the school’s LGBTQ+ club, cis girl Essie as an ally—but Essie’s crush on nonbinary kid Ollie has her questioning her orientation. Their romance plays out twice: first from Essie’s point of view and then from Ollie’s, a device that emphasizes the importance of looking through others’ perspectives. Ollie’s comfort, from the book’s outset, with their nonbinary identity makes for a sweet and necessary complement to coming-out narratives. Both Ollie and Essie are White; their friends are diverse.

Alba, too, explores gender identity in Tanya Guerrero’s All You Knead Is Love (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, March 30), along with family dynamics and abuse, when she’s sent to Barcelona to stay with the grandmother she hasn’t seen in years. Abuela Lola gives Alba the love and kindness the 12-year-old so badly needs, and Alba further gains confidence by learning to make bread in a local bakery. Alba is biracial, with a White American father and Spanish and Filipinx heritage on her mother’s side; Abuela Lola’s Barcelona neighborhood is vigorously multicultural.

In Grandad’s Camper (Little Bee, April 6), Harry Woodgate gently pushes the boundaries of what’s considered a queer family with a sweet story of grandfather-grandchild bonding. The narrator, a child of color, is visiting Grandad, who reminisces about his youth with the now-deceased Gramps and their adventures in their VW microbus. This spurs the rehabilitation of the old vehicle and a new road trip, with Grandad at the wheel and grandchild riding shotgun. That Grandad and Gramps were an interracial couple simply adds to the book’s appeal.

Stonewall Award winner Kyle Lukoff moves from picture books to middle-grade fiction with his debut novel, Too Bright To See (Dial Books, April 20), a ghost story. As if looking ahead to middle school weren’t hard enough, Bug needs to do it without beloved Uncle Roderick, a gay man who recently died of cancer. But is Uncle Roderick lingering somehow? And what is he trying to tell Bug? Bug’s gender journey unfolds naturally in the context of these other transitions, with the tender support of both mother and friends. Major characters are White. (Lukoff is a freelance contributor to Kirkus.)

The littlest readers will get some practice with their ABCs even as they attend a joyous, boisterous Pride parade with the central family of Robin Stevenson and Julie McLaughlin’s Pride Puppy! (Orca, May 11). From morning (“A for awake”) to night (“Z for zzzs”), this interracial family of four and their rainbow-kerchiefed dog experience a day full of love and fun, punctuated by some chaos when the titular dog gets loose. McLaughlin’s illustrations celebrate the racial, gender, ability, and body diversity of the queer community even as they put a special spin on tired abecedarian tropes: “Q for queen” rarely looks so fabulous.

Vicky Smith is a young readers’ editor.
come back once more as Clovis arranges a tea display in the window. When the hecklers insult Granny Grace and break her favorite teacup, Clovis is “all out of grace.” Leaving smashed china in his wake, a raging Clovis chases the cowering hecklers into an alley where he composes himself to channel Grace, then offers them tea, with surprising results. Painterly illustrations cleverly juxtapose Clovis, with his menacing horns and barrel-chested, bulging-biceps, linebacker physique, with the rather fussy china shop. Humorous scenes of Clovis meditating in lotus pose, lighting candles, pouring tea into delicate cups, and arranging flowers contrast with powerful close-ups of his brief descent into raging-bull mode, enhanced by exaggerated facial expressions and dramatic lighting.

A heartwarming, funny lesson in keeping one’s cool. (Picture book 4-8)

**OCEAN’S REVENGE**

Aung Than, Gacvin
Illus. by the author
Random House (160 pp.)
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Jul. 20, 2021
978-0-593-17509-1 PLB
Series: Super Sidekicks, 2

The Super Sidekicks return to save humanity from a dangerous foe—who turns out to be of humankind’s own making.

Following their origin story in *No Adults Allowed* (2020) and still trying to establish themselves as legitimate crime fighters in their own rights, the Super Sidekicks become aware of a new threat to Sydney. An enormous monster made of bits and pieces from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch has invaded the harbor, and the adult superheroes have mysteriously disappeared. Junior Justice, Flygirl, Dinomite, and Goo use their individual talents and teamwork to take down the power behind the monster—who is ultimately trying to protect the ocean and its inhabitants. While the heroes’ solutions to plastic pollution are oversimplified and unrealistic, the message promoting urgent environmental action is presented in an accessible and entertaining way. Importantly, this second volume maintains the goofy humor and dynamic action scenes that made the first book so enjoyable. Dinomite’s sarcasm is acerbic without being abrasive, and Junior Justice prompts lighthearted laughs by taking himself just a tad too seriously. Highly effective and aware narration carries the episodic, sometimes-plodding plot and brings a matter-of-fact attitude to the fantasy elements that really sell them. While the threat looms of his werewolf sire trying to steal the vampire guide, Tom’s actually much more concerned about getting his friend Annie to talk to him again, keeping a valuable action figure out of the hands of a bully, getting his band back together, finally turning 12, and attending his first comic-book convention. Apart from a few heartwarming moments with friends and family, little is resolved, and the story ends on a cliffhanger. The narrative flirts with the darkness of Tom’s condition but ultimately plays it for laughs, like when he sprints away from a bloodmobile to get himself a thirst-quenching, nonhuman-liver smoothie. Goofy grayscale spot illustrations further lighten the tone, showing Tom’s scruffy hair and freckles along with his fangs. Tom reads as White; a few supporting characters have darker skin, and two are coded as Latinx.

Another amusing entry. (Paranormal. 8-12)

**OUT FOR BLOOD**

Banks, Steven
Illus. by Fearing, Mark
Holiday House (304 pp.)
$13.99 | Aug. 31, 2021
978-0-8234-4616-2
Series: Middle School Bites, 3

The first year of middle school continues for Tom, the Vam-Wolf-Zom. Tom Marks has adjusted somewhat to being part vampire, part werewolf, part zombie, and all middle schooler since the first two installments of the series, *Middle School Bites* (2020) and *Tom Bites Back* (2020). He’s even been studying the old book *A Vampiric Education* by Eustace Tibbitt to learn new skills like turning into smoke and hypnotizing people. Still charming, his cheeky, self-aware narration carries the episodic, sometimes-plodding plot and brings a matter-of-fact attitude to the fantasy elements that really sell them. While the threat looms of his werewolf sire trying to steal the vampire guide, Tom’s actually much more concerned about getting his friend Annie to talk to him again, keeping a valuable action figure out of the hands of a bully, getting his band back together, finally turning 12, and attending his first comic-book convention. Apart from a few heartwarming moments with friends and family, little is resolved, and the story ends on a cliffhanger. The narrative flirts with the darkness of Tom’s condition but ultimately plays it for laughs, like when he sprints away from a bloodmobile to get himself a thirst-quenching, nonhuman-liver smoothie. Goofy grayscale spot illustrations further lighten the tone, showing Tom’s scruffy hair and freckles along with his fangs. Tom reads as White; a few supporting characters have darker skin, and two are coded as Latinx.

In this gentle, expository piece, a rhyming text merges with vibrant illustrations to explore multiple interpretations of the meaning of home.

Home is particular for both humans and creatures of the natural world. Alternating and opposing views prove the point. “Home is land, home is sky. / Home is wet, home is dry.” A rural river scene reveals a bear emerging from its den to find breakfast in the fish-filled river, birds flying above through a clear, sunny sky, a beaver observing from its dam, and a small cottage sitting on the far bank. The contrasting views continue: “Home is dark, home is bright. / Home is day, home is night.” The dark undersea world is shown opposite a bright tropical
Anticipation makes Grandma’s visits with her grandchild extra special. Although they’re depicted embracing on the cover, for the first two spreads, Grandma (who appears White, with brown hair pulled into a bun) and her grandchild (who appears to be a kid of color, with brown skin and curly black hair) are seen in their separate homes. Yaccarino’s bold, flat art style has a modern flair even as the accompanying text evokes the familiar nursery rhyme to share anticipation of a visit. The third spread reads, “Nine, ten together again!” and the cover art is replicated on the recto while the facing page introduces the child’s parents, a Black man and White woman, who are dropping the child off with Grandma. Ensuing pages share how the pair joyfully make the trip to her grandchild’s house. Especially given the separation many grandparents and grandchildren have endured throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, this title is likely to strike a chord with readers.

There’s lots to love here indeed. (Picture book 2-5)

Stanley, hamster-of-all-trades, is back, this time in a book-loving occupation.

Stanley works in a typical brick-and-mortar library and also on the library’s bookmobile. He spends the morning loading up the van. (Bee’s droll humor is especially evident on the shelves: the “horror” section includes owls and cats—horrific to the rodent set. And of course there is an entire shelf dedicated to cheese.) Stanley drives around the town matching just-right books to readers. Benjamin, Sophie, and Betty are at the park. One borrows a “scary book.” Another borrows a “scary, hairy book.” And the last borrows a “scary, hairy, fairy book.” (Kids always have the trickiest requests—but librarians know just how to please them!) Hattie is working on her motorbike. She didn’t ask for a book, but Stanley found one that she knew she would love and put it aside for her—it’s The Big Book of Twisty

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**MY DOG HAS FLEAS!**

*A Ukulele Misadventure*

Barner, Bob

Illus. by the author

Holiday House (32 pp.)

$17.99 | Aug. 3, 2021

978-0-8234-4642-1

Get ready for a rollicking, musical, flea-bitten read!

A young child with beige skin and curly, reddish-brown hair has an energetic dog who loves to romp with lots of doggy friends. Inevitably, the pooch contracts fleas at the park that “Chew! Chew! Chew!” and send all the dogs zooming, upseting a picnic before splashing into a frog-filled pond. Such rowdy dogs! Told in first person, the exuberantly rhyming text recounts the exciting adventure, which culminates in a sudsy bath and a song: the titular “My Dog Has Fleas.” The child and friends play the song on ukuleles to the delight of all the dogs. Backmatter includes the history of the ukulele as well as tips to convey the energy and humor of the story through close-up perspectives, at dog’s-eye level, of the action. Full of pastel colors dotted with black specks that may convey the offending fleas, each spread invites a closer look to find all the dogs, individually named on an early spread. A later, parallel spread shows a ukulele up close, with all the parts individually labeled, as well as a few of the dogs. Simple, swift lines effectively convey the different personalities of each canine, bringing them all to life.

A nifty preschool read-aloud that blends early musical instruction with just plain fun. (Picture book 3-5)
“Quilting offers a perfect metaphor in this thoughtful tale.”

HOPE SPRINGS

Roads. After a busy day of connecting readers with books, the seemingly indefatigable Stanley heads back to the library for a special event. Agatha Mouse has a new book out and is doing a reading! Stanley goes home for his predictable dinner, bath, and bedtime routine—but is reading his book the entire time. Some might suck their teeth at the sight of Stanley in the tub with First Mouse in Space, but so sure and stable are Bee’s compositions that they should know not a drop will get on it.

Delightfully celebrates the art of librarianship. (Picture book. 2-5)

HOPE SPRINGS
Berry, Jaime
Little, Brown (336 pp.)
$16.99  |  Aug. 10, 2021
978-0-316-54057-5

Sixth grader Jubilee and her paternal grandmother, Nan, move so frequently from town to town that they have Relocation Rules. Jubilee’s father died in a motorcycle accident when she was 4 and her mother took off to become a country singer. A great fan of the TV show Queen of Neat, hosted by Arletta Paisley, Jubilee loves crafting. After she and Nan arrive in Hope Springs, Texas, Jubilee befriends Abby, whose mother is the mayor. A job in a fabric store puts her organizational skills to great use, and the shop owner teaches her how to quilt. Jubilee is thrilled to learn that Arletta grew up in Hope Springs and will be coming to visit as the spokesperson for a new big-box store, but this leads to

“Quilting offers a perfect metaphor in this thoughtful tale.”

HOPE SPRINGS

“...An Unusual Friend earns a spot on the shelves of sensitive and science-minded kids.... an inspiring (if unrealistic) portrayal of respect for ocean life and the caring of other creatures.”

—Booklife Reviews

“A gentle, enjoyable tale of interspecies trust and kindness, with some excitement to boot.”

—Kirkus Reviews

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concerns about the survival of local businesses—and a glimpse for Jubilee of the person behind the TV personality. Another thread in the story is the strained relationship between Jubilee and her absent mother. Her friendship with Abby and her growing feelings for the townspeople lead Jubilee to question whether she can arrange her life as neatly as she can objects. With a town festival and occasional directions for craft projects thrown into the mix, debut author Berry allows Jubilee to grow and mature to the point where she can implement Staying Put Procedures. Characters follow a White default.

Quilting offers a perfect metaphor in this thoughtful tale of a tween piecing together a new life. (Fiction. 10-12)

I'M SORRY
Black, Michael Ian
Illus. by Obi, Debbie Ridpath
Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 31, 2021
Series: I'm Books

A potato apologizes to a flamingo.

We don't exactly know what Potato said to Flamingo, but we know it was hurtful enough for Flamingo to be sad and Potato to feel awful about it. The White, pigtailed child who has rounded out the trio in such previous humorous social-emotional titles as I'M Bored (2012), I'M Sad (2018), and I'M Worried (2019) works on resolving this conflict, emphasizing to Potato that he needs to apologize and that giving Flamingo a sandwich or disguising himself as a cowboy won't do the trick. Of course Potato apologizes, and of course Flamingo accepts after emphasizing how hurtful the comment was, but the resolution feels unearned. We never learn what, exactly, Potato said to Flamingo. It's unclear why Potato feels gut-wrenching remorse but is unable to apologize given that a more-common reaction is denial or justification. The conflict seems straightforward and one-sided rather than reflecting the messy realities that come when children (or anyone) hurt each other's feelings. And the end gag with pen guarantees that new readers laughing and turning pages. (Graphic early reader. 5-7)

FROG AND BALL
Caple, Kathy
Illus. by the author
Holiday House (40 pp.)
978-0-8234-4341-3
978-0-8234-4933-0 paper
Series: I Like To Read Comics

Never underestimate the chaotic fun that magic and an angry bouncing ball can create.

When Frog goes to the library, he borrows a book on magic. He then heads to a nearby park to read up on the skills necessary to becoming “a great magician.” Suddenly, a deflated yellow ball lands with a “Thud!” at his feet. Although he flexes his new magician muscles, Frog’s spells fall as flat as the ball. But when Frog shouts “Phooey!” and kicks the ball away, it inflates to become a big, angry ball. The ball begins to chase Frog, so he seeks shelter in the library—and Frog and ball turn the library’s usual calm into chaos. The cartoon chase crescendos. The ball bounces into the middle of a game of chess, interrupts a puppet show, and crashes into walls and bookcases. Staying just one bounce ahead, Frog runs, hides, grabs a ride on a book cart, and scatters books and papers as he slides across the library furniture before an alligator patron catches the ball and kicks it out the library door. But that’s not the end of the ball….Caple’s tidy panels and pastel-hued cartoons make a surprisingly effective setting for the slapstick, which should have young readers giggling. Simple sentences—often just subject and verb—with lots of repetition propel the action. Frog’s nonsense-word spells (“Poof Wiffle, Bop Bip!”) are both funny and excellent practice in phonetics. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Fast and furious action guaranteed to keep new readers

J.R.R. TOLKIEN FOR KIDS
His Life and Writings, With 21 Activities
Carr, Simonetta
Chicago Review Press (144 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-64160-346-1
Series: For Kids

A lifeless life of the great philologist and creator of “secondary worlds.”

With eye-dulling granularity Carr turns Tolkien’s story into a recitation of family members and religious conversions, childhood and later experiences of debatable significance, academic colleagues and obscurely named literary clubs, changes of address, and sound-bite quotes. It all passes steadily into and out of view, leaving readers only the very briefest of plot summaries and bare glimpses of the uncommon complexity of his imagined languages and worlds or the immense range of literary and cultural traditions on which he drew. Eschewing
nuance of any sort, the author also offers no comments about his sometimes-fustian writing style and likewise leaves the sexist and racist themes in his fantasies unexamined. The illustrations mix more film stills and recent art into the period photos than examples of Tolkien's own lively paintings or drawings, and the assorted set of enrichment activities runs to such uninviting projects as making mushroom toast or writing a book review. The backmatter also seems catch as catch can, as the lists of resources include audiobooks but no visual media despite all those stills and leave out the separate editions of most of Tolkien's shorter books.

Unenticing as an invitation to explore either Middle Earth or the mind behind it. (glossary, timeline, endnotes, index) (Biography. 11-13)

BEING CLEM
Cline-Ransome, Lesa
Holiday House (256 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-8234-4604-9
Series: Finding Langston Trilogy, 3

The highly anticipated conclusion to Cline-Ransome's Finding Langston trilogy.

Small but smart, Clemson Thurber Jr. has acquired resilience from dealing with his two teenage sisters, who barely tolerate him. Now 9, Clem has lost his father in San Francisco's 1944 Port Chicago Disaster that killed 320 sailors, most of them Black, who were loading ammunition onto ships. Because of Chicago's employment discrimination, Clem's widowed mother works as a domestic to a White family despite her college education. Although Clem believes his mother wants him to follow his Daddy into the Navy, he must face his utter terror of swimming; the water makes him think of his father's death.
In a new graphic novel, the artist reimagines an American myth through the eyes of a queer Chinese American girl

BY JOHANNA ZWIRNER

Installation artist and cartoonist Shing Yin Khor is the author of a YA graphic memoir about the author’s experience traveling Route 66 with their dog, *The American Dream?* Their new graphic novel, *The Legend of Auntie Po* (Kokila, June 15), reimagines the folk logging hero Paul Bunyan, instead invoking Auntie Po and her water buffalo as protectors of a 19th-century logging camp. The story follows 13-year-old Mei on many adventures, from crushing on her best friend, Bee, to learning about her father and their Chinese heritage and, eventually, dreaming of an education beyond the logging camp. Through Mei’s brilliant, inquisitive voice and the sweeping illustrations of the community around her, Khor revisits the story of one of America’s early industries to introduce a powerful new origin myth. We recently spoke with Khor on Zoom from their home in Los Angeles; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

The gods Auntie Po and her water buffalo, Pei Pei, look out for the loggers in Mei’s community. Who or what was your initial inspiration for these gods?

This started with a passion for Paul Bunyan. As I was doing research, I learned things my history classes had never taught me. Japanese people were a really significant part of the West Coast logging industry until Japanese internment. A lot of Chinese workers, after they built the railroads, moved on to other forms of labor, and the logging industry was a fairly common one. That definitely started me thinking: If you were a Chinese kid in a logging camp being exposed to the Paul Bunyan mythos, what would it be reinterpreted [as] in your head? Someone asked me yesterday if Auntie Po was based on anyone. This [picture of my grandmother] sits above my desk, and until I was asked that question, it didn’t really occur to me that, of course, this picture that I look at almost every single day would come through when I drew this elderly matriarch.

You write movingly about the hardships that Chinese people faced in the U.S. in the 19th century. How do you approach writing about violence and discrimination for young readers?

A lot of it is reflected in my own experience, where I felt I was sheltered quite a bit from the reality of violence and discrimination. Part of it is that I grew up in Malaysia—although I did immigrate to the United States when I was 16—but my parents, [and] the people around me, did a really good job of not making me feel different, not making me feel like there would ever be any danger in my life. Of course, that is a very different...
experience than a lot of other marginalized communities face, especially Black people, where you don’t have the privilege of being sheltered.

For Mei, her entire life is this logging camp. That’s all she knows; her dad is intent on sheltering her. There’s a moment in every child’s life where they realize that maybe not everything is great. I was writing a lot of the violence from Mei’s point of view; that slow realization that people that look like me get beaten up. What does it feel like, in that moment where your bubble starts to crack? There’s a scene where Mei fakes Pei Pei’s footsteps throughout camp in order to make the children happy. She wants them to have a distraction from the violence around them. A Black woman there, Martha, is like, “I know that you want the kids to feel safe, but it’s not really safe.” I think that’s very much about the different levels of privilege, what people are able to consider safe.

**What I love so much is how food brings people together in this book.**

I really want to center food and center joy, because the food is joyous. So much of writing about marginalized people is excavating trauma. It’s excavating stories about violence, especially with working-class communities—in this case, the Chinese labor class in this era. You don’t have a lot of data, you don’t have a lot of personal letters. I came across [a fact] that really shaped the entire book in one of the few academic works written about Chinese people in the logging industry in this era—Sue Fawn Chung’s *Chinese in the Woods*. I learned that if you had a logging camp [with] a good cook, you had the ability to retain your workers much better. If you had a bad cook, your workers quit, and you wouldn’t be able to do the work. I learned that Chinese cooks were actually considered some of the best. Not only that, but they were often paid significantly more, [sometimes] double. This was an area that Chinese people were thriving in.

**There’s a wonderful friendship and love between Mei and Bee. How did you first decide to incorporate this relationship as a romantic subplot?**

That’s directly based on my own experience of crushing on an awful lot of best friends who are not remotely gay. I do think there are a lot of queer stories that are like, *Can we have a happy ending? Why don’t they end up together?* That’s what happens when you crush on your straight best friends. Mei is figuring out a lot of things, not just her sexuality. At the end of the day, her own sexuality might not even be at the top of that list. Bee’s a little older, about to leave for college, she cares for Mei a lot, and they’re best friends. Were this something taking place in our current era, there might have been more queer experimentation. But without the language to do it, [Bee] is not thinking of what queerness could be. They absolutely love each other, but sexuality isn’t really part of that relationship, because of the lack of language and because they’re very young.

**Did you always envision Mei as a queer character?**

What has been your favorite part about writing a queer protagonist for young readers?

Mei was always queer in my head. She was always someone who was going to be figuring out her place in the world at all these different intersections. I think more than anything else, I wanted to write a queer character who was not defined by their queerness. Her story is about finding and accepting...that she’s not a sidekick to Bee’s story, that she is a whole person with her own stories to tell. When you’re writing as a marginalized person, a lot of times you [think], *which marginalization, exactly, am I writing about,* and for this book in particular, I feel like I got a lot of them in. That’s a very gratifying thing, that acceptance that not every single marginalization needs to be the forefront of the story.

*Johanna Zwirner is the editorial assistant. The Legend of Auntie Po received a starred review in the May 1, 2021, issue.*

**Shing Yin Khor**

**The Legend of Auntie Po**

SHING YIN KHOR
“Scenes depicting the towers’ ruins are aptly somber yet hopeful, as they show the crushed tree still defiantly alive.”

SURVIVOR TREE
Colleen, Marcie
Illus. by Becker, Aaron
Little, Brown (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 31, 2021
978-0-316-48767-2

A remarkable tree stands where the twin towers of the World Trade Center once soared.

Through simple, tender text, readers learn the life-affirming story of a Gallery pear tree that grew and today still flourishes “at the foot of the towers.” The author eloquently describes the pre-9/11 life of the “Survivor Tree” and its heartrending, nearly decadelong journey to renewal following its recovery from the wreckage of the towers’ destruction. By tracking the tree’s journey through the natural cycle of seasonal changes and colors after it was found beneath “the blackened remains,” she tells how, after replanting and with loving care (at a nursery in the Bronx), the tree managed miraculously to flourish again. Retransplanted at the Sept. 11 memorial, it valiantly stands today, a symbol of new life and resilience. Hazy, delicate watercolor-and-colored pencil artwork powerfully traces the tree’s existence before and after the towers’ collapse; early pages include several snapshotlike insets capturing people enjoying the outdoors through the seasons. Scenes depicting the towers’ ruins are aptly somber yet hopeful, as they show the crushed tree still defiantly alive. The vivid changes that new seasons introduce are lovingly presented, reminding readers that life unceasingly renews itself. Many paintings are cast in a rosy glow, symbolizing that even the worst disasters can bring forth hope. People depicted are racially diverse. Backmatter material includes additional facts about the tree.

A lovely 20th-anniversary tribute to the towers and all who perished—and survived. (author’s note, artist’s note) (Informational picture book: 5-8)

THE ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE ELEMENTS
The Powers, Uses, and Histories of Every Atom in the Universe
Congdon, Lisa
Illus. by the author
Chronicle Books (148 pp.)
$22.99 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-4521-6159-4

An illustrator leads a tour through the periodic table. Hip artwork and a funky display type give coffee-table appeal to this large but relatively lightweight “encyclopedia.” Colorful sections introduce each element along with its category, its year of discovery according to Western science, the scientist credited, and (usually) a “fun fact.” Additional sections, evidently sprinkled in to break up the parade of facts about the individual elements, include explorations of “endangered elements,” stinky elements, “CSI elements,” “the deadliest elements,” and elements in the human body as well as miniographies of periodic table originator Dmitri Mendeleev; the Curies, many other notable chemists, and famed element collector Oliver Sacks. Text is friendly and illustrations, accessible; this might well prove an enticing introduction for budding researchers. There is neither a bibliography nor a credited expert reviewer, however; that might explain the erroneous proclamation that “every cubic mile of . . . seawater” contains “37 pounds . . . of gold” or the incorrect diagram that shows gamma rays passing unhindered through a thick wall of concrete. It’s less egregious that the text equates atomic mass and atomic weight or that the ancient Greek elemental symbols shown aren’t exactly correct. The text breezes through spectrum and capacitor without defining them for the glossary—which, oddly, also includes acid but not base. Opening a gatefold on the front endpaper reveals a periodic table plus key. (Text is friendly and illustrations, accessible; this might well prove an enticing introduction for budding researchers. There is neither a bibliography nor a credited expert reviewer, however; that might explain the erroneous proclamation that “every cubic mile of . . . seawater” contains “37 pounds . . . of gold.”)

Stylish and superficially informational. (index) (Nonfiction: 8-12)

KING OF RAGTIME
The Story of Scott Joplin
Costanza, Stephen
Illus. by the author
Atheneum (56 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 24, 2021
978-1-5344-1036-7

While his father tried to convince young Scott Joplin to work with him on the railroad that provided reliable work for African American men, Scott’s heart answered another call—one that led him to become the “King of Ragtime.”

Scott Joplin was born into a musically talented family in which everyone knew how to play an instrument. However, it
was his mother who first recognized her son’s exceptional talent for playing music. She allowed him to tinker on the piano of the White family she worked for. Young Joplin would make up tunes for her to dance and sing to while she worked. To further support his talent, she later traded cleaning services with a different employer in exchange for piano lessons for her son. That early training and Joplin’s dedication helped him land jobs as a piano player in honky-tonks throughout the Mississippi Valley. Later, Joplin made his way to Sedalia, Missouri, where he found work as a piano teacher, went to college to study music, and published his first song, “Maple Leaf Rag.” Writing with a bit of a twang and punctuating the narrative with idioms and onomatopoeia, Costanza delivers a biography as bouncy and colorful as ragtime itself. In the opening spread, a pastoral, hardworking newly freed Black men and women are carving out a life for themselves in Texarkana. The busy scene, with punches of optimistic blue, is full of animation and joy; motifs that repeat throughout each gorgeous spread. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Outstanding. (author’s note, discography, bibliography)

This picture book follows two African-American children as they learn about the natural habitats of animals, and connect each to the comfort and security of the children’s own home and family.

“Isn’t It Scary is not scary at all. It is all about defusing fear and emphasizing the importance of home – for humans and all creatures."
—J. R. Harris, Member of the Explorers Club, and Author of Way Out There: Adventures of a Wilderness Trekker

“…full-page illustrations skillfully portray the dark-skinned family and naturalistic animals and backgrounds in rich shades of brown, gold, and aqua that contribute to the story’s nurturing feel. A warm hug of a tale that comforts and informs.”
—Kirkus Reviews

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human poverty, but at the risk of wiping out 11 million Donbalese citizens. In order to save the realm “down below,” Chance and Pauline (with Mersey helping from aboveground) will make a treacherous 6-hour voyage along an underground river, talk their way past a bureaucratic librarian, and slide down a chute into a stinky pile of laundry, but with the help of old friends and new, both human and Donbalese, they might be able to pull it off. The worldbuilding is creative and richly detailed, and an appendix provides an overview of Donbaloh’s unusual flora and fauna. Some of the hilarious comparisons, droll humor, and pop-culture references might go over younger readers’ heads but will be greatly appreciated by others. Assume Whiteness for most human characters; Killiam’s surname cues him as Chinese.

*A satisfyingly silly and fast-paced sequel.* (Fantasy. 8-14)

**SAGUARO’S GIFTS**
Cyrus, Kurt
Illus. by Atkins, Andy
Sleeping Bear Press (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 15, 2021
978-1-5341-1130-1

A saguaro’s crown of blossoms unfurls in the night to the excitement of the desert dwellers.

Nectar lures a small bat who wishes the tall cactus a happy 100th birthday, and an owl returns to its home in the green, spiky trunk. Morning arrives, along with hummingbirds, doves, bees, and butterflies—jostling one another to see and taste the gifts the blooming flowers offer. The seemingly desolate landscape teems with activity while Cyrus’ jaunty verses describe the saguaro from the perspectives of the animals that depend on it as a source of food, shelter, and refuge. Unfortunately, the uneven verses take the life cycle of the flowers and subsequent fruit out of sequence. A tortoise drops by; looking for food, and observes, “Blossoms wither in the sun. / The pollination party’s done.” Yet the flowers had just begun blooming the night before—much too early for withering (as later illustrations attest), let alone for the ripened fruit the confused reptile hopes to find. The author’s skimpy fact sheet also fails to mention many important details, such as the fact that saguaros are found exclusively in the Sonoran Desert. Atkins’ rich illustrations capture the vibrant desert ecosystem with wonderful detail; in one illustration, a bobcat scrapers to the top of the saguaro, and in another, a coyote hungrily peers into a rabbit’s burrow. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

*A striking if imperfect homage to the venerable saguaro.* (Picture book. 3-6)

**CHIRRI & CHIRRA, THE RAINY DAY**

Doi, Kaya
Illus. by the author
Trans. by Boyd, David
Enchanted Lion Books (40 pp.)
$16.95 | Jun. 22, 2021
978-1-927917-41-1

It’ll take more than rain to dampen the moods of indefatigable bicyclists Chirri and Chirra.

Of course, their ride in the rain is far from a slog. Shortly after the drops begin to fall, they happen upon a shop that is “only open on rainy days.” Inside, a squirrel family enjoys tea, and the pig shopkeeper welcomes the adventurers. After some tea, each buys a raincoat, and they set back out on a trip that only turns more magical: The rain starts “falling from below,” stopping at the bottoms of their wheels and lifting them up to treetop level (don’t question the physics; Chirri and Chirra certainly don’t trouble themselves); another shop has huge windows from which the kids can view the upside-down rain; outside again, they join some animals gathered around a gumdrop tree: “Chomp chomp, nom nom, yum yum.” The upside-down rain ends, and animals, children, and bikes are all in the canopy of the gumdrop tree. Not to worry: The gumdrops turn into balloons that float everyone safely back down. Doi’s trademark illustrations, made with colored pencils to evoke the look of mid-20th-century lithographs, depict the protagonists with pale skin, rosy cheeks, and black pageboys. They cycle ever to the right across the spreads, which take advantage of the book’s unusual trim size to open to a 6.5-inch-tall by 18-inch-wide panorama that’s somehow both cozy and expansive.

Another delightful outing in this winsome Japanese series. (Picture book. 3-6)

**CATALINA**

Doody, Lori
Illus. by the author
Running the Goat (40 pp.)
$9.95 paper | Aug. 10, 2021
978-1-927917-41-1

Three new dogs move into a house cat’s home territory.

With a veritably “purrfect” life, Catalina rules the roost. The marmalade cat does what she wants: eats whenever, plays with toys whenever, and naps whenever. Most of the time, her humans leave her home alone, and Catalina can get “a little blue.” Her humans eventually take notice. But when they bring home three Labrador retriever puppies as a solution, they may have overdone it. Catalina finds the pups—Fogo, Burin, and Amherst—to be “too loud, too big, and too many.” As the dogs take over her space and throw off her routine, Catalina gets “cranky.” She gets “contrary.” She gets “CROOKED!” But can she learn to be a good housemate? This Newfoundland
import is distinctive, with its childlike cartoon art, small trim size, bold colors, and spare use of black outlines. Two dollhouse-esque cutaway spreads effectively (and hilariously) convey the pets' personalities. The simplified interior design—aside from loud, repeated patterns—draws focus to the animals. Hidden details cue readers that the humans (shown only from the waist or chest down) are expecting a baby. (One human has pale skin and the other has brown skin; strangely, a sketched photograph on the couples' nightstand shows them both as White.) A brief glossary explains some of the regionalisms used in the book.

An accessible, humorous tale of family changes—animal or otherwise. (Picture book. 3-6)

**WE HAVE A PLAYDATE**

Dormer, Frank W.
Illus. by the author
Amulet/Abrams (96 pp.)
$12.99 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-1-4197-5273-5

Four quirky animal friends develop their social-emotional skills over the course of four chapters.

In “The Slide,” Tuna (apparently a land-walking narwhal), Noodle (a lime-green, baseball cap–wearing snake), and Margo (a pink duck) reckon with Ralph, a bear who is unwilling to leave the spot at the top of the slide and let others have a turn. In “The Swings,” the now-amicable quartet finds a way to help Noodle enjoy the swingset in a traditional way, and the others learn a new way to appreciate the swingset. In “The Monkey Bars,” Margo is distraught to find that their secret hideout has been destroyed by the very robot they built in the first chapter to thwart Ralph (it immediately went amok), and their friends build them a new and quite magnificent den. In “The Seesaw,” the quartet learns how to balance their individual needs and play safely together. All characters use they/them pronouns and remain genderless throughout. The characters aren’t as unwaveringly sweet as many of their counterparts in similar titles, and their messy, brash earnestness charms. Slapstick humor and light mayhem abound, although unfortunately a couple of jokes at Noodle’s expense are tinged with ableism. Bright, cheerful colors, uncomplicated backgrounds and paneling, and large, simple facial expressions make this a strong graphic novel for young independent readers.

Silly fun. (Graphic fiction. 6-9)

**LITTLE GRUMP TRUCK**

Driscoll, Amanda
Illus. by the author
Knopf (40 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Aug. 24, 2021
978-0-593-30081-7
978-0-593-30082-4 PLB

When dump trucks get angry (really, really angry), head for the hills! Little Dump Truck is “the happiest member of the construction crew.” Assisting everyone from Excavator to Bulldozer, she hauls her load merrily. But sometimes things just don’t go her way. In rapid succession, dirt is blown in her face, a tire is punctured, and a flock of birds mistake her for a lavatory. Now she’s Little Grump Truck, and the exceedingly poor advice from her co-workers (“Ignore it. You’ll be fine”; “Shake it off!”) pushes her too far. After Little Grump Truck unloads (figuratively and literally) on her colleagues, everyone else has the “grumpies” too. It isn’t until she closes her eyes and focuses that Little Dump Truck is able to clear her mind and lighten her mood. Apologies are in order, and soon everything is humming (for the time being, anyway). Though the narrative doesn’t drill the message home, both child and adult readers alike will hopefully pick up on the fact that pithy aphorisms are maddeningly unhelpful when one is in a bad mood. Gray skies accompany the dump truck’s mood, which is depicted as an ever morphing agglomeration of hard, black scribbles. The accompanying art serves its purpose, investing its trucks with personality via time-honored headlight, windshield-wiper, and grille facial features. Little Dump Truck has a purple cab and green bed and a single lash on each headlight eye. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Should appeal to all the little grump trucks hauling their feelings about. (Picture book. 3-5)

**A SONG OF FRUTAS**

Engle, Margarita
Illus. by Palacios, Sara
Atheneum (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-5344-4489-8

As Abuelo pushes a cart laden with fruit, they sing out the names of the fruit in the cart: “mango, limón, coco, melón, / naranja, toronja, plátano, piña.” Their happy voices reach far, inviting people to come and purchase. Other street vendors join in, singing out their own wares. The louder they call out, the louder Abuelo must sing. Palacios’ vibrant illustrations beautifully capture the joy and liveliness of the event. The child tells readers, “my favorite visits…are on the eve of el año nuevo” when people buy 12 grapes and make a wish, one for each month of the new year. This child’s wish, reflecting the author’s own
Let’s say you’re 6, finally 6 years old. You’re given Rob Sanders’ new picture book, *Two Grooms on a Cake: The Story of America’s First Gay Wedding* (Little Bee, May 4), whose cover features an illustration by Robbie Cathro of two male cake toppers—figurines that look just like Jack Baker and Michael McConnell, the two men who claim to be the first same-sex married couple in America. You are unaware that a simple Google search for “first same-sex marriage in America” reveals that on May 17, 2004, it was actually Marcia Kadish and Tanya McCloskey who were the first same-sex couple to get married in America.

So which couple has truly earned that distinction? For sheer craftiness and legal wiles, Baker and McConnell are the clear winners. In 1970, the couple was denied a marriage license in Hennepin County, Minnesota, so Baker, who was in law school, decided to legally change his name to the gender-neutral “Pat Lyn.” In 1971, McConnell went to a different location, Blue Earth County, to apply for a marriage license—alone, so that the clerk wouldn’t see that his spouse was a man. Minnesota’s marriage laws didn’t explicitly stipulate that marriage was outlawed between two people of the same sex, so Baker and McConnell were married. Once the officials in Blue Earth County realized their mistake, the county attorney told the clerk to not record the marriage, meaning that Michael and Jack McConnell (for they now had the same last name) couldn’t receive Social Security benefits or the other protections an officially recognized marriage confers. In 2018, after a long fight in the courts, a Minnesota judge ruled that the McConnells’ 1971 marriage was valid; not only was the couple entitled to spousal benefits, but they are officially the first legally married same-sex couple in America, and perhaps the world.

How to make this set of tricky maneuvers and convoluted history perfectly clear to a young reader? For starters, Sanders, the author of a number of picture books about LGBTQ+ history, has the perfectly cute and approachable cake toppers who look like the McConnells narrate the book in the first person plural. But he also thought of his Aunt Shirley; she made wedding cakes for everyone in Sanders’ family. “The most interesting thing to me about a wedding then—maybe even now—is the cake,” says Sanders, who is 62. In the ’70s and ’80s, Aunt Shirley was in her baking heyday in Sanders’ home state of Missouri, and her cakes were dramatically tiered with fountains of colored water in them, “all those really tacky things by today’s standards,” Sanders says. “I’ve seen them made with Crisco, which would make bakers today cringe. It was coat-your-mouth-and-stick-to-your-ribs kind of cake.”

With memories such as those, it’s no wonder Sanders thought of the careful tending required to make a cake taste and look beautiful as an analog to the watchful investment of love and selflessness that are necessary to make a relationship grow.

Like the McConnells, Sanders knows what it’s like to suffer from anti-gay discrimination. He grew up as a South-
ern Baptist and graduated from college with an elementary education degree. Then he attended seminary school. “I thought I was making a bargain with God, that I would go to seminary and he would make me not gay,” Sanders recalls. “That was my deal, to tell you the truth. We did not shake on it, so God did not keep his side of the bargain.”

Sanders was eventually hired by the publishing division of the Southern Baptist Convention, where he worked for approximately 15 years. The “best thing that happened to me,” Sanders says, was that he was outed and fired from the company. Sanders had been slowly coming out of the closet by then, disclosing his sexual orientation to a few friends and family. The night he was fired, his best friends took him out to dinner and they drank some champagne; earlier that day, he could’ve been fired for having alcohol at dinner. “My friends, especially my circle of gay friends, stood around me to make sure I realized what a positive turning point this could be for my life, and to embrace it,” Sanders says. He calls himself a “person of faith” but no longer participates in organized religion.

When the McConnells were married, Sanders was 13, “beginning to awaken to who I was,” he reflects. “The sheer thought that these guys had the courage to do what they did” continues to inspire the author. The McConnells were doing much more than applying for a marriage license, he points out; they were insisting that they be treated just like any other person wanting to get married. “It’s inspirational to me because I know what my life was like in Springfield, Missouri,” Sanders says. “Their bravery has really changed my perspective.”

Claiborne Smith is the literary director of the San Antonio Book Festival and the former editor-in-chief of Kirkus Reviews. Two Grooms on a Cake received a starred review in the May 1, 2021, issue.

leitmotif, is for friendship between the two countries and a time when families on both sides of the narrow strip of ocean that separates them can freely visit. In the author’s note, Engle gives some details on the travel restrictions that keep families apart as well as explaining her choice to use Spanglish in the text. Readers also learn a little more about Cuban street vendors—pregoneros—and the tradition of having grapes on New Year’s Eve. The main character has exuberant wavy black hair and brown skin like Abuelo’s; other characters reflect Cuba’s racial diversity. The story publishes simultaneously in Spanish, with a translation by Alexis Romay. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A joyful celebration of Cuban tradition and family ties. (Picture book. 4-6) (Un pregón de frutas: 978-1-5344-6218-2, 978-1-5344-94765 paper)

BOOGIE BOOGIE, Y’ALL
Esperanza, C.G.
Illus. by the author
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins
(40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-0-06-297622-2

Children notice art around the city that others are too busy to pay attention to. “BOOGIE BOOGIE, Y’ALL. / The city BOOGIED all day / Busy, busy, busy / till one kid stopped to say... // ‘WOAH, WOAH, WOAH! / Look at the ART on the WALL!’ ” Much of the charm of this tale lies in the rhythm of the text, showcased in these opening lines that repeat, with variations, throughout the book. Esperanza’s bright and colorful graffiti-style illustrations capture the excitement of a child enraptured by the street art on the side of a building. It’s a child of color with an infectious, gap-toothed grin. Though the refrain shifts, the focus remains on the children (and one dog!), who have a different perspective than the adults around them, appreciating the art (visual, musical, and dance) that is seemingly mundane to others. Some of the transitions between spreads aren’t entirely clear, which may cause some readers to backtrack to follow the thread. Similarly, an unexpected and unexplained moment of fantasy near the end adds excitement but may trip up some readers. These foibles don’t spoil the whole, however, as it’s all about the joy. How refreshing to read a picture book that centers the experience of the many children growing up in diverse cityscapes and acknowledges the unique beauty of cities and the many forms urban art can take. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A book boogie. (Picture book. 4-8)
Sometimes the scariest thing is growing up.

Halloween-loving Esther, who is implied Ashkenazi Jewish and White, has had her bat mitzvah, which makes her an adult in religious terms, but she's not ready to let go of trick-or-treating, even when her parents say otherwise. She's also not ready to move on to high school or to do anything about her feelings for her best friend, Agustín, whose name may cue him as Latinx. But when the Queen of Halloween freezes their neighborhood in permanent Halloween, Esther finds herself reconsidering the value of forward momentum. Fink, of Welcome to Night Vale podcast fame, tries to do a lot with his creepy premise, but heavy-handed, meaning-laden passages—for example, digressions about neighbors as Esther and friends flee through yards chased by a villain flinging razor-bristling apples—slow the pace to a crawl and leave little for the reader to discover. Esther is joined in her fight against the Halloween Queen (who has sent the adults into a magical Dream and stolen the children) by Agustín; Korean American Christian bully Sasha; and seemingly boring, default White dentist Mr. Gabler, all of whom serve as foils for Esther's emotional growth as she learns to see past the surface. This reads like two books uneasily combined: one about growing up and discovering people's value and the other a horror story with a fantastic sense of place and some wonderfully shivery (and not entirely resolved) details.

Disappointingly fails to coalesce. (Horror.11-14)

Jenna Sakai, seventh grade superstar journalist in the making, tackles the story of her life.

Japanese American Jenna from Keep It Together, Keiko Carter (2020) is having quite the school year. Her parents are still adjusting after a nasty divorce, and her boyfriend and fellow student journalist Elliot Oxford has broken up with her. Nursing a bruised, but not broken, heart on multiple fronts, she becomes more resolved than ever to protect herself and focus on her goals as a hard-hitting investigative reporter. This is not without challenges in the form of having to write a personal essay for newspaper club and scoping out a stellar story for a journalism scholarship competition, all while trying to reconnect with her friend Keiko. Jenna finds some solace in hanging out in a Broadway-themed diner, the girls’ father disappears one morning from the Chevy Suburban in which he, Lulu, and Selena live. They’ve been in an RV park in Montana since driving up from Texas, where the girls’ mother died after a devastating, financially ruinous illness. For two weeks, Lulu manages to keep up the routine (food bank, laundromat, and picking up Selena from her after-school program), fending off queries about her dad. The narrative focus stays tightly with Lulu’s point of view, her understanding of the world informing her decisions. She’s afraid to ask for help, believing that she and Selena will be separated if anyone finds out about their situation. Lulu, the target of the contempt of some classmates, is befriended by both Jack, a boy who persuades her to try out for the school musical, and the town librarian, who unwittingly provides a refuge. Fox offers a message via Jack when he learns about Lulu’s life: “No one should have to live in a car.” Cranes—paper ones that Lulu sells at the craft booth, she has to determine if his presence is annoying or—possibly worse—welcome. Jenna faces even more surprises as her scholarship article forces her to reexamine her own emotional journey and biases. Florence offers a tightly written narrative that is as fearless as it is balanced, divining into complicated feelings of distrust and isolation while still offering glimmers of friendship and hope. Jenna’s honest voice shines with clarity, portraying a flawed but relatable protagonist whom readers will root for.

This entertaining read is as complex as it is delightful. (Fiction. 9-12)

Twelve-year-old Lulu must care for her little sister when they are left homeless and alone.

The girls’ father disappears one morning from the Chevy Suburban in which he, Lulu, and Selena live. They’ve been in an RV park in Montana since driving up from Texas, where the girls’ mother died after a devastating, financially ruinous illness. For two weeks, Lulu manages to keep up the routine (food bank, laundromat, and picking up Selena from her after-school program), fending off queries about her dad. The narrative focus stays tightly with Lulu’s point of view, her understanding of the world informing her decisions. She’s afraid to ask for help, believing that she and Selena will be separated if anyone finds out about their situation. Lulu, the target of the contempt of some classmates, is befriended by both Jack, a boy who persuades her to try out for the school musical, and the town librarian, who unwittingly provides a refuge. Fox offers a message via Jack when he learns about Lulu’s life: “No one should have to live in a car.” Cranes—paper ones that Lulu sells at the craft booth, she has to determine if his presence is annoying or—possibly worse—welcome. Jenna faces even more surprises as her scholarship article forces her to reexamine her own emotional journey and biases. Florence offers a tightly written narrative that is as fearless as it is balanced, divining into complicated feelings of distrust and isolation while still offering glimmers of friendship and hope. Jenna’s honest voice shines with clarity, portraying a flawed but relatable protagonist whom readers will root for.

This entertaining read is as complex as it is delightful. (Fiction. 9-12)

Twelve-year-old Lulu must care for her little sister when they are left homeless and alone.

The girls’ father disappears one morning from the Chevy Suburban in which he, Lulu, and Selena live. They’ve been in an RV park in Montana since driving up from Texas, where the girls’ mother died after a devastating, financially ruinous illness. For two weeks, Lulu manages to keep up the routine (food bank, laundromat, and picking up Selena from her after-school program), fending off queries about her dad. The narrative focus stays tightly with Lulu’s point of view, her understanding of the world informing her decisions. She’s afraid to ask for help, believing that she and Selena will be separated if anyone finds out about their situation. Lulu, the target of the contempt of some classmates, is befriended by both Jack, a boy who persuades her to try out for the school musical, and the town librarian, who unwittingly provides a refuge. Fox offers a message via Jack when he learns about Lulu’s life: “No one should have to live in a car.” Cranes—paper ones that Lulu sells at the craft booth, she has to determine if his presence is annoying or—possibly worse—welcome. Jenna faces even more surprises as her scholarship article forces her to reexamine her own emotional journey and biases. Florence offers a tightly written narrative that is as fearless as it is balanced, divining into complicated feelings of distrust and isolation while still offering glimmers of friendship and hope. Jenna’s honest voice shines with clarity, portraying a flawed but relatable protagonist whom readers will root for.

This entertaining read is as complex as it is delightful. (Fiction. 9-12)
“Zippy, vibrant, and fun...a delightfully gooey romp for young readers.”

**TOO MUCH SLIME!**

**PUG & PIG AND FRIENDS**

Gallion, Sue Lowell  
Illus. by Wan, Joyce  
Beach Lane/Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)  
$17.99 | Aug. 3, 2021  
978-1-5444-6500-4  
Series: Pug & Pig  

Now that Pug and Pig are fast friends, it’s time to meet some of their other buddies.  

In the yard of their large Victorian house, dog and pig explore and run in circles with their friends Robin and Squirrel (with the latter’s prominent stripe, Chipmunk might be a better name, though their head is fluffy). Cat just watches these shenanigans, waiting for an opportunity to engage in her own fun: surprising Pug. Cat and Pig find this activity wildly amusing, but the other three “do not like surprises at all.” When a thunderstorm suddenly strikes, it’s every friend for themselves. Squirrel and Robin go to their tree nests, Pug and Pig run to their (dog) “house” (which looks like a small version of their Victorian “home”), and Cat, frightened by lightning, gets stuck in a tree. There she remains until clever Pug lures her down with her favorite pastime, which this time amuses all five friends. Not much happens in this outing, and there’s little to no character growth, making this closer in feel to the duo’s first meeting (*Pug Meets Pig*, 2016) than to their shining Halloween moment (*Pug & Pig Trick-or-Treat*, 2017). The simply drawn cartoon scenes with few details and blocks of color keep the focus on the expressive faces and body language of the friends. Cat’s adorned with a collar and flower atop her head, Pig sports a blue shirt with a yellow ruffled collar, and Pug has a bow tie. (This book was reviewed digitally.)  

**Unsatisfying.** (Picture book. 3–6)

**GOING WILD**

Geragotelis, Brittany  
Pixel-Ink (272 pp.)  
$17.99 | Aug. 3, 2021  
978-1-64995-057-8  
Series: The Infamous Frankie Lorde, 2  

A middle school thief feeling trapped in her new life rescues endangered animals with help from a friend.  

Frankie Lorde, former international thief-turned-Connecticut middle schooler, is back for another adventure with her best friend, Ollie, as they take on a local exotic animal ring. While volunteering at a local pet rescue facility over winter break, Frankie and Ollie find out that their last mark, Christian Miles, left behind an illegally owned pet Bengal tiger. Guilt-ridden, as she feels partly responsible for the tiger’s plight, and feeling like a trapped animal herself, Frankie is determined to take down Sam and Emma Brasko—the wealthy celebrity twins who sell exotic pets—while learning that she doesn’t have to change who she is in order to grow in her new environment. Frankie’s first-person journal gives a detailed, almost co-conspiratorial account of her latest heist and her adjustment to life in Greenwich with her police detective uncle. With her snarky comments about contemporary music and references to older pop culture, Frankie often sounds more like an adult than a tween. While not required reading, those who enjoyed the series opener, *Stealing Greenwich* (2020), will better understand references in this entry. The fast pace and facts about the exotic animal trade may hold some readers’ interest. Frankie is White; Ollie is queued as Latinx.  

**A thriller for fans of plot-driven stories.** (Thriller. 11-14)

**TOO MUCH SLIME!**

Gilbert, Frances  
Illus. by Vogel, Vin  
Random House (32 pp.)  
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Jul. 27, 2021  
978-0-593-30357-3  
978-0-593-30358-0 PLB  

What’s to be done when green slime overruns everything?  

A bright green slime takes over in this slapstick picture book with strong visual appeal for readers in preschool through second grade. The vibranche of the slime and the characters who confront it pop against the black-and-white line-drawn backgrounds that evoke the style of the 1960s. As this playful book opens, a Black-presenting sibling team hears a “thwack”—or maybe a “blerb”—on the door, which also displays a small green blob smudged against the window. Against their better judgment, they open the door to the intrusive goo, which immediately takes over their living room, bathtub, and bed. It’s not long before the troublesome gunk has oozed its way into the street and down to soccer practice before barreling through a PTA meeting. As the slime takes over the school’s library, gym, and science lab, the whole diverse community steps in to help. Gilbert’s understated text doesn’t bother trying to explain the origin of the slime, instead reveling in the chaos it creates. Children will love souding out the onomatopoeia, often rendered in an appropriately gloppy hand: “Zlerk! PHLAP! SQUERCH!” Fans of *Billy Bloo Is Stuck in Goo*, by Jennifer Hamburg and illustrated by Ross Burach (2017), or *On Account of the Gum*, by Adam Rex (2020), will enjoy this lively adventure.  

**Zippy, vibrant, and fun...a delightfully gooey romp for young readers.** (Picture book. 3–7)
The First Blade of Sweetgrass

A Native American Story

Greenlaw, Suzanne & Frey, Gabriel
Illus. by Baker, Nancy
Tilbury House (32 pp.)
$18.95 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-88448-760-9

While hunting for summer’s sweetgrass, a young Wabanaki girl learns patience from her grandmother.

It’s Musqon’s first time to gather sweetgrass, and she’s excited. Her grandmother will use what they gather to make baskets she will sell the following summer. As they walk together through the salt marsh, her grandmother explains, “It’s important to remember that we never pick the first blade of sweetgrass we see. If we never pick the first blade, we will never pick the last one,” ensuring the sweetgrass will endure. But in Musqon’s excitement and haste, she pays no attention and grabs the first grasses she finds. With patience and love, Musqon is encouraged to think of how her ancestors had looked for sweet grass. She learns to slow down and identify the different grasses until she recognizes the “sweet hay smell that was in her grandmother’s basket room.” As she considers what she has learned that day, she realizes that “perhaps next summer she could teach her younger sister…to pick sweetgrass.” Greenlaw (Houlton Band of Maliseet) and Frey (Passamaquoddy), a basket maker himself, pen a tender ode to a treasured tradition. Muted illustrations rendered in pastels on brown paper evoke the coastal Maine landscape and fit nicely with the tranquil pace of this lyrical tale.

Quiet text shows how careful observation and the respect of nature can provide unexpected gifts. (authors’ notes, glossary) (Picture book. 3-7)

Mr. Walker Steps Out

Graff, Lisa
Illus. by Jacques, Christophe
Clarion (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 31, 2021
978-1-328-85103-1

Explore the city—safely—with the crosswalk-signal man.

On the corner of Broadway and Main Street lives Mr. Walker, the white crossing signal, who works day and night to help people traverse his street. In Jacques’ sparsely but diversely populated New York City, everyone crosses at the signal, splashes in clean puddles, and enjoys ice cream and leisurely dog walks. One fine day Mr. Walker hangs up his red stop hand and goes for an adventure, freshly adult-sized and complete with a friendly if rudimentary set of facial features. On his staycation, he enjoys all the things he has seen his pedestrians doing: He eats ice cream, chases after a dog, and splashes in pristine puddles under the watchful eye of a White police officer. Spot illustrations of Mr. Walker’s tour of the city depict amusement-park rides, balloons, and a skate park before he admires the sunset over the Brooklyn Bridge in a charming full-page spread. After some tortuous crosswalk heroics away from home, Mr. Walker returns to his corner and, newly appreciative of his role in the grand scheme, settles back into the signal box quite happily. Author Graff weaves a sweet, imaginative story about the little walk-sign man, and Jacques’ illustrations bring him to life in colorful, chalky illustrations. (This book was reviewed digitally)

This un-pedestrian ode to road safety gets the green light. (Picture book. 3-7)

Now You Say Yes

Harley, Bill
Peachtree (384 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 1, 2021
978-1-68263-247-5

Mari is lost.

Her mother has died suddenly, but before she even breaks the news to her 9-year-old brother, Conor, who is on the autism spectrum, she knows they have to get out of there. Mari was in the foster care system before being adopted; her adoptive mother gave birth to Conor, and their dad later left the family. With this history and no one else to turn to, Mari refuses to get thrown back into the system, much less allow Conor to be separated from her. So, she takes her mother’s car and their camping gear, and they leave Los Angeles for their grandmother’s house in Massachusetts even though they haven’t spoken in three years and Mari doesn’t have a license (she’s 15). It’s 2017, and she persuades Conor, an astronomy buff, to comply by promising they will stop in Missouri to see the much-hyped upcoming solar eclipse. During their cross-country trip, they also visit state and national parks, eat a lot of chips, briefly pick up a hitchhiker, grieve, and meet with some genuine kindness. This road-trip story is introspective and revealing, much like the desert highway in the middle of the night. Mari’s perspective is transparent and fragile, completely realistic to her circumstances. Her attitude toward Conor, while fundamentally loving, is not perfect, but it feels honest for a teen sibling in her position. Main characters read as White.

A grand journey measured in both physical and emotional distance. (Fiction. 10-14)

Brayden Speaks Up

Harrington, Brayden
Illus. by Tang, Betty C.
Harper/HarperCollins (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-0-06-309829-9

A young teen with a stutter connects with another member of the same club: then–presidential candidate Joe Biden.
With nearly unwavering positivity Harrington presents in third person his experiences as a 13-year-old who loved to talk even though words sometimes got caught in his mouth. At a campaign meet and greet, he is thrilled by the candidate’s frank admission that as a teenager he too had “bumpy speech.” Feeling “truly understood for the first time,” the author overcomes his nerves to address (via video) the 2020 Democratic National Convention and to speak at the subsequent inauguration. Having realized that his stutter is “one of his greatest strengths,” he closes on a personal note: “So don’t be scared to speak up, speak out, and use your voice. You are amazing just the way you are!” With rare exceptions, Tang depicts him as a wide-eyed, confident-looking lad, whether exchanging smiles with Biden, surrounded by his supportive family (all, like Harrington, White), or chatting with racially diverse groups of friends and classmates. Though packing nowhere near the emotional punch of Jordan Scott and Sydney Smith’s I Talk Like a River (2020), the reassuring tone and message may promote improved self-esteem in readers struggling with speech (or other) difficulties of their own. An afterword offers said readers and their caregivers simple insights and suggestions. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A sunny, affirmative testimonial to the power of positive thinking. (Informational picture book. 6-8)

SONNY SAYS MINE!
Hart, Caryl
Illus. by O’Hara, Zachariah
Bloomsbury (32 pp.)
$15.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-5476-0580-4

A kid finds a toy, becomes smitten with it, and lies about having it.

Sonny’s an orange fox who stands upright and wears a shirt and knit cap. At the playground, Sonny finds a pink toy bunny in a yellow polka-dot dress. “Ooh!” he says, naming it Bun-Bun and playing with it. When a yellow rabbit named Boo in a black-and-red dress arrives in search of “her favorite pink bunny,” the arc turns to deception. Sonny hides the toy and explicitly lies about having it, and urging him to do right. Illustrations feature bold black lines and flat colors in flat spaces; short black dashes depicting the characters’ fur are sharp, unblended, and visually dominant such that every- one appears stubbly.

Valuable only as the most explicit moral lesson. (Picture book. 3-6)

UNRAVELED
Hatch, Leanne
Illus. by the author
Margaret Ferguson/Holiday House (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 17, 2021
978-0-8234-4783-1

Love is a hand-knit baby blanket.

Mama knits a blue blanket for her newborn son, Cole, and boy and blanket become inseparable. The blanket, knitted during Mama’s pregnancy, is a perfect fit and texture for a baby’s touch. And it continues to be a constant companion as the baby grows into a boy, becoming, in turn, a plaything, a hero’s cape, and a makeshift reading cave. Knit garments, alas, do not last forever when so physically loved, and the blanket comes undone, a handful of tightly curled yarn that no longer is a playful friend. Cole returns it to Mama, who is a very dedicated knitter, indeed. At nighttime, she fashions the yarn into a new gift—a sweater—and once more boy, mother, and knitwear “bond.” The colorful, delicate cartoon illustrations depict a round-faced White boy and mother with softly drawn features. The action unfolds in full-page spreads and panels. Observant readers will immediately notice the ever present cat, the third member of the household, who never speaks but always expresses itself quite delightfully. Clearly, the message here is that a baby blanket is the perfect gift, especially from mother to offspring. The response can only be—knitters! Grab your needles!

A sweetly appealing story. (Picture book. 3-5)

THE LEAF THIEF
Hemming, Alice
Illus. by Slater, Nicola
Sourcebooks Jabberwocky (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 1, 2021
978-1-7282-3520-2

A confused squirrel overreacts to the falling autumn leaves.

Relaxing on a tree branch, Squirrel admires the red, gold, and orange leaves. Suddenly Squirrel screams, “One of my leaves is… MISSING!” Searching for the leaf, Squirrel tells Bird, “Some- one stole my leaf!” Spyng Mouse sailing in a leaf sailboat, Squirrel asks if Mouse stole the leaf. Mouse calmly replies in the negative. Bird reminds Squirrel it’s “perfectly normal to lose a leaf or two at this time of year.” Next morning Squirrel panics again, shrieking, “MORE LEAVES HAVE BEEN STOLEN!” Noticing Woodpecker arranging colorful leaves, Squirrel queries, “Are those my leaves?” Woodpecker tells Squirrel, “No.” Again, Bird assures Squirrel that no one’s taking the leaves and that the same thing happened last year, then encourages Squirrel to relax. Too wired to relax despite some yoga and a bath, the next day Squir- rel cries “DISASTER” at the sight of bare branches. Frantic now, Squirrel becomes suspicious upon discovering Bird decorating with multicolored leaves. Is Bird the culprit? In response, Bird shows Squirrel the real Leaf Thief: the wind. Squirrel’s wildly
dramatic, misguided, and hyper possessive reaction to a routine seasonal event becomes a rib-tickling farce through clever use of varying type sizes and weights emphasizing his absurd verbal pronouncements as well as exaggerated, comic facial expressions and body language. Bold colors, arresting perspectives, and intense close-ups enhance Squirrel’s histrionics. Endnotes explain the science behind the phenomenon.

A hilarious autumnal comedy of errors. (Picture book. 4-7)

ALEJANDRIA FIGHTS BACK! / ¡LA LUCHA DE ALEJANDRIA!
Hernández-Linares, Leticia & The Rise-Home Stories Project
Illus. by Liu-Truyillo, Robert
Trans. by España, Carla
Feminist Press (48 pp.)
$16.95 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-1-55861-704-9

When rent increases and eviction notices threaten her barrio, 9-year-old Alejandria organizes her family and friends to fight back.

It’s the start of summer vacation. Walking alongside her abuela Tita in the barrio, Ale comes across a for-sale sign. “There’s a new one every other day,” says Ms. Beatrice from the bakery. The following day Ale sees Julian and his family packing up to move out of their apartment. “My dad said the landlords raised the rent, so we can’t stay here anymore,” says Julian. Then Mami receives a letter with big words like RENT and INCREASE and 30 DAYS. Worried and unable to sleep, Ale recalls Tita’s stories of bravery from Nicaragua and wonders if she can find the strength to push back. With a little encouragement from Tita and Mami, a little research on tenants’ rights, and a little direction from a grassroots group, Ale leads her family, neighbors, and friends to city hall, where the young activist tussles with a quick, didactic message. Sing “to-ge-ther,” commands Ms. Water Buffalo, the din becoming a “zoo” are planning a party. There’s nary a cage, zookeeper, or animal; the “zoo” claim is merely a casual, forgettable premise that explains the wildly diverse animals hanging out together. There are roosters from Portugal, Jamaica, Nigeria, Germany, and China and frogs from North America, Poland, Iran, Korea, Thailand, and Italy. (Origins are conveyed textually.) When everyone tries to plan the party’s “perfect” music (“moosic,” says Mr. Cow from England) by belting their own song, it’s a “cachophany”—animals are “roaring, mooing, yelping, braying, squawking and meowing,” all in their respective languages.

When the cooperative fails to plan the perfect party, Ale tries her own version. She’s ever eaten. The cooperation lessons offer no applicable how-to’s—combining myriad international dishes into one mish-mosh-stew might not really taste superb—but Baum-Owoyele’s cheerful watercolors have a true party feeling. The small trim size overcrowds the animals, but their bright colors and keen-edged shapes, crisp and energetic against the white background, bounce with energy.

Busy, crowded, vibrant—like a party. (Picture book. 5-6)

THE PERFECT PARTY
Jackson, Laurel P.
Illus. by Baum-Owoyele, Hélène
Yeehoo Press (32 pp.)
$12.99 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-1-953458-12-4

Sundry animals with a common goal squabble, shriek, and work it out.

It’s Little Robin’s birthday. The “other animals in the zoo” are planning a party. There’s nary a cage, zookeeper, or

human; the “zoo” claim is merely a casual, forgettable premise that explains the wildly diverse animals hanging out together. There are roosters from Portugal, Jamaica, Nigeria, Germany, and China and frogs from North America, Poland, Iran, Korea, Thailand, and Italy. (Origins are conveyed textually.) When everyone tries to plan the party’s “perfect” music (“moosic,” says Mr. Cow from England) by belting their own song, it’s a “cachophany”—animals are “roaring, mooing, yelping, braying, squawking and meowing,” all in their respective languages.

There is the same problem with food (“foonohhhuuud” says Mr. Owl from the United States): Shouts for curry, phô, egusi, and sadza; an artichoke, a croissant, and sushi fly through the air. Both tussles resolve with a quick, didactic message. Sing “to-ge-ther,” commands Ms. Water Buffalo, the din becoming a “grand melody” under her direction. Accidentally mixing all the foods somehow produces “the tastiest thing” Little Robin’s ever eaten. The cooperation lessons offer no applicable how-to’s—combining myriad international dishes into one mish-mosh-stew might not really taste superb—but Baum-Owoyele’s cheerful watercolors have a true party feeling. The small trim size overcrowds the animals, but their bright colors and keen-edged shapes, crisp and energetic against the white background, bounce with energy.

Busy, crowded, vibrant—like a party. (Picture book. 5-6)

SPACE EXPLORERS
Jackson, Libby
Illus. by Dupond, Léonard
Beyond Words/Aladdin (192 pp.)
$21.99 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-1-53270-764-8

Twenty-five tales of space explorers and exploration from the launch of the space race to an upcoming trip to Mars.

Only that final yarn is speculative, and though most of the rest will be familiar to students of Space Age history, Jackson has found a number of hidden gems to highlight. These include the contributions of engineer Mary Sherman Morgan to the success of the U.S.’s inaugural Explorer 1 mission; how Svetlana Savitskaya and Sally Ride, respectively the second and third women to travel in space, once met in secret; and the story of a major collision that nearly destroyed the Mir space station. Aside from a chapter on space-program fatalities the overall tone is boosterish, and readers wondering if space travel could be in their career plans will definitely find inspiration in the profile of candy chemist Helen Sharman, Britain’s first astronaut, and in the author’s recruitment pitch for prospective International Space Station workers. Dupond’s blocky illustrations add a retro-futurist tone, and if human figures in the art are often too stylized to show racial distinctions, at least the narrative picks up NASA’s laggard decision to accept “people of different genders and ethnicities [from] white men” as trainee astronauts. Closing overviews of up-to-date prospects for commercial space flight and of a hypothetical journey to Mars create a soaring sky’s-the-limit send-off.
“Artful lines and gradations detail features, facial expressions, and hairstyles, defining unique human beings amid a sea of anonymity.”

I AM THE SUBWAY

Technological triumphs get proper nods, but it’s the people-centric focus that boosts this into orbit. (glossary) (Nonfiction. 11-13)

THE PLENTIFUL DARKNESS

Kassner, Heather

Henry Holt (256 pp.)

$16.99 | Aug. 3, 2021

978-1-250-76400-3

Children disappear into a strange world of darkness.

In the town of Warybone, several orphans collect and trade magical moonlight (a power source). Three orphans band together as the “roughhouse boys”—including one tomboy. But 12-year-old Rooney de Barra is still going solo after losing her parents to the feather flu. For Rooney, the only thing worse than her rival roughhouse boys is the growing problem of children disappearing from the streets at night. Until one day it happens to her. Rooney follows Trick Aidan into a strange “splotch of darkness” created by a magician. As the pair fall into the “starless, moonless murk,” they find themselves in a “warped mirror” of the real Warybone. Other stolen children eventually greet them in a forest, singing a creepy tune that ends with the lyrics “There’s no escaping / The plentiful darkness.” As the realm unravels its mysteries, the darkness tightens around them. Can the children escape before they become part of it? Kassner’s latest is deliciously on-brand, featuring inventive magic, lyrical writing, and that just-right creep factor. Third-person narration switches between focusing on Rooney and on the mysterious magician, creating a slow reveal to a painfully tender twist. Vivid descriptions help establish a strong sense of place that feels imaginatively expansive yet forebodingly claustrophobic. With the exception of one secondary character, the majority of the cast reads as White.

Well worth the plunge. (Fantasy. 8-12)

SUNNY DAYS

Kerbel, Deborah

Illus. by Sato, Miki

Pajama Press (24 pp.)

$17.95 | Aug. 24, 2021

978-1-77278-197-7

Young children delight in sun-filled activities throughout spring and summer.

From its bright, wondrous wake-up call to its gentle, gradual goodbye, the sun is a friendly constant, providing warmth, light, and opportunities to explore the outside world. Children are depicted taking part in familiar activities such as reading in an outdoor patch of sunlight, planting seeds, making mud pies, and swimming at the beach. These experiences take place in an urban landscape, grassy yard, farm, and beach with lighthouse in the background. Similar to the text in its companion book,

Snow Days (2020), simple rhyming couplets create a playful, upbeat tone: “Ocean sun: flash and glimmer / Kick and paddle, little swimmer.” A vivid color palette bursting with highly saturated hues pairs well with collage to create richly layered scenes that will capture young readers’ interest. The changing position of the sun and use of embroidery for its rays evoke various moods and signal different times of day in each spread. The use of mixed media allows various textures to jump off the page, giving the book an almost 3-D feel. The multiracial cast of children featured have a diverse mix of skin tones and hair colors.

Radiates joy and the carefree fun of days in the sun. (suggested activities) (Picture book. 2-5)

I AM THE SUBWAY

Kim Hyo-eun

Illus. by the author

Trans. by Smith, Deborah

Scribble (52 pp.)

$18.99 | Aug. 3, 2021

978-1-950354-65-8

A mass-transit vehicle conveys the life of a metropolis from dawn to dusk. In this picture book, a subway train shares intimate stories while ferrying passengers around Seoul. Its mechanical, rhythmic, motion—“ba-dum, ba-dum”—echoes the city’s heartbeat, pulsating through a collective memory and quotidian history. Together, readers encounter myriad travelers and glimpse individual lives: Mr. Wanju rushing to and from work, yearning to be with his daughter; Granny returning from the sea with the morning’s catch to “cook a feast for [her] girls”; Lee Do-young, 29, jobless, “not sure what’s next.” Watercolor washes establish figures and shapes at once suggestive and formalistic; artful lines and gradations detail features, facial expressions, and hairstyles, defining unique human beings amid a sea of anonymity.

A contemplative, poignant rendering of everyday journeys. (Picture book. 5-9)
"A familiar story of house-bound pet rivalry, amiably resolved."

**ORIGINAL CAT, COPY CAT**

*Kurpiel, Sarah*

*Illus. by the author*

*Greenwillow Books (40 pp.)*

*$17.99 | Aug. 3, 2021*

*$978-0-06-294383-5*

Fluffy Pineapple's comfortable feline routine, upended by small, sleek newcomer Kiwi, must adjust to a decidedly new normal.

Metaphorically depicted on a large clock, Pineapple's pre-Kiwi schedule included ample doses of eating, window-watching, sleeping, solitary play, and snuggling with his human. "Kiwi was fast. / Kiwi was LOUD. / Kiwi was exhausting." Kiwi mimics Pineapple, following him everywhere. (Spot illustrations show them eating a houseplant and scratching an armchair, among tamer pursuits.) Kiwi supplants Pineapple in their human's reading chair, too—a scene sure to elicit twinges in any reader who's had to share parental affection. Reaching his limit, Pineapple scares his rival off. Predictably, the ensuing serenity is *too* serene. Once resumed, his "sweet routine had soured....Pineapple started to worry." Locating and then monitoring Kiwi takes Pineapple to new household spots like the attic, where the two gaze out at nesting birds. Newly bonded, the pair eats, naps, and makes mischief together, and a final spread shows them sharing a cozy lap-nap. Kurpiel's pictures, executed in flat pastels anchored with brown and blue-gray, include plenty of fruity touches for readers to spot, from the citrus-slice clock and watermelon planter to a lamp with a pineapple base.

A familiar story of house-bound pet rivalry, amiably resolved. *(Picture book: 3-6)*

**TOMATOES FOR NEELA**

*Lakshmi, Padma*

*Illus. by Martinez-Neal, Juana*

*Viking (40 pp.)*

*$17.99 | Aug. 31, 2021*

*$978-0-593-20270-8*

Neela loves cooking with her mother in their big, warm kitchen, where her grandmother's portrait hangs on the wall.

On Saturday, Neela and Amma go to the green market to buy the vegetable Neela loves cooking best: tomatoes! Together, Neela and Amma make a sauce using a recipe passed down from Paati. As they cook, Neela and her mother dance to the music of omnipresent YummCo—newly, the pair eats, naps, and makes mischief together, and a final spread shows them sharing a cozy lap-nap. Kurpiel's pictures, executed in flat pastels anchored with brown and blue-gray, include plenty of fruity touches for readers to spot, from the citrus-slice clock and watermelon planter to a lamp with a pineapple base.

As a stand-alone work, less than satisfying. *(Science fiction. 6-10)*

preserving the sauce, Neela saves a jar for Paati, who will visit in the winter. Martinez-Neal's warmly textured, beautifully detailed illustrations are the perfect celebration of intergenerational love. Similarly, the gentle text has some lovely emotional moments. However, Lakshmi includes so much information in the narrative that it meanders, which may cause readers to lose hold of its core. Recipes for sauce and chutney, additional tomato facts, a note about farm workers, and a personal note close the book.

A digressive plot gets in the way of this celebration of female relationships. *(Picture book: 3-6)*

**RETURN OF ZOMBERT**

*LaReau, Kara*

*Illus. by Andrews, Ryan*

*Candlewick (160 pp.)*

*$16.99 | Jul. 13, 2021*

*$978-1-5362-0107-9*

*Series: The ZomBert Chronicles*

Bert, the cat Mellie adopted in series opener *Rise of ZomBert* (2020), may not be a zombie...but she's sure he's special.

Former stray Bert has put on weight, and his fur’s filled in in the month that fourth grader Mellie has been taking care of him. With him, she hopes to win the Best Pet Contest at the Lambert Harvest Festival (sponsored by omnipresent YummCo) so she can pay her parents back for Bert's vet bill. Her friend Danny's (kind of) helping with Bert's training while filming the rough-looking feline for a trilogy of ZomBert movies on social media. Bert has his own plan: to rescue all of his former test-subject companions from YummCo's labs. Meanwhile, the Big Boss and lab techs Kari and Greg scheme to get Bert (or Y-91, as they call him) back into the lab for more tests. Whose plans will succeed? Perspectives alternate chapter by chapter among Mellie (related in the first person) and Bert (in a third-person cat voice) and the Yums (third-person bad guy), and the story moves at a nice clip. However, it's less spooky and mysterious than the first installment and has a truncated feel; it's definitely a middle chapter in a longer work, leaving little resolved. As seen in the illustrations, Mellie's family is interracial (she and her mom have brown skin and textured hair, and her dad and younger siblings present White); her friends are racially diverse. Entertaining enough, but young readers might want to wait until the final volume is out before picking up the first.
Sejal, her mother, and her grandmother are planning a trip to Kanyakumari, a city at the southernmost edge of India, where “three oceans meet.”

Sejal and Mommy live in the United States and Pati in Bangalore, so while Sejal has a lot in common with her grandmother, they are also very different. When they are packing for their trip, for example, Sejal packs shorts and T-shirts while her grandmother packs 9-yard saris typical of southern Brahmin households. Sejal speaks mostly English while her grandmother speaks a mix of English, Tamil, and Kannada. On their way to Kanyakumari, Sejal and her family get to experience iconic cities in Tamil Nadu. In the coastal city of Chennai, they eat dosa. In Coimbatore, they visit relatives over tea. In Madurai, they visit one of southern India’s most famous Hindu temples. In between these cities, they stop to sip tender coconut, shop at a typical market, and gaze at the countryside from the windows of a train. These sights are all realized in Sreenivasan’s sunny, affectionate illustrations, and they appear again on a closing map that traces the journey. Finally, they reach Kanyakumari, where they witness three oceans coming together just like three generations of their family. The book’s text is a celebration of intergenerational, border-crossing love, and the analogy between the three oceans and the three female protagonists works well.

A sweet picture book about forming family ties across oceans. (Author’s note, illustrator’s note) (Picture book 3-6)  

ESCAPE TO WITCH CITY
Latimer, E.  
Tundra Books (320 pp.)  
$17.99 | Aug. 3, 2021  
978-1-101-91931-6

In this alternate historical London, anyone with more than 15% witch blood is banished; royals are not exempt. Queen Alexandria, with her sister Isolde by her side, ascended the throne after crushing a witch uprising. Since then, all 13-year-olds have been tested for witch blood. When Prince Edgar and Isolde’s daughter, Emma, are tested, they fail. They, along with two others, Maddie and Eliza, are put on the Witch Express, a train supposedly headed to Scotland. But Eliza informs them that, actually, nooses await them. With assistance from a sympathizer, the foursome escape with instructions to find Witch City. But first, they must traverse the changeable In-Between as they are chased by the murderous queen, a witch hunter, and a monster. Survival depends on using their individual gifts: Maddie’s thought control, Eliza’s fire starting, Edgar’s bird communication, plus Emma’s alarming ability to hear others’ heartbeats—and even stop them. As they untangle the lies they’ve been fed, they uncover terrible secrets about the uprising and its aftermath. The brisk tale, colored with inventive details, is told with a focus on Emma’s perspective. Intrigue, betrayals, and threats of filicide heighten the drama, but it is the awesome possibilities awakened when one embraces one’s powers that lie at the heart of this story. Themes around rewriting history and the oppression of certain groups will invite the contemplation of parallels to the real world. Most characters default to White; Eliza has dark skin and curly hair.

Suspenseful and heartening. (Fantasy. 10-14)  

THE COLLECTORS
Lawrence, Lorien  
Amulet/Abrams (288 pp.)  
$16.99 | Aug. 31, 2021  
978-1-4197-5604-7  
Series: Fright Watch, 2

Return to Goodie Lane for ghostly scares.

After defeating a group of supernaturally senior citizens, eighth graders Parker and Mike are thrust back into their supernatural investigations when five young women move into the neighborhood. The mystery kicks off when the Ladies in White—so named for their monochromatic fashion sense—have an open house for their interior design business and Parker sees one woman’s hand momentarily turn translucent and an object pass through it. When Parker’s friend Lex, normally a fan of brilliantly colored garb, becomes enchanted by the Ladies’ glamour and starts volunteering with their business and dressing like them, Parker fears it’s only a matter of time before she becomes possessed. The plot and spook factor are as translucent as a ghost’s hand, which may leave readers unimpressed by the antagonists and confused by their motivations. A nonsensical final confrontation is brief and will leave horror fans who are expecting something more underwhelmed. A subplot exploring Parker’s challenges as track team co-captain interjects some humanity, but beyond that the characters—mortal and otherwise—are not terribly compelling. The first story, The Stitchers (2020), establishes that Mike is Black and Parker is White; here, names signify that Lex is Latinx.

A horrifyingly boo-ring read. (Horror. 9-11)
NIA AND THE NEW FREE LIBRARY
Lender, Ian
Illus. by Pett, Mark
Chronicle Books (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Jun. 1, 2021
978-1-4521-6686-5

Waiflike Nia convinces Littletown to rebuild its library after a tornado carries it away.

The opening double-page spread mimics an album of photographs, starting with the earthbound library in a horse-and-buggy era and ending years later, with the building spun aloft in a tornado’s funnel. Simple text asserts that the library had been there so long that “people stopped paying attention” and no one noticed when the librarian retired. Townspeople do notice the space left by the tornado; preliminary suggestions for projects are a skyscraper and a parking lot. Nia’s suggestion is met with negative reactions from people who think that libraries are never used and are a waste of money. There is one stumbling moment when readers learn that decidedly young Nia had been checking out books weekly. How long ago had that librarian retired? Nevertheless, text, art, and layout combine to create a tale that is distinctive, whimsical, funny, and a pointed reminder about public libraries’ value. Nia gathers some items in her red skin and wears her hair in a brown pageboy.

A keeper. (author’s note) (Picture book. 4-8)

LEILONG THE LIBRARY BUS
Liu, Julia
Illus. by Lynn, Bei
Trans. by Wang, Helen
Gecko Press (36 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-776573-31-8

Sauropod Leilong loves books and stories, especially about dinosaurs.

Leilong and his friends Maggie, Mo, and Max are headed to the library for storytime, traveling on Leilong’s very large back. There are hints that dinosaurs are not entirely unusual in this city. There is a refueling station that’s specifically for dinosaurs. When he moves too fast, police warn him to slow down. But Leilong is denied entrance to the library because he cannot fit through the door and doesn’t have a library card. So he pokes his head in a window to hear the story. The children enjoy “Little Red Riding Hood,” shouting responses as the librarian reads. Leilong becomes so involved that his shouts shake the entire building, and he is banished for breaking the rules. When all the children leave with him in solidarity, the librarians reconsider and come up with an ingenious plan to share books with everyone. Text and illustrations are perfectly matched here. Via Wang’s smooth translation from Chinese, Liu employs simple, direct third-person narration, enhanced by intriguing dialogue and winning characters. Lynn’s intricate cartoons provide scope and setting and much of the fun as well as thought-provoking details. Humans all have pale skin, and Leilong is gloriously green. Leilong is met variously with laughter, amazement, and quite a few frowns, and the initial reactions at the library indicate that sauropods are not always welcome. Young readers will come to understand an underlying gentle message of recognizing and embracing differences.

Yay for Leilong. (Picture book. 4-8)

MANATEE’S BEST FRIEND
Liu, Sylvia
Scholastic (224 pp.)
$6.99 paper | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-338-66226-9

A Florida girl with crippling shyness must find her voice.

Becca Wong Walker is assigned to work with two other students on a sixth grade science project. She dreads both the expected presentation and working with others. Their group seems so awkward, as it includes extremely shy bookworm Becca; Amelia Carlson, the talkative and confident new girl; and the class’s funny kid, Deion Williams. But bringing them together is their interest in Missy, the manatee who comes to Becca’s dock. To Becca, Missy has been her only friend for a long time—someone she can actually speak to without freezing up or feeling weird and alone. And now Missy has a new calf who is in great danger due to the speedboats and jet skis that run into these gentle creatures. Liu has created an inspiring story with excellent pacing centered on a budding activist finding her voice. Although the three main characters start out as common types, their project changes them. Navigating the dangerous environment of new friendships, Becca’s dread and fear express her palpable social anxiety on top of her worry for the manatees. Will she be strong enough to speak up to her classmates, the town council, and even her own father? Becca’s mother’s side of the family is cued as Chinese; other characters are minimally described.

The struggle to face one’s fears and stand up for one’s values creates a compelling story. (author’s note) (Fiction. 8-12)
“There is acceptance and celebration of differences in the expression of Black masculinity, along with respect for girls and women.”

BLACK BOY JOY

17 Stories Celebrating Black Boyhood

Ed. by Mbalia, Kwame

Delacorte (320 pp.)

978-0-393-37993-6
978-0-393-37994-3 PLB

An anthology spotlights the many ways Black boys find joy as they learn and grow in the world.

Seventeen writers, some very well known—Jason Reynolds, Jerry Craft, Varian Johnson—others representing newer voices, present short pieces that depict Black boys exploring their communities, families, sexuality, and even space and time as they come of age and grow in confidence and understanding. Editor Mbalia contributes a story in three parts that provides a metanarrative that further emphasizes the magic of taking joy in life and in storytelling. While the thematic thread provides a scaffold, each of the stories is independently successful. Readers experience Black boys seeking excellence in, among other things, a debate about superheroes, a baking contest, learning to pilot a plane, skateboarding, and determining the true meanings of fly and cool. There is acceptance and celebration of differences in the expression of Black masculinity, along with respect for girls and women. Reflections of Black culture give the stories richness and texture. There are many examples of strong family connections and community support. Most of the contributions are prose, but the compilation includes a graphic story as well as one in verse. There is variety in tone and style: Some are humorous, some are poignant, but all are compelling reading. The length of the stories makes them ideal for discussion and student responses.

A unique, timely, and necessary read. (about the authors)

(Fiction. 9-12)
A 13-year-old once again rises to face magical challenges. Six months after defeating La Llorona, Paola Santiago is pulled back into the magical world when her vivid dreams return, this time featuring her absent father. Distanced from her best friends, Dante and Emma, Pao feels increasingly isolated and out of place, especially since her mother’s new boyfriend came into the picture and apparently will be moving into their apartment. Alone in her struggles and feeling frustrated, Pao finally jumps into action when Señora Mata, Dante’s grandmother, falls into a magically induced coma after appearing in her dreams and confusing her with Pao’s mother, Maria. Pao and Dante’s enmity continues as they set out, traveling from Arizona up the West Coast, reuniting with an old ally and battling fantasmas. The journey is peppered with conversations about and explanations demonstrating the vulnerability of minority populations around police and in health care. Queer Emma, whose characterization falls a bit flat, is active in their school’s Rainbow Rogues group and feels distant from Pao as her new social circle consists mostly of well-off White kids, in contrast to Latinx Pao’s financial struggles. Additionally, Emma’s zealous sharing of her newfound social justice awareness and efforts to be a White ally sometimes push Pao further away.

An interesting twist uplifts the ending of this second series entry. (Fantasy. 8-13)

**PAOLA SANTIAGO AND THE FOREST OF NIGHTMARES**

*Mejia, Teóbror Kay*

Rick Riordan Presents/Disney (336 pp.)

$16.99 | Aug. 3, 2021

Series: Paola Santiago, 2

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“Youngsters who already know of Dr. Fauci will enjoy hearing about how he came to be the person he is today.”

**DR. FAUCI**

**DR. FAUCI**

*How a Boy From Brooklyn Became America’s Doctor*  

*Mezner, Kate*  

Illus. by *Bye, Alexandra*

Simon & Schuster (48 pp.)

$17.99 | Jun. 29, 2021

978-1-66590-243-4

A new kind of hero!

From early childhood, Anthony Fauci was curious and a problem solver, asking questions about science, sports, and religion, and trying to figure out the answers himself. Clear, straightforward text and appealing illustrations show how he also learned how to get along with almost everyone, from the tough kids on the Brooklyn streets to his father’s pharmacy customers (Anthony delivered prescriptions). By high school, he knew he wanted to be a doctor, and after many years of study, he embarked on a career of medicine and research on infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS and Covid-19, providing information and describing preventative measures throughout the U.S. and around the world. The text emphasizes his skill and knowledge while giving equal time to social-emotional skills, in particular his ability to listen and communicate and his resilience and compassion. Youngsters who already know of Dr. Fauci will enjoy hearing about how he came to be the person he is today while those unfamiliar will glean new information and insight. The end pages include child-appropriate questions and answers on Covid-19 and vaccinations as well as Dr. Fauci’s tips for future scientists: “Keep an open mind. Don’t be afraid to fail. Get excited about discovery. Remember that science is self-correcting. Keep learning.” In scenes from the 1980s to the present, Bye takes care to surround her White protagonists with a racially and ethnically diverse cast.

A satisfying and informative biography of Dr. Fauci that is sure to inspire. (timeline, recommended reading, bibliography, author’s note) (Picture book/biography. 5-10)

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**MONET’S CAT**

*Murray, Lily*

Illus. by *Cameron, Becky*

Random House Studio (32 pp.)

$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Aug. 17, 2021

978-0-593-30614-7 PLB

Chika, a white ceramic cat in Claude Monet’s Giverny house, comes to life and leads the painter on a merry chase through four of his paintings. When Monet taps the cat three times, the frollicsome feline jumps off her green pillow and enters *The Luncheon*. Monet clammers in after her. Taking time to sip milk from a teacup and eat some crusty bread, she saunters through the painted garden just ahead of Monet, escaping by jumping out of this bucolic scene and entering *The Gate Saint-Lazare*. The portly painter finds himself on the ground in this painting, searching for Chika. Kids will spot her amid the crowds, the steam, and the trains, and then find her in a train window, leaving the station. Chika and the painter visit two more paintings, *The Boardwalk on the Beach at Trouville*, and one of his iconic water-lily paintings. The silliness of the rather elderly White man in blue suit and straw hat climbing in and out of paintings and the cat’s amusing interactions with the painted characters and landscapes will keep readers chuckling while they get a taste of the famous French impressionist’s oeuvre. The textured brush strokes of the original oils are in evidence while the artist and his cat are rendered in looser, cartoony illustrations that stand out from the paintings. An afterward provides facts about the actual ceramic cat. For a more detailed look at the painter’s methods, read Barb Rosenstock and Mary GrandPre’s *Morning With Monet* (2021). (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A delightful introduction to a famous artist for young cat fanciers and art lovers alike. (afterword) (Picture book: 5-7)
HOME ALONE
Nascimbeni, Barbara
Illus. by the author
Thames & Hudson (48 pp.)
$14.95 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-0-500-65261-9

What’s a dog to do all day, left home alone?

“FRI-FROU-sweetheart,” aka Frido, a winsome dog whose doting owner gives the dog a pat on the head in the morning before she leaves (presumably for work) and the earnest but misplaced reassurance, “Don’t worry, the day will go by very fast.” Frido, far from devastated at being left home alone, is thrilled. With cheeky aplomb, Frido walks readers through the day. Frido bounces on the bed, takes a peek in the fridge, invites friends over, watches TV (the yoga channel is a favorite), and indulges in many, many other amusing adventures. While the spare narrative delivers dry humor to the story, the lovely stylized illustrations, reminiscent of mid-20th-century modern graphics in both their simple functionality and color palette, really bring it to fruition. Rendered in uncluttered lines and simple shapes on off-white pages, the illustrations are notable for their effective use of negative space and clever overall design that projects action and ambiance with minimal clutter. Frido is drawn in simple lines and a uniform tan/yellow wash coloration, survivors from the age of dinosaurs, animals that have excellent self-defense. There are sharks and fish, insects and worms, birds, crabs, reptiles, amphibians, ocean invertebrates, and even some unusual mammals. They come from land and sea, all over the world. Each amazing creature disguises themselves, those that have unusual eating habits, animals with unusual body parts, animals that can light up, and those that have excellent self-defense. There are sharks and fish, insects and worms, birds, crabs, reptiles, amphibians, ocean invertebrates, and even some unusual mammals. They come from land and sea, all over the world. Each amazing creature is presented on a page with a title of fancy lettering, a portrait, and a paragraph or two of description that usually includes where it might be found. The tone of the text is showmanlike and the language probably difficult for the intended audience to read, but it’s appropriate for performance. These creatures are modestly recognizable in the cartoony illustrations. They sport googly eyes and occasional tattoos, hats and canes, as well as smiles. The Czech publisher focuses on a combination of play and education; this lively presentation, part of their World of Amazement series, does just that for children who enjoy learning about the out-of-the-ordinary. From alligator snapping turtle to yeti crab, featured creatures are listed in an index in the back.

Not, perhaps, a main attraction, but an entertaining sideshow. (Informational picture book: 6-9)

AMAZING ANIMALS OF THE WORLD
Nová, Jana
Illus. by Krutá, Zuzana Dreadka
Albatros Media (40 pp.)
$12.95 | Jul. 27, 2021
978-80-00-05930-3
Series: World of Amazement

A glib huckster presents a pageant of astonishing animal species.

Forty-one astounding animals parade across the author’s imaginary stage, each accompanied by a recitation of its unusual characteristics. These “wonders of Mother Nature” have been grouped into seven chapters: animals with glorious coloration, survivors from the age of dinosaurs, animals that disguise themselves, those that have unusual eating habits, animals with unusual body parts, animals that can light up, and those that have excellent self-defense. There are sharks and fish, insects and worms, birds, crabs, reptiles, amphibians, ocean invertebrates, and even some unusual mammals. They come from land and sea, all over the world. Each amazing creature is presented on a page with a title of fancy lettering, a portrait, and linear, this text is more nuanced and obtuse, likely requiring scaffolding by an adult during the telling. Moreover, while it seems the residents of the city become refugees, their new city so resembles the first as to belie the journey itself and its significance. Illustrations range from a dramatic fish-eye effect to sharp, diagonal lines and dramatic weather changes that fill the page. Joining earth tones with deep jeweled hues of purple and blue, the artwork recalls aspects of Chris Van Allsburg and Shaun Tan; in fact, Tan’s The Arrival (2007) seems an apt pairing. Two spreads of small, black-and-white panels offer a graphic-novel approach to the telling of the grimmer moments in this unusual story.

Visually compelling; narratively obscure. (Picture book: 4-8)
THE GREAT STINK
How Joseph Bazalgette Solved London's Poop Pollution Problem
Raffi Colton
Illus. by Carpenter, Nancy
McElderry (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 31, 2021
978-0-316-50013-5

Unearth the smelly, complicated history of London’s sewage system!

This informative exploration of London’s sanitation history will delight nonfiction fans interested in history, ecology, biography, and more. A brief account of London’s waste-removal system from the 1500s to the 1800s provides context before the book introduces Joseph Bazalgette, the future father of sanitation. Bazalgette’s journey is woven into the multiple cholera epidemics, the incorrect medical information, and the political challenges that defined the age. Backmatter further explains the connection between the London sewage system of the 1800s and the modern world. A bulleted list of information provides additional information about modern systems and suggestions for ways families can reduce water pollution. Keen educators and caregivers will find this a useful tool in lessons about ecology. The watercolor-and-ink illustrations make the most of the text, creating sweeping double-page spreads that depict the teeming city and the grandeur of Bazalgette’s work. The addition of skeletons intermingling with the living population drives home the losses of the epidemics—a message that won’t be lost on modern readers—and the inclusion of a range of skin tones will quietly remind readers that London has been a diverse city for centuries. Bazalgette himself presents White.

Far from stinky. (timeline, author’s note, further reading, selected bibliography) (Informational picture book. 7-12)

ALI CROSS
Like Father, Like Son
Patterson, James
Jimmy Patterson/Little, Brown (304 pp.)
$13.99 | Jun. 28, 2021
978-0-316-50013-5
Series: Ali Cross, 2

Ali Cross sets out to solve another case that hits close to home.

Ali, son of Washington, D.C., detective Alex Cross, returns in a sequel to his 2019 outing that finds him in the thick of things when his crush, Zoe Knight, gets shot in a park. Middle schooler Ali is the closest thing there is to an eyewitness, though he didn’t even see the shooter’s face. Zoe knows who did it but strangely is keeping quiet. Still, Ali’s knack for investigation and his connection to Zoe propel him to pursue the case with the help of friends. Themes of activism, gun violence, and police bias are explored, with various complex sides to the issues being shared by different characters. Ali’s schoolmates become frustrated with the impact of gun violence on Black people and start demanding more accountability from the authorities. Meanwhile, Ali, the son of a homicide detective, finds himself in the middle of arguments about these topics while at times feeling his opinions are dismissed due to his father’s profession. Overall, this is a solid follow-up that shows Ali developing as a sleuth even as he’s a young boy trying to make sense of his world. Important messages regarding social justice are imparted, although the pacing sometimes feels rushed, taking away from the gravitas of certain moments. Overall, however, readers who enjoy stories of young detectives will be pleased. Ali and Zoe are Black.

A fitting, socially conscious sequel. (Mystery. 10-14)

CLAYTON PARKER REALLY REALLY HAS TO PEE
Paul, Cinco
Illus. by Joe, Gladys
Abrams (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-1-4197-4863-9

Clayton Parker really, really, really should’ve tried to pee before getting on the bus for a field trip.

Rhyming text with a sometimes-stumbling singsong cadence recounts how the protagonist, a boy of color, didn’t think he had to pee when he boarded the school bus to go to the zoo. By the time he arrives there with his class, however, he’s desperate. A brief interlude with Dr. Bladder explains: “See, when you drink some juice, let’s say, once it has left your mouth, / it goes down your esophagus and keeps on heading SOUTH. / It passes through your STOMACH and your KIDNEYS and then soon, / it fills your BLADDER up with urine, just like a balloon.” Clayton frantically scrambles around the zoo, encountering various animals and facing myriad obstacles before he finally finds an open restroom where he can relieve himself. There are some humorous moments that the amiable cartoon art attempts to exploit, but the climax veers to an older readership than the preschool/early-elementary crew in its use of simile: “He stepped into the stall and then let nature take its course. / (I’ve heard his flow was like that of a massive Clydesdale horse!).” The moral of the story—that one should try to use the bathroom before going on a trip—is reinforced just in case kids don’t get it. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Not really, really, really a must-have for the potty bookshelf. (Picture book. 4-7)
“Innovative design reinforces the book’s central ideas: that reading and writing go together and that every child is capable of creativity.”

YOU ARE A READER! / YOU ARE A WRITER!

AMELIA EROWAY

Castaway Commander

Peterschmidt, B.C.
Illus. by the author
Graphix/Scholastic (288 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-338-18612-3

A rambunctious young girl does exactly what you’d expect with her father’s airship.

Twelve-year-old Amelia Erroway is not allowed out of her room while her father’s ornithopter is in flight—but try telling her that. She might look the proper Victorian(ish) lady in her sashed dress, but she daringly climbs on the outside of the airship while it’s aloft. Wide views of the craft provide a treat for any steampunk enthusiast; while the Intepwyd Ray is not at all convincingly airworthy, it cuts an elegant, avian figure in the classical fantasy landscape. Of course Amelia rushes to take it off by herself the moment she gets a chance in a bid to prove to her father that she is too ready to become a commander like him. It’s no surprise that she crashes spectacularly, and in the Juniper, a dangerous rainforest, to boot. Luckily, she meets Raston and Fynley, a pair of cute and equally rambunctious brothers with a kindly mom, who are only too happy to help her rebuild her ship and call her commander. With a science-minded trio to cheer for and several labeled diagrams to delight the meticulous, the story telegraphs its young nerds’ success, though Amelia’s final choice still comes as a surprise. The watercolor-style illustrations in intense jewel tones convey a sense of wonder. Amelia and her father are White; the brothers and their mom have brown skin and dark hair.

Adventures galore. (author’s note) (Graphic fantasy. 8-12)

THE NIGHT WILD

Poster, Zoë Ttilley
Illus. by the author
Dial Books (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Jul. 27, 2021
978-0-525-55378-6

A dog nudges her way out the door of her human’s home to investigate the night.

As Dog explores, she encounters and befriends “someone WILD,” illustrated as a wolf or perhaps a coyote. They chase a rabbit together, and when daylight comes, Dog, all tuckered out, falls asleep back home. The striking thing about this story is the unusual black-and-white illustrations that are created using brushed graphite powder, pencil, and erasure on paper. Their soft, atmospheric mood and their design and distribution—full-bleed double-page spreads, single-page bleeds, and, particularly, a few stellar sequences in which multiple iterations of characters denote action—show author/illustrator Poster’s skill in telling a story with pictures. Unfortunately, the story itself has problems. Since the animals—raccoons, a bear, rabbits, the coyote or wolf, among others—are depicted behaving as animals do and not anthropomorphically, the story can’t be interpreted as a fantasy. And to romanticize a scenario in which a small domestic dog encountering a larger, wild canine would have a romp and a bit of friendship is fundamentally misleading. In the real nighttime world, the dog would more likely become the other canine’s dinner, so here’s hoping readers won’t take it into their heads to send their pet dog or cat out into the night to have a lovely adventure. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Unusual and strikingly lovely black-and-white illustrations can’t save a problematic storyline. (Picture book. 4-6)

YOU ARE A READER! / YOU ARE A WRITER!

Prince, April Jones
Illus. by Davenier, Christine
Margaret Ferguson/Holiday House
(40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-8234-4625-4

If you love reading, writing, listening to, or telling stories, then this book is for you!

Learning to read can be challenging—vowels in particular can be confusing—but with enough practice and the right strategies, the narrator assures readers, everyone can learn not only how to read, but also how to enjoy it. The narrator emphasizes that even if books are not for everyone, there are many other exciting reading materials: magazines, recipes, maps, and even labels at museums. Writing, like reading, can be tricky and also requires patience and practice. But, like reading, writing, once mastered, can open up all kinds of creative opportunities, from writing songs or poems to composing slogans or text messages. This cleverly designed picture book is actually two rhyming stories, bound back to back. The stories meet in the middle on a page with text printed in a circle that repeats the mantra that “readers are writers and writers are readers.” This innovative design reinforces the book’s central ideas: that reading and writing go together and that, fundamentally, every child is capable of creativity. While there is no protagonist per se, Davenier’s loose, humorously informal illustrations include diverse characters with varied skin colors, hair textures, and abilities. Taken together, the text and pictures articulate a quirky, inspirational call to creative action that is sure to empower young children to explore the wild world of words.

A cleverly designed, engaging picture book about the joy of text. (Picture book. 3-6)
Very short and scary stories. Twenty different entries, with atmospheric illustrations, create new yet classic-feeling tales for younger readers. Rissi uses a variety of storytelling elements to make a collection that combines a timeless quality with contemporary forms, from a young girl playing an eternal game of hide-and-seek in a cornfield to a deadly chain letter sent via text. While the majority of them are straightforward prose, one story is told through the format of the dialogue of a play pieced together from the memories of audience members after the cast and script disappeared. The attempts at rhyme are less successful. As in any collection, readers will have favorites and ones they skip upon rereading, but the cumulative effect here is successful and consistent. A few (especially one tale about crows and the privileges one gets from being part of a murder) seem to have more allegorical meanings. These are all a scare level appropriate for an upper-elementary audience. And the blunt writing means that the creepy factor is present more in the concepts themselves, which linger in the mind, than the actual telling, which is more matter-of-fact than spine-chilling. The full-page charcoal-style illustrations do provide a sense of ominous eeriness, however. There is a small amount of surface-level diversity among the cast.

Ideal for any younger reader looking for bite-sized horror. (Horror. 7-11)

A child who can’t safely return to in-person schooling learns focus from a well-trained Lakeland terrier.

Despite all his “zoomies” and “wiggles,” Brisket is an excellent Helper Hound. After he was adopted by Luke, a White American man then living in London, Brisket became a medal-winning pup in his obedience drills. Now he and Luke live in America and work in animal-assisted therapy. Wearing his Helper Hounds vest, Brisket demonstrates his focus and attention for Miryam, an immunocompromised child who can’t return to normal school yet. In the illustrations—which depict adults rather like tall children—Miryam and her father, Malik, have pale skin and straight, dark hair. Luke explains to them how the skills that make Brisket excel at obedience drills might also help Miryam with remote schooling. Frequent breaks for Miryam and Brisket to run and play (getting their “20000000es out”) keep this story from becoming a lesson in how a child should behave like an obedient pet. Illustrations of Luke, Miryam, and Malik wearing masks, together with discussion of both children with health concerns and the difficulties of remote schooling, provide value for readers whose early education has been so utterly strange. One major continuity problem and some indifferent prose aside, reading about Miryam’s problems could comfort readers who’ve experienced the strangeness of pandemic school and medical fears. Tips on focusing and further facts about Lakeland terriers follow the story. Series companion *Louis Helps Ajani Fight Racism* publishes simultaneously.

For instructional, therapeutic reading, with a dog narrator as the spoonful of sugar. *(Fiction. 7-9)* *(Louis Helps Ajani Fight Racism: 978-1-64371-086-0, 978-1-64371-087-7 paper)*

A sportswoman who was unstoppable.

Born in 1946 and Deaf from age 2, Kitty O’Neil was an active child from the get-go and went on to become a world-record breaker (holder of the women’s land-speed record and fastest quarter mile in auto history, among others), a stunt performer featured in movies and television, and an athlete who succeeded in a wide array of sports, including boat racing, diving, waterskiing, karate, cycling, skating, and horseback riding. How did she do it? From childhood, she wanted to be “the fastest girl on Earth,” and she continually focused on her goals and practiced while thriving on the breathtaking exhilaration of speed. Though at times a bit unwieldy, the illustrations of the determined White woman in action overall match the enthusiasm of the animated, appealing, and accessible text. A book with a Deaf hero that doesn’t focus on Deafness and a tale of a feminist icon that doesn’t focus on sex, this selection presents O’Neil’s achievements without context; the challenges O’Neil presumably faced as a Deaf and female athlete go unmentioned. In making this decision, the author chose to focus on O’Neil’s accomplishments, which are astounding on their own. While the absence of contextual information is a pity, what’s here is bound to engage and excite readers and may inspire them to discover more about this unique, driven athlete and her love of speed. *(This book was reviewed digitally)*

An energetic portrayal of O’Neil’s accomplishments that excludes historical and social background. *(author’s note, notes, resources)* *(Informational picture book. 4-8)*
As you can see, you don't belong here. I'm sure you understand.”

And for those adults that will be subjected to this book regularly, the supervisor about to be buried in dirt on one page shows Go!

fect weather with a gentle breeze, and imagines being thrilled day. She begins the morning with (precisely) 7 minutes of exercise. At snack time, she eats one slice of pumpernickel bread, two pieces of stinky cheese, and…12 raisins. But one morning, she pleads, she begs. But the rock just sits. Sometimes, plans need to change. Sattler’s expressive vole wears her heart on her sleeve, and watching her come to terms with reality is both instructive and delightful. Readers will cheer her newfound nimbleness. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A little flexibility goes a long way. (Picture book. 3-6)

A delight for the youngest of truck aficionados. Go, dogs. Go! (Picture book. 2-4)

An intrepid vole sets out on an adventure (with a meticulously thought-out plan).

Vole, a squat little nugget with big, bright eyes and wisps of lashes, is very persnickety. She follows the same routine every day. She begins the morning with (precisely) 7 minutes of exercise. At snack time, she eats one slice of pumpernickel bread, two pieces of stinky cheese, and...12 raisins. But one morning, inspired by the vast landscape before her, she decides she wants an adventure. So she slips on her spectacles and draws a map. She plans her snack time exactly halfway through, includes peppers with it: “Excuse me, Rock, I’ve planned this trip very carefully. Nothing will go wrong.” But the rock just sits. Sometimes, plans need to change. Sattler’s expressive vole wears her heart on her sleeve, and watching her come to terms with reality is both instructive and delightful. Readers will cheer her newfound nimbleness. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A little flexibility goes a long way. (Picture book. 3-6)

A reptile cleverly lures his favorite prey.

Bob, a rapacious, lazy alligator, expects birds to fly into his mouth without his lifting a claw. Observing how they home in on seed scattered atop grass, he devises an ingenious idea for enticing feathered types to flock his way: opening a restaurant. By sprinkling birdseed (well-seasoned, so customers will be especially flavorful) on his snout, Bob figures unsuspecting birdies will zoom to “Chez Bob” so he can gobble them up. The first satisfied diner promises to recommend the place; Bob decides to forgo eating him. Soon, the restaurant attracts a global clientele, a new town thrives around it, and Bob becomes a civic-minded entrepreneur. By this point, readers will have noticed a shift in Bob: He hasn’t swallowed any customers, despite ample opportunities and repeated self-reminders to do so. When a storm breaks and Bob invites his winged neighbors to shelter between his jaws, kids might believe the climax has arrived. What happens next proves a devious alligator can change and kindness and friendship can prevail over predaciousness (though Bob expects accolades for being selfless—he is not entirely reformed). Readers will laugh at this funny story, told mostly via Bob’s hilariously self-centered, dryly witty dialogue. He’s a riotous hoot whose nature is shown to develop subtly, and kids will cheer for the heartwarming ending. Appropriately drool illustrations perfectly match the lively shenanigans and depict Bob with a toothy, expressive mug.

This is one to devour. (Picture book. 4-8)

Bertram and Alan are good neighbors and “great friends.” In this British import, brown-skinned, bespectacled Bertram is a tidy minimalist while Alan, a White, wild-haired redhead, prefers a comfortable mess. Bertram acquires Pierre, a cat
with a haughty air, to add warmth to his rather stark home. He provides Pierre with both a fancy cat bed and meals in a fine china bowl, but Pierre spurns them—he even refuses to sit on the elegant sofa. In fact, the cat spends most of the time at Alan’s home, where he eats scraps from an old bowl, naps on an old soft coat, and cuddles next to Alan on his beat-up sofa. Understanding how his friend feels about his cat’s defection, Alan urges him to borrow the coat and the bowl. Pierre now spends his days with Bertram, but evenings are still spent with Alan on his sofa. So generous Alan lends Bertram his sofa, and Alan urges him to borrow the coat and the bowl. Pierre now is well at Bertram’s. But now Alan is uneasy in his changed space. This time it is Bertram who has the generous solution. A wall is demolished, furniture is merged, and the friends join their homes. Smouha writes straightforwardly and empathetically in this tale of a strong friendship between two dissimilar men who respect and care for each other. Text is set within white spaces in Hubbard’s bright, detailed cartoons, which vary among vignettes and single- and double-page spreads. Depicted only in the illustrations and never discussed, race is merely one aspect of the characters’ quirky, eccentric personalities. Readers will cheer the outcome and root for this odd couple’s continued contentment.

Engaging, charming, and tender. (Picture book. 3-8)

WHAT I AM
Srinivasan, Divya
Illus. by the author
Viking (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-593-20401-6

When this book’s unnamed, female, Indian American protagonist is asked, “What are you?” she responds with humor and grace.

She is, in fact, so many different things. For example, she is a daughter, a granddaughter, and a mother (to her stuffed animals). To some people, she is light skinned, while to others, she is dark. In her own eyes, she is a bundle of contradictions. Sometimes she is mean, and other times she is kind. Sometimes she likes being with friends, and other times she likes being alone. All in all, the protagonist decides, she is someone who she—and her family and friends—loves. According to the author’s note, Srinivasan wrote the story in response to a real-life incident in which her sister was asked, “What are you?” at a young age. The book is a gorgeously human answer to this dehumanizing question. The spare, efficient text, a series of declarations, and the inked illustrations are a beautiful tribute to multiple identities and the inked illustrations are a beautiful tribute to multiple identities and the celebration of the contradictory personality traits that make us all who we are. There is humor in some details: When afraid, the child cowers as a thunderstorm rages outside; when brave, she fearlessly (and bloodlessly) rescues a cowering relation from a bug. When she announces her vegetarianism, she’s seen with two friends who are chomping on pepperoni and sausage pizza while she enjoys a slice topped with veggies.

A picture book celebrating the nuances of living with multiple identities. (Picture book. 2-5)

THE GRAVEYARD RIDDLE
Thompson, Lisa
Scholastic (304 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-338-67903-8
Series: Goldfish Boy, 2

Thirteen-year-old Melody Bird faces several challenges in this sequel to Goldfish Boy (2017)—including a real puzzler hiding in a derelict house next to the local cemetery.

In an episode not just driven, but almost entirely populated by vulnerable characters, Melody wholeheartedly buys into the tale spun by notably reticent teenager Hal Vincent that he’s a secret agent using the old house as a stakeout. Why is she so naïve? Perhaps because she needs a little magic; not only has her OCD-afflicted friend Matthew Corbin taken to snubbing her in favor of hyperallergic frenemy Jake Bishop, but her mom has abruptly and secretly decided it’s time to move out of their neighborhood as they can no longer afford to remain there. Melody’s gullibility isn’t all that the author asks readers to swallow; as, without making the scenario sufficiently credible, she supplies Melody with clues that eventually lead to a startling discovery about Hal’s true history. In no time, she has helped Hal access the resources and support he needs, mended fences with Matthew, found a way to stave off the move, and helped save Jake from both a life-threatening anaphylactic reaction and a bullying teacher with major anger issues. By the time the tidy wrap-up rolls around readers may feel more relief than satisfaction. Characters read as White.

Mildly suspenseful but more a whirl of personal issues and interventions. (Mystery. 11-13)

ALLEY CAT RALLY
Trickartt, Ricky
Illus. by the author
Flying Eye Books (40 pp.)
$16.99 | Jul. 6, 2021
978-1-838740-30-6

A cat participates in a race car adventure, earning the respect of her feline friends.

Asta is strolling through an alley at night when a group of cats zooms by in race cars, calling her a “slowpoke.” When she learns about a race on Saturday at Kibble Hill, she gathers her tools and blowtorch and transforms her washing machine into a functional if blocky racing vehicle. After a test drive down Mount Tuna Road, it’s off to the races for four fast-paced spreads. Asta is the first (“by a whisker!”) to cross the finish line. Cat lovers and fans of auto racing, in particular, will get a kick out of seeing the cats’ creatively rendered vehicles: Ludlow drives a melon-shaped car; Marvin steers a motorized shopping cart; and Professor Kim has built an impressive, elaborate cat-shaped vehicle that she controls from inside a bubble
top. There’s much humor in seeing the determined cats, some in racing goggles, fly down the track that loops through town on spreads dominated by vivid oranges, reds, and yellows. Detailed jokes await observant readers, such as the presence of a “Cat-olic Church” on the spread showing the racing map. The book’s abrupt rim shot ending leaves readers wondering if Asta dreamed it all, a resolution that may disappoint some readers who experience a vicarious thrill in Asta’s win.

Start your engines for some energetic fun. (Picture book. 4-10)

ERIK VS. EVERYTHING
Us, Christina
HMH Books (288 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-358-12671-3

The Sheepflattener clan fearlessly follow ancestral Viking traditions set down in the Lore, except for Erik, 9, whose default response to challenges and invitations is to invoke his life philosophy, “AVOID STUFF.”

Sent to help babysit his triplet cousins in Minnesota, Erik’s relieved to escape piano lessons with Mrs. Loathcraft but nervous when the fiercer of his two older sisters, ax-wielding Brunhilde, decides to accompany him. Like his parents, the hearty, outdoors-fancying Minnesota Vikings prove deaf to Erik’s fears. Forced to fish with his bare hands, he’s mauled by a large pike; then Mr. Nubbins, the family pet, activates Erik’s squirrel phobia. Erik’s meltdowns inspire Brunhilde to help him tackle his fears head-on. Determining their scope, she studies strategies to conquer them, like exposure therapy, and implements breathing exercises, supplementing the Lore’s wisdom with the library’s The Big Book of Fear and Sun Tzu’s The Art of War. Seeking a comprehensive picture of Erik’s dizzying array of phobias, Brunhilde constructs an ingenious diorama, using her mapmaking skills and Lego bricks. As the project progresses, Erik finds himself drawn into a multi-activity biking club soon to race Bonebreaker Hill. Unable to empathize with Erik’s anxieties, Brunhilde recognizes they must be vanquished; conquering is a concept the Scandinavian-ancestry-worshipping, rune-tattooed Sheepflatteners embrace. Fond of aggressive sports and a turnip-heavy diet, short on nuance, long on family loyalty, they’re portrayed with sly, affectionate humor. Erik’s anxieties are presented lightly but sensitively.

A quirky delight. (author’s note) (Fiction. 8-12)

SHARKBOT SHALOM
Waldman, Jenna
Illus. by Davey, Sharon
Apples & Honey Press (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Aug. 1, 2021
978-1-68115-567-8

Sharkbot could be any of us.
Anyone who’s ever felt frazzled may identify with the robot shark in this picture book, who has to prepare dinner for seven guests in time for the Jewish Sabbath. The metaphor isn’t even subtle. Sharkbot has a warning light that tells him he’s low on energy. A counter alerts him as his power level plunges from 10 to one, making this a sort of counting book in reverse. He shows his alarm the way, apparently, a robot shark does, with expressions like “Goodness gears” and “Slime of snail and tail of trout!” Readers will find this either endearing or baffling. The language in the book can be quaint and sometimes stilted: “Long strands of kelp he’s braiding through / give challah loaves a greenish hue.” Davey’s drawings are just as eccentric. They’re charmingly askew. Sharkbot’s eyebrows never quite match, and lines that should be parallel often aren’t. But his anxiety feels familiar and accessible. Sharkbot eventually finds a traditional Jewish solution to his problems. Spending the Sabbath with his friends renews him—but an electronic charger also helps. In an afterward, Waldman even says: “Shabbat is a time to ‘recharge our batteries.’” But she suggests a more contemporary method as well, with a list of detailed mindfulness techniques. This is both a universal story and an acquired taste.

A guidebook for those who believe “think like a Jewish robotic shark” is good advice. (Picture book. 5-8)

THE MANY MEANINGS OF MEILAN
Wang, Andrea
Kokila (368 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 17, 2021
978-0-593-11128-4

Twelve-year-old Meilan is a gifted storyteller, but she’s unprepared for the chain of unfortunate events unleashed by a bedtime story she invents.
After her cousin asks how the Golden Phoenix, their Taiwanese American family’s bakery, got its name, Meilan spins an imaginative tale. Before long, there are squabbles over money; the business is sold, and Meilan, her parents, and her recently widowed grandfather are leaving Boston. Moving to mostly White Redbud, Ohio, exposes Meilan to microaggressions that begin when the school principal dubs her “Melanie” after mentioning Disney’s Mulan in reference to her name. Meilan’s alienation and dislocation compel her to reframe her familial narrative using various interpretations of her original name, inspiring the overlay of a Chinese fairy-tale world in which a fox demon, a snake sprite, and a household ghost co-exist with a phoenix, a tree spirit, superstitions, and
adages spelled out in tone-marked Hanyu Pinyin. Meanwhile, Meilan’s red Doc Martens and newfound friends, with whom she weathered a tornado, evoke a quintessential American tale associated with homecoming. The dizzying array of imagery and references reflect this work’s ambitious scope and its not entirely successful attempt to weave together multiple conceits amid explicit efforts to tackle racism as the protagonist makes a new home and finds her chosen family. Unfortunately, the story’s important messages are weakened by haphazard pacing, and readers may struggle to follow the logic of Meilan’s internal monologues.

Underscores the importance of personal stories. (author’s note, glossary, further reading) (Fiction. 8-12)

**OTTILIE COLTER AND THE WITHERING WORLD**

**Williams, Rhiannon**

Hardie Grant Egmont (384 pp.)

$10.99 paper | Aug. 1, 2021

978-1-76050-118-1

Series: The Narroway Trilogy, 3

In the conclusion to the Narroway Trilogy, Ottile faces the culmination of a long plot to destroy the kingdom. After the bone singers’ betrayal and the attack on Fort Richter, the sculkie squad has been elevated to fledgling huntsmen and made into a new order named after historical princess Seika Devil-Slayer. But many of Ottile’s friends are in crisis—cursed Scoot is slowly petrifying dredretches. All the while, Whistler attempts to recruit Ottile, dreams, sleepwalking, and suffering ominous complications are a couple of blink-and-you-miss-them nods to romance; the army out to the Narroway to head off the invasion. The bloody and their puppet master Whistler bring King Varrio Sol and his family history, from Seika to Whistler to Varrio’s own prog- eny, is delved into as it’s intrinsically linked to the monstrous dredretches. All the while, Whistler attempts to recruit Ottile, leaving her struggling with what Whistler’s fondness for her says about herself. Heavy amounts of backstory satisfy readers who have been looking for answers, and various threats and fights keep the physical stakes of the story ever present. While the story’s plot thread weave neatly together for the climax, the conclusion embraces uncertainty in a liberating way. There are a couple of blink-and-you-miss-them nods to romance; the primary relationships are between friends and family. Most characters read as White.

A keenly crafted end to a genuinely fun trilogy. (Fantasy. 10-14)

**IT TOOK TWO WISHES**

**Wyatt, Edwina**

Illus. by Freitas, Irena

Knopf (32 pp.)

$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Jul. 13, 2021

978-0-593-11954-9

978-0-593-11955-6 PLB

Rain ruins a birthday party but leads to the discovery of new friends (furry and otherwise).

With creative views on the passage of time, a child prepares for a birthday party at the park. It took “twelve moons” to get to the big day, and it took “two hours,” “five smudges,” and “half a sandwich / to write the invitations.” Soggy weather spoils the party plans, but while leaving the park, forlorn and disappointed, the child spots a lost dog. Observant readers will have noticed on a previous spread that another child wanders the park, looking for the pet. The birthday child seeks the dog’s owner—even stopping to query some ducks (cue the giggles)—and eventually succeeds. Both families celebrate the birthday (inside), the protagonist noting that “two wishes came true” that day; readers putting their inferencing skills to work will recognize those wishes as a party, despite the rain, and a pet-human reunion. Everyone in the book is depicted as White; the illustrator uses, in a palette dominated by teal, rose, and yellow watercolors, simple black lines to outline people’s bodies, their skin depicted in the negative white space therein. The inventive ways in which the child measures time frames and activities—baking the cake involves not just eggs, but “two mountains” (i.e., the heaps of flour on the table)—may have readers chiming in with their own examples. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Clever and uplifting. (Picture book. 4-9)

**THE GAME MASTER**

**Summer Schooled**

**Zamolo, Matt & Zamolo, Rebecca**

Illus. by Dangor, Chris

Harper/HarperCollins (176 pp.)

$16.99 | Jun. 1, 2021

978-0-06-302507-3

Sixth grade summer school turns into a scary escape room.

The six kids don’t know why they’re the only ones to show up for summer school today, but the empty building is seriously creeping them out. Can they just leave and enjoy the summer day? But something has happened to their class projects: Frankie’s “Leaning Tower of Cheese-a” has vanished, and so has Becca’s heirloom zoetrope, which is her nana’s prize possession. The classroom door slams shut and locks, and a voice over the loudspeaker tells them they need to solve puzzles if they ever want to leave the school or find the zoetrope. They’re herded by clues and shadowy figures around the building, where they’re repeatedly locked into rooms. Their antagonist escalates the challenges...
the more they solve: First it’s just a locked door with a code, then a chaotically furniture-filled gym, and eventually buckets of fake blood. Chapters alternate between the third-person points of view of Becca and Matt, the two White children. The other four kids—Vietnamese American Kylie; brown-skinned, bilingual Miguel (who has two moms); brown-skinned Danny; and nonbinary, brown-skinned Frankie—are just as central to the storyline, and there’s no clear narrative benefit to the alternating perspectives of the two blond children in particular. No questions are answered before the setup for the sequel. Most puzzles aren’t provided, so readers can’t join the solving process, and detail-oriented middle school readers will notice many incorrect details.

**Flimsy puzzles plus unsolved mystery equals unsatisfying.** *(Suspense. 9-11)*

**BASEBALL BABY**
*Adams, Diane*
*Illus. by Obua, Charlene*
*Viking (22 pp.)*
*$7.99 | Jan. 12, 2021*
*Series: Sports Baby Book*

A toddler enjoys a family baseball game and explains baseball basics.

The focus of the first-person narrative is the titular tot, a Black child with short hair wearing a pin-striped shirt and blue baseball cap (those who aren’t Yankee fans may not appreciate the look). The other players, all members of the same Black family, include an older, gray-haired “coach,” a pink-clad kid with hair in a topknot Afro puff, a goatee’d grown-up, and a ponytailed adult. Together they play a robust game of what is actually T-ball—a bit easier for the preschool set to emulate. The action includes practice throws, catching fly balls, batting, and even a home run to finish the game. The narrative consists of gentle rhyming verse, slightly forced to accommodate all the baseball vocabulary: “Up it flies. / The outfield chases. / I drop my bat / and run the bases.” Various critters, including a bird, an earthworm, and a bunny, can be seen cheering on the players. The boldly colored cartoon figures stand out well against the softer, more muted landscapes. The outing ends with the little baseball player tucked into bed, still wearing “my lucky hat.”

**A simple but action-packed story for the littlest ballplayers.** *(Board book. 1-3)*

**GO, TRUCKS, GO!**
*Boswell, Addie*
*Illus. by Mostov, Alexander*
*Little Bigfoot/Sasquatch (22 pp.)*
*$9.99 | Apr. 13, 2021*
*Series: In Motion*

It’s a truck jamboree! Over 40 trucks, some playful, some practical, rumble across the pages of this board book.

Brief, repetitive rhyming sentences describe the action. “Trucks make ditches. / Trucks make hills. / Trucks make highways. / Yikes! No Spills!” Older preschoolers may begin to recognize key words. Fanciful illustrations characterize this diverse trucking world. The monster truck on the cover is painted like a tiger. Another with super-high struts is decorated with flames. Unusual trucks like a weather-tracker vehicle and a space rover are included alongside the expected firetruck and tow truck.

Diversity extends to the people, too. The ice cream truck is staffed by a White woman and a brown-skinned man while the customers include a White man and child, a South Asian woman in a sari with a baby and toddler, and a youngster with a Black mom who uses a wheelchair. The truck drivers defy gender stereotypes as well. The trash truck driver is female, as is the excavator operator. Unfortunately, the pictures are small so these details may not be noticed. Still, truck-obsessed toddlers returning to study this compendium will absorb the multicultural tone. Fewer specialized planes to describe and a subject young children have less direct experience with make *Go, Planes, Go!* published simultaneously, less successful.

**Just enough information for toddlers on the go.** *(Board book. 1-4) (Go, Planes, Go! 978-1-63217-315-7)*

**ANIMAL WORLD**
*Crisp, Lauren*
*Illus. by Elliott, Thomas*
*Tiger Tales (12 pp.)*
*$12.99 | Jan. 19, 2021*
*Series: I Can Learn*

Colorful animals and spinning disks attract young readers to this board book.

Five disks decorated with a different animal symbol on each side spin on a rod embedded in a cutout on the right side of the cover; within, they appear on the left-hand side of each spread. Critters on the disks correspond to the colors introduced in the book but otherwise have no direct relation to the 10 animals introduced within. Each animal is one of the featured hues, with a penguin on a disk and a zebra in the book representing both white and black. Whimsically decorated backgrounds are in related tints. Four-line stanzas describe each animal, with its color named in large black type. Above the spinner is an invitation: “Spin to find!” Adults sharing the book must rotate it to read the question prompts printed up one side of each rectangular cutout. Young children may struggle to catch on to the
game, choosing instead to use the die-cut openings as handles to turn the pages. Strong toddlers may detach the rod, making the rod and disks potential hazards and the “3 & up” publisher’s age designation particularly meaningful. Busy Day (published simultaneously) uses the same format, following a stylized lion and cub through a human child’s typical day. Its spinners depict similarly shaped objects to match to 10 featured shapes. More manipulative toy than book, this novelty might be good for solo sharing or silent play for younger preschoolers fidgeting during nap time.

More fidget toy than learning tool. (Board book: 3-4) (Busy Day: 978-1-68010-671-8)

FEELINGS
Deneux, Xavier
Illus. by the author
Adapt. by Francescelli, Christopher
Chronicle Books (16 pp.)
$15.99 | Mar. 9, 2021
978-1-7972-0379-9
Series: TouchThinkLearn

Evocative, poetic expressions of various emotions wrapped in an innovative tactile package.

It starts with the emotion “joy,” a raised, gloriously yellow die-cut chick cavorting on the left-hand page with a circular die cut serving as both a picture of a shining sun and a recess for the chick to fit into on the right. Though the book’s many raised and indented pieces fit together neatly, they aren’t always exact mirrors of each other—a neat touch. Each double-page spread offers a pair of word clusters, with (in the first one) a joy-inspired word bank first, followed by a second grouping that’s woven loosely together into a poem that actually carries a plot. In “sadness,” which details the “freeze • melt • puddle” demise of a snowman, the die-cut, drippy remains easily communicate the sense of “sob • snuffle • whimper.” Because feelings are so abstract and the vocabulary herein quite high level, with words like grit and cover, this may fly over the heads of the traditional board-book crowd, but perceptive preschoolers should enjoy the challenge of both the poems and the new language. Graphically simple shapes in bold colors are inviting, and some spreads, like one in which two “playful” squirrels caper opposite a teary “left out” friend, tell a perfect visual story. Most of Deneux’s risks pay off, like an angry red crayon accompanied by “exasperated” scribbles, but “surprise,” which confronts a mother duck and two ducklings with a hatching alligator, concludes with an unsettling, conversation-starting “snap!”

An excellent way to broaden children’s preexisting emotional vocabulary. (Board book: 2-6)

THE TOUCH BOOK
Edwards, Nicola
Illus. by Elliott, Thomas
Tiger Tales (22 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 23, 2021
978-1-68010-656-5
Series: My World

In the tradition of Pat the Bunny, this effort offers plenty of opportunity for tactile exploration.

Though it lacks the inventiveness, charm, and nontactile sensory provocations that make Pat the Bunny an enduring classic, this gives little hands plenty to grab, feel, touch, and experience. There are no “Paul and Judy” on hand to emulate, but the die-cut, fizzy handprint in the middle of the thick, cardboard cover makes the book’s intent and methodology clear to its audience. So does the admonition, “Let’s Get Hands-on!” accompanying a photo of a little White child with fingers and palms covered in different colors of paint. The next page lists 10 different textures along with photographs of items that act as examples of each. Featured sensations are “fluffy, crinkly, smooth, bumpy, sticky, spongy, furry, scratchy, [and] soft.” Each texture gets a two-page spread featuring several different items or creatures that feel that way and one large example with a die-cut hole and an embedded tactile element of the corresponding texture. The book features plenty of vocabulary, including three synonyms for each type of texture. There’s a descriptive sentence: “Fluffy things feel light and airy,” for example. Questions add an interactive element, inviting children to explore for themselves: “If you run your finger along something crinkly, what kind of noise does it make?”

A fun, utilitarian vocabulary builder that begs to be picked up and touched. (Board book: 1-4)

HIDE-AND-SEEK WITH LITTLE HIPPO
Elschner, Géraldine
Illus. by Klauss, Anja
Schiffer (14 pp.)
$8.99 | Feb. 28, 2021
978-0-7643-6111-1
Series: First Steps in Art

A baby hippo, based on the ancient Egyptian figurine from the Louvre Museum, plays hide-and-seek with a butterfly in this French import.

The titular calf, with bright blue skin and darker blue markings painted on its body, counts to three to find a spot to hide. Subsequent spreads find the hippo, chameleonlike, adopting the color and texture of yellow sand, red bricks, and green grass. When his mommy, a larger hippo with similar markings, calls him for a bath, the butterfly finds him. Now the butterfly, which is also bright blue, hides in plain sight against the baby hippo’s markings. Simultaneously publishing in the First Steps in Art series, Antoinette the Tree Frog, also by Elschner but illustrated by Xavière Devos, depicts a frog wearing an old-fashioned
bathing costume in artist Claude Monet’s lily pond. A gust of wind carries off Mr. Claude’s straw hat, which Antoinette finds and takes a nap in. The droll narratives are simply told, and the illustrations loosely and effectively evoke the art style each uses as an inspiration. The backmatter of both books describes a bit about the artistic influences and where museum visitors can see the originals. On the back of each book, a reproduction of the original artwork appears.

A playful, child-friendly introduction to a well-known work of art. (Board book. 1-3) (Antoinette the Tree Frog: 978-0-7643-6110-4)

PEEK-A-MOOD
Ferri, Giuliano
Illus. by the author
Minedition (16 pp.)
$11.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-6626-5038-3

Little ones can guess and name some of the more common human emotions. Sweetly rendered primates, outlined in black over colored washes, invite toddlers to engage in a game of peekaboo. With the animals’ hands acting as flaps over their faces, children can open them up to reveal their varied expressions. A simple question prompts children to speculate: “How do you think I feel?” “Do you ever feel like me?” When little ones open up the hands, they can guess by the expression they see what the feeling might be. If they don’t know, their adult reader can help out by reading the answer provided on the animal’s palm: “I’m upset”; “I’m sad.” Each primate is depicted against a white background, thus allowing the answer provided on the animal’s palm: “I’m upset”; “I’m sad.” Each primate is depicted against a white background, thus keeping the focus squarely on the animal and the peekaboo game. The emotions to be explored are: happy, upset, sad, angry, scared, surprised, and silly. When children open the last pair of hands they will find a mirror in which they can see their own reflection. The statement “Show me how you feel!” prompts readers to look and engage with their own feelings.

A simple and delightful board book for many households. 
(Board book. 1-3)

BABY NARWHAL
Finger Puppet Book
Illus. by Huang, Yu-Hsuan
Chronicle Books (12 pp.)
$7.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-77972-0565-6

A narwhal finger puppet accompanies related facts in this compact board book. Similar to predecessor Baby Raccoon (2020), this small and chunky board book offers different toddler-appropriate factoids about its subject, providing exposure to relevant words such as tusk. Little listeners might be surprised to learn that narwhals communicate by clicking and how they hold their breath “for a long time!” Keeping the book short with a simple sentence or two on each page maintains a swift and age-appropriate pace. The finger puppet itself is a cute gimmick, designed more for an adult’s finger than a child’s given the thickness of the book. Aside from having a tusk, the finger puppet doesn’t resemble a real narwhal. Its light blue body and sparkly purple tusk make it more akin to a unicorn than a whale (capitalizing on unicorn popularity, perhaps). This stands in contrast to the book’s otherwise informative, nonfiction tone. The accompanying illustrations are simple, extending a painted body for the protagonist from the puppet on each spread and endowing all the normal characters with googly eyes and smiles. But while this is a nice, informational text for a younger audience with a high-interest animal as its subject, the finger puppet adds little.

It gets credit for the nonfiction content but does not otherwise leap to the front of the pod. (Board book/novelty. 1-3)

A magical eyeful for developing minds and growing bodies. Tummy time is the practice of placing babies on their stomachs to develop strong muscles. Some pediatricians recommend tummy time as a strategy for building the strength to roll and sit while helping to prevent flat spots on the back of the head. Made from rigid tagboard, this pictorial scene folds out accordion-style and includes images of six mythical creatures on one side and a growth chart for measuring up to 5 feet tall (measurements begin at 19 inches at the bottom) on the other side. The unfolded chart can stand on its own on the floor in order to provide stimulating graphics for young babies to ogle during play or tummy time. The mythical-creature theme repeats on both sides, with a unicorn, merfolk, a dragon, and a sleepy hippogriff recurring. The merfolk depicted have several different skin tones ranging from peach to deep brown and white or brown hair. Images are both colorful and whimsical and would integrate well into either a baby’s nursery or an older child’s space.

Simple and visually pleasing. (Novelty. 0-2)
A lunar flyby, with notes on our largest satellite’s origins, phases, and tidal effects enhanced by pop-ups.

As in its predecessor, Pop-Up Earth (2021), paper engineer Charbonnel’s 3-D constructs are showstoppers that make the narrative text and the flat illustrations come off as afterthoughts. Still, though author Jankéliowitch leaves special terms like umbra and penumbra undefined, she does cover lunar basics (including comparisons with select moons orbiting other planets) in simple language. Similarly, if the human faces are White in all but one of illustrator Buxton’s scenes, her maps and diagrammatic views of the moon as it orbits the sun and Earth are clean and easy to understand. As the final spread on the Apollo missions includes no mention of later developments, readers will come away uninformed of current plans for return visits, which is a shame. Still, after taking ganders at the huge planetary collision at the opening, the astronaut waving up through the large clear plastic screen of an antique TV from the moon’s surface at the close, and the spectacular constructs in between, they may well be tempted into the orbit of Elaine Scott’s Our Moon (2016) to find out the full story.

Light on informational payload but a blast for display or demonstration. (Informational pop-up picture book: 7-9)

WHAT A SHIP SEES
A Fold-Out Journey Across the Ocean
Knowles, Laura
Illus. by Mineker, Vivian
Weìbecke Children’s (46 pp.)
$14.95 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-78312-615-6

A small red boat chugs through seas rough and smooth, past fish, floating plastic, and other nautical sights. The voyage, printed on one side of a long, accordion-folded sheet, begins in a crowded harbor, continues past a (rather lush) “desert island” and through a storm, pauses while the crew (one brown-skinned, one pale) nets some floating garbage, then passes icebergs and seals on the way to a new mooring. “This little ship has seen so many things on its travels. Goodbye, ocean! Hello, land!” Expanded explanations of the kinds of ships and boats on view, along with a cutaway look at the red boat’s insides, notes on water safety and the importance of picking up litter, glimpses of select wildlife from gulls to whales, and a taste of nautical flags and terminology fill the overleaf. The animals smile, the two sailors cuddle in a peaceful moment, and, except in the storm scene, the waters in Mineker’s simple, stylized illustrations are glassy smooth, so there’s an overall sense of sunny serenity to the entire outing. The format lends itself equally well to sharing on laps or laying it out on the floor.

An idyllic miniodyssey for young tars and travelers alike. (Informational novelty: 3-9)

HELLO, GARDEN!
Pryor, Katherine
Illus. by Soini, Rose
Schiffer (24 pp.)
$9.99 | May 28, 2021
978-0-7643-6109-8

A gentle board book follows two toddlers through a busy day in a backyard garden.

Two unnamed tots stretch and yawn to greet the sunshine and sunflowers outside the bedroom window. These siblings are light-skinned with curly brown hair while their mother is brown-skinned and their bearded father is even paler than the children. The focus throughout is on the natural wonders this interracial family discovers while tending their garden. Detailed drawings add information. The second spread shows a belowground cross section with ant tunnels and dandelion roots—and one child’s bare feet above. Six four-line stanzas use an abcb rhyme scheme. Rhyming fly with high and seed with weed works nicely, but pea and leaf is a bit of a stretch. What is clear is these big-eyed children’s sense of wonder. They willingly “crunch a green bean. / Snap a pea” and even “pluck some kale.” There is whimsy too. A snail almost as big as one of the children also nibbles on the kale, and a mouse chomping a strawberry underground is not bothered by the earthworms that share the soil with carrots. The story ends as it began, with the two children tucked into beds, just like the fruits and vegetables. “Sun sets. / Flowers close tired eyes. // Young plants rest. / Growing tomorrow’s surprise.”

Just right for little gardeners. (Board book: 1-4)

CAT HAS ONE SHOE
Purcell, Rebecca
Illus. by the author
Tiny Seed (24 pp.)
$7.95 | Feb. 1, 2021
978-1-80036-010-5
Series: Cat and Friends

When Cat’s shoe goes missing, Cat and Bird take a ride to find it.

Purcell’s skateboarding Cat from Cat’s New Hat (2020) is on another adventure with friend Bird, this time looking for Cat’s missing shoe. As the pair skateboard along, they encounter a few possible shoes that turn out to be not quite right until finally finding the match on a monster’s foot. Purcell offers little readers opportunities to notice similarities and differences. Some shoes are the wrong color, others the wrong size (and the wrong
This allows for three fantasy scenarios involving space travel, BETTER! Anticipating instant fame, Zip explains he’ll need an owl and snakes before meeting the monster, which readers and it reads just right. Those highlights aside, the text begins with rhythm and rhyme, but it’s not consistently carried out. Cat’s location is very specifically indicated with cacti, but then that seems irrelevant to the adventure. Cat and Bird encounter an owl and snakes before meeting the monster, which readers have been primed to imagine will be another animal thanks to other context clues. While this surprise is surely part of the silliness, it also feels a bit misplaced. In a break from previous, nongendered titles, here Cat is assigned a masculine pronoun.

Cute enough overall, but Cat’s previous outings are stronger titles for little readers. (Board book 1-3)

Zip, the World’s Greatest Robot, returns, even better than before, with an amazing feature so new even Zip doesn’t know what it does!

Zip, the lovable fire hydrant-shaped robot with an enormous grin and rabbit ear antennae, returns with a brand new, bright-red button on its midsection that’s just begging to be pressed. When Zip’s friend Cat asks him what it does, Zip indulges a bit of presumptuous fantasizing about the luster this modification will bring to its robotic career: “It makes me even BETTER!” Anticipating instant fame, Zip explains he’ll need to wear sunglasses “to hide from my many eager fans.” Returning to the question of functionality, Cat asks again, “What happens if you PRESS the button?” Zip admits, “I do not know.” This allows for three fantasy scenarios involving space travel, time travel (with a dinosaur!), and invisibility before Zip finally breaks the suspense and presses the button. Handily, the button actually activates “<sleep mode> in 10 seconds.” That, of course, makes this an ideal final read at bedtime, concluding with a gentle press of the buttons in the midsections of the Zip fans at home.

A delight—like Zip itself, the art and storyline are clean and simple but also loaded with warmth and personality. (Board book 2-5)

A brief biography of labor leader and civil rights activist Dolores Huerta.

Huerta’s life is presented in simple, short statements—one fact per double-page spread—in both English and Spanish. Some facts need no further elaboration, such as where she grew up or extracurricular activities she enjoyed as a child. The unelaborated statement that “while at school, she faced many troubles. Once, a teacher accused her of not doing her own school work” will leave readers wondering what were her troubles and why her honesty was questioned. The book goes on to tell how she got started as a civil rights activist; her partnering with Cesar Chavez; the grape strike that eventually led to improved working conditions for farmworkers; and the recognition she received for her work in 2011, when she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. And of course, there is a spread with Huerta shouting through a megaphone the now famous slogan “¡Sí se puede! Yes, you can!” It is no easy task to reduce a complex and influential life to just a few statements that can convey the essentials in a meaningful and accessible way to very young readers. The creators have mostly done so, but adult guidance will still be required for concepts such as discrimination (unnamed but indicated), union, and strike.

Sweet, color-saturated illustrations in earthy tones accompany the text. Fittingly, most people depicted have brown skin.

An age-appropriate introduction to a civil rights icon. (Board book 4-6)

Caregiver-child love abounds in this rhyming board book full of animal puns.

One thing’s for certain, there’s plenty of sweet (and groanworthy) sentiments in this book. Rossner writes, “Giving HOGS and kisses / sends me to the moon!” and, “I’m such a lucky DUCK. / You really QUACK me up!” The book progresses entirely in this fashion, with a new animal pair and pun with each page turn. It reads well as a book for a caregiver to share with a lap-sitting child. On that mark, it succeeds in providing plenty of opportunities for giggles and snuggles. That said, at times the meter is forced, making the cadence a bit stilted, and the rhyme is a dubious one. This is an issue for a book that will almost solely be read aloud. Gibson’s illustrations are very charming; the animals and insects with big eyes and expressive faces have high appeal. The
warmth of the animals’ embraces and cuddles translates well from the page, inviting the same snuggles from readers. Decorated eggs appear on each page, and the bunny pair from the cover features prominently. Overall, the concept and message of the book are high interest and age-appropriate, but it doesn’t stand out from the very crowded shelf of “I love you, little one!” books similar to it. Perfectly fine but nothing new. (Board book. 6 mos.-2)

THE PRESIDENCY!
Spiro, Ruth
Illus. by Patrocki, Greg
Charlesbridge (20 pp.)
$8.99 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-62354-235-1
Series: Baby Loves Political Science

In this latest addition to the Baby Loves Political Science series (a spinoff of Baby Loves Science), a toddler discovers the duties of the United States president.

Jumper-wearing Baby, a confident preschooler with light-brown skin and hair pulled back in a bun, learns about leadership with Papa, who has slightly lighter skin than his offspring. Papa’s job running a food pantry is somewhat inexplicably compared to that of the U.S. president, shown here as a woman with silver hair and the same complexion as Baby. The straightforward text explains simple civic concepts in two or three sentences per double-page spread, running through the three branches of government, presidential responsibilities, Cabinet positions, and the electoral process. Diverse representation abounds, with governmental officials of a variety of skin colors; some wear hijabs, turbans, or head scarves, and others use wheelchairs or forearm crutches. Companion title Congress! publishes simultaneously and introduces a different preschooler named Baby to explain the legislative branch of government. This tot and an unidentified caregiver, both with dark-brown skin and curly, brown hair, write their congressperson urging support for environmental protection legislation. In both books, the cartoon art uses subtly textured, vivid colors to illustrate this sunny, optimistic world. As with much of the series, the explanations and scenarios are pitch-perfect for preschoolers but, like Air Force One, will fly over the heads of actual babies.

The “Baby” branding and format may confuse many buyers; these simple civics lessons work best for preschoolers and up. (Board book. 3-5) (Congress!: 978-1-62354-234-4)

NEW HOUSE
Wheeler, Dave
Illus. by the author
Rise x Penguin Workshop (32 pp.)
$9.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-0-593-22492-2

A board book for adults seeking to reassure a toddler about a move to a new house.

The moving truck arrives, and a little blond toddler tumbles out; they’ve arrived at the “new house.” The book goes on to show and name in simple two-word phrases all the new things the protagonist will encounter: “new door”; “new doorstop”; “new dustpan”; “new dirt!”; “new mess!” Readers will see how the new dirt and new mess are getting spread around the “new car,” “new kitchen,” and “new staircase” all the way up and into the “new tub!” Up to this point it’s all sweet and endearing, but then comes “new bedtime.” The illustrations are now done in different shades of dark blue, and the shadows cast by the railing around the toddler’s crib look eerily like prison bars. “New shadows,” “new noises,” and especially “new dark!” are outright scary. Seeking to reassure the toddler that in spite of all the new things in this “new house” the important things have not changed, the text shifts to introduce the “same mommy,” “same daddy,” “same songs,” “same hugs,” “same monkey,” and “same blanky.” Yet even in the next-to-last spread, when the protagonist has now settled down and is back to sleep (“same night-night”), the illustration with its dark colors and jaillike feel does not feel comforting at all. All family members appear White.

There are better ways of reassuring toddlers. (Board book. 2-5)

STRONG PUPPY
Strickland, Tessa
Illus. by Meza, Estelí
Barefoot Books (16 pp.)
$7.99 | Jan. 15, 2021
978-1-64686-159-0
Series: Yoga Tots

A board book that stands out in the surprisingly crowded yoga-for-preschoolers category.

Two puppies (one brown, one white) demonstrate the seven postures that make up a Sun Salutation. Looking like plush toys, the animals model the poses on the left. On the right, a multiracial cast of children display the moves needed to achieve the position. Just like real children, they have different body types and varying degrees of success. Some bend their knees when they reach for their toes; others touch easily. The book can be read at two levels. Uncluttered white backgrounds and brief text are featured on the puppy pages. Opposite, instructions in a lighter type include directions for breathing through the movement. The seven children and two dogs move through a complete half Sun Salutation: from standing, through a forward fold, plank, Downward Dog, and leg lift, then back to standing. The only thing missing is the suggestion to repeat the moves lifting the opposite leg. In Calm Bunny, published simultaneously, a toylike rabbit and snake demonstrate Child Pose and Cobra sequences. Again, longer instructions on the pages with children doing the motions explain when and how to breathe. This attention to breath is a strength of both these simple guides, ensuring that even adults who are not practicing yogis will be able to safely guide the movements.

A good choice to help very young children practice yoga and controlled breathing. (Board book. 2-5) (Calm Bunny: 978-1-64686-158-3)
THE WILD ONES
Azad, Nafiza
McElderry (352 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-5344-8496-2

Belonging to neither the human nor middle worlds, the Wild Ones navigate the magical corridor of the Between.

These women have been victims of violence, exploitation, and betrayal. Paheli, the leader and original Wild One, survived sexual assault engineered by her opportunistic mother. Imbued with special abilities by the stars on their palms, the Wild Ones wander and delight in the magic of old cities, sensory wonders, and the freedom to live their lives while helping and collecting others who have experienced despair. They soon discover a dangerous truth: Tāraana, the Keeper of the Between and the source of their stars, is being targeted by one who wishes to harvest his magic. His death would end their abilities as well as cause the collapse of the Between and magic itself. To intervene, Paheli must face years of trauma and risk her heart.

Azad's lush narrative weaves a digressive story that questions patriarchal notions the world (and time) over. Perspectives shift throughout, from Paheli's voice and origin stories of the Wild Ones told in the first-person to the third-person collective of the Wild Ones. The prose is ornate and often purposely vague while also deliberately focused more on inner turmoil than external plot-driven threats, reinforcing ideas around the internalization of trauma and saving oneself. The internationally diverse cast, mostly people of color, includes queer people.

A powerful feminist account of sisterhood, the longevity of pain, and the reclamation of power. (Fantasy. 14-18)

NO KNOWN ADDRESS
Barwin, Steven
James Lorimer (192 pp.)
$8.99 paper | $27.99 PLB | Aug. 1, 2021
978-1-4594-1554-6
978-1-4594-1557-7 PLB
Series: SideStreets

Sixteen-year-old Tyler couch surfs with friends, but what happens when he’s out of places to go?

Though his life seems great on the outside, Victoria, British Columbia, teen Tyler fears being at home. His father, a respected doctor, has a drinking problem.
The acronym LGBTQ+ (and all its permutations) pulls together a swath of the world’s population who differ dramatically from one another in every way you can imagine—age, race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, culture, disability, language, faith, political beliefs—but share the experience of living outside the mainstream of many societies by virtue of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This broad diversity combined with the relative paucity of titles about queer experiences means that there is sometimes undue pressure on one individual book to represent “everyone”—something that’s clearly an impossibility. What we need are more voices telling more stories. Anyone choosing reading material for young people needs to be sure that the collection or book list they put together provides as broad a range of representation as possible in order to avoid inadvertently pigeonholing people while trying to do exactly the opposite. It is heartening to look at the queer YA releases of 2021 so far and see ever more varied types of protagonists and genres.

Boy Meets Ghoul by Birdie Milano (Pan Macmillan, Jan. 1): This fast-paced and hilarious follow-up to Boy Meets Hamster (2020) offers abundant laughs, something too rarely found in YA. This time, hapless Dylan spends his school holidays at a soccer camp in Manchester, England, and contends with crushes on both Leo and Freddie.

Perfect on Paper by Sophie Gonzales (Wednesday Books, March 9): This rom-com simultaneously entertains and tackles biphobia. Scholarship student Darcy’s secret business involves giving anonymous relationship advice to classmates. She could use some help herself, as she has feelings for both her best friend, Brooke, and the new Australian boy at school.

The Mirror Season by Anna-Marie McLemore (Feiwel & Friends, March 16): Magical realism offers a perfect vehicle for tackling the serious subjects of sexual assault, toxic masculinity, and abuse. Two young people, pansexual Ciela and Lock, the new boy at school, are bound together through trauma but ultimately build something defiantly beautiful through their love.

All Kinds of Other by James Sie (Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins, May 4): This book is moving and intense due to the transphobia that some characters face—even in what should be supportive environments—and its heartwarming romance that includes an underrepresented type of love story, that between cis and trans gay boys.

Off the Record by Camryn Garrett (Knopf, May 18): This riveting novel about a talented student journalist who pushes through anxiety to tell a breaking #MeToo story involving some of Hollywood’s biggest names centers a young queer woman who is figuring out her sexuality, embracing her size, and learning to speak out.

Hani and Ishu’s Guide to Fake Dating by Adiba Jaigirdar (Page Street, May 25): Dublin forms a colorful backdrop for a nuanced coming-of-age story in which two girls who are total opposites fall in love despite themselves. Along the way, they reckon with peer pressure, biphobia, the complexity of immigrant families, and figuring out what feels true.

The Witch King by H.E. Edgmon (Inkyard Press, June 1): This series opener offers all the suspense and imaginative worldbuilding fantasy that fans appreciate along with ample diverse representation, including a trans protagonist, an asexual Native character, body positivity, and more. Readers will resonate with the many themes that reflect contemporary real-world conversations.

The Darkness Outside Us by Eliot Schrefer (Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins, June 1): A dangerous mission to one of Saturn’s moons throws two boys together in this science-fiction adventure. The complex, well-developed story will keep the pages turning as readers learn if the boys succeed and follow their developing feelings for one another.

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
and constantly berates him while his mother is depressed and doesn’t leave her bed. Tyler often spends the night on the couch at his girlfriend Lucy’s house, until her parents decide he's overstayed his welcome. He’s not permitted to sleep at his friend Simon's apartment; the family, for whom money is tight, is not inclined to share their scarce resources with someone they perceive as rich and not in need of help. No one understands the cause of Tyler's food insecurity and hygiene issues. As Tyler works to get through one day at a time, he falls deeper into trouble, but an ultimately hopeful ending redeems his story. The portrayal of Tyler's reluctance to ask for help feels realistic, and his inability to articulate the verbal abuse he endures at home is heartbreaking. With emotional first-person narration and dialogue-heavy prose, this short book will be fodder for reluctant readers. Tyler, his family, and Lucy default to White; Simon is Asian, and there is diversity in the supporting cast.

A thought-provoking problem novel about a teen’s journey to find a safe place to call home. (Fiction. 12-16)

THE DEVIL MAKES THREE
Bovalino, T ori
Page Street (368 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 10, 2021
978-1-64567-235-7

Moody teens summon a demon. Tess Matheson’s summer has not turned out the way she hoped. Instead of practicing her beloved cello, Tess is working in her boarding school’s library, spending sunny Pittsburgh days pulling books for ungrateful faculty members. One of them has a smarmy son: Eliot Birch has been given his father’s borrowing privileges, allowing him to ask Tess to pull as many books as he requires. Eliot, fresh off a flight from visiting his sick mother in Toronto, but unlike with his old team, he isn’t out to anyone. He learned a bit of the craft from his mother and yearns for the right sort of spell to cure her. The answer may lie in one of the forbidden grimoires locked away deep in the library’s stacks. Eliot’s search brings him and Tess into contact with a book-bound demon, a monster willing to do anything it takes to remain free. Eliot and Tess are modestly shaded characters, their introspection gets repetitive. Readers less enamored of biblio-fetishism may duck out before the titular devil makes its appearance and even then, the novel’s interest remains mood and atmosphere rather than plot. Unfortunately, the mood overwhelms and the atmosphere dries out. Tess and Eliot are presumed White.

A well-conceived title poorly executed. (Horror. 14-18)

IN THE SHADOW OF THE FALLEN TOWERS
Brown, Don
James Lorimer (160 pp.)
$8.99 paper | $27.99 PLB | Aug. 1, 2021
978-1-4594-1578-2 PLB
Series: SideStreets

Coccia scores with this gay athlete’s journey.

Tall, husky, blond Cooper is a superstar goalie for his new hockey team in Toronto, but unlike with his old team, he isn’t out to anyone. Things change when he rooms with Pesh, a teammate with dreams of going pro. Pesh makes sure they room together on away games to ensure they have time alone, and as their sexual relationship develops, Pesh insists they are just having fun, no strings attached. Meanwhile, Pesh does everything he can to fit in with the team and continues dating Bobbi, a girl with
ambitions for a sports PR management career. Cooper agrees to keep quiet about his relationship with Pesh while beginning his own friendship with Bobbi that begins to complicate things. As Bobbi also helps Cooper build his online image, she urges him to come out in order to positively influence hockey culture. Witnessing homophobic locker-room exchanges, Cooper weighs the risks of being open about his sexuality, both personally and in the context of the sport he loves—and as his physical relationship with Pesh heats up, he is forced to make some difficult choices. Stinging secrets, betrayals, and steamy attractions fuel this quick-paced addition to the series lineup that will draw in and retain the interest of reluctant readers. Most characters are presumed White; Pesh is Sri Lankan Canadian.

Sweet heat melts the ice, and relationship woes guide growth. (author’s note) (Fiction. 14-18)

PHANTOM HEART
Creagh, Kelly
Viking (528 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 17, 2021
978-0-593-11604-3

Stephanie and her family move into an old mansion rumored to have been put under a curse after a turn-of-the-20th-century rich boy meddled with an Egyptian mummy.

After her young sister complains about strange events, high school student Stephanie befriends Lucas, a geeky, good-looking boy; and meets the other members of SPOoKy, the Scientific Paranormal Organization of Kentucky: Charlotte, Wes, and Patrick. Stephanie learns the history of her new home from Lucas, who attracts her romantic attention, but the usually levelheaded girl is soon drawn to Erik, the handsome phantom who first comes to her in dreams. The story is told in chapters narrated by Stephanie, Lucas, and Zedok, whose identity is initially a source of confusion to Stephanie. Zedok appears wearing different masks, “personified slivers” of his soul, representing states of mind such as Wrath, Madness, and Valor. Meanwhile, until gifted singer Stephanie came along and he could write songs for her, Erik’s dreams were thwarted; he wanted to be a composer but his family expected him to become a doctor. In the gothic horror tradition, Erik’s full background and connection with Zedok are slowly revealed. Romantic dream sequences are lush and swoon-y, but the long, drawn-out battle to end the curse, aided by a celebrity clairvoyant, is tedious, and the constant introduction of Erik’s different personae is confusing. Most characters default to White; Patrick is Black.

The Phantom of the Opera served as inspiration, but this wouldn’t last on Broadway. (Horror. 13-16)

THE DEGREES OF BARLEY LICK
Flanagan, Susan
Running the Goat (248 pp.)
$10.99 paper | Aug. 10, 2021
978-1-988140-16-2

Barley Lick, an avid 16-year-old geocacher, is dealing with a series of daunting issues.

He’s competing in a highly selective, multiday geocaching tournament, using his GPS system and well-honed skills to locate a series of caches hidden around British Columbia. His main competitor is his former—now detested—girlfriend, attractive, smart, and determined Phyllis. Since he’s still grieving the sudden death of his beloved father, it’s not easy to keep his mind in the game. The final—and greatest—challenge is that a policeman Barley’s mother’s been dating taps him to assist in the search for a kidnapped child, Benjamin, since the kidnapper is using geocaches to provide clues to the boy’s location. Chapters periodically offer readers Benjamin’s terrified point of view but never for long enough to establish his personality and maximize the suspense. Phyllis, meanwhile, furious that Barley keeps calling her Syphilis, punches him mightily in the face, breaking his nose—an incident that others shrug off. After Phyllis is mauled by a bear and in danger of bleeding to death, the action abruptly switches to a long flashback that tries to explain their earlier breakup. Readers are not given sufficient clues to work out the identity of the kidnapper; worse, that person’s lack of connection to geocaching makes its extensive use in the story puzzling. Main characters are White by default.

A somewhat rambling tale that will most appeal to fellow geocachers. (Mystery. 12-16)

SEASONS BETWEEN US
Tales of Identities and Memories
Ed. by Forest, Susan & Law, Lucas K.
Laksa Media (362 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 8, 2021
978-1-988140-16-2
Series: Laska Anthology

Stories of how life events, some cyclical, shape identities through time are featured in the latest anthology in the thematically focused speculative-fiction series.

Through soft and hard science fiction, magical realism, folklore, horror, high fantasy, and alternate history, the 20 stories and two poems tackle aging, loss, change, and adaptation. Like the authors and characters, the settings are diverse: Japan, Singapore, India, Tanzania, Wales, Canada, and the U.S. Most stories portray the middle-aged or elderly in conflict with young adults or simply themselves at an earlier age. In C.J. Cheung’s
spare, evocative “Clear Waters,” an elderly man, shaped by loss, feels betrayed when his daughter partners with an android. In Álvaro Zinos-Amaro’s ironic “Sympathétique,” a young man uses his future self to smooth his path and shape his life. A desperate father places his family’s survival in the hands of his teen children in Tyler Keevil’s apocalyptic “Summer of Our Discontent.” In Maria Haskins’ haunting “When Resin Burns to Tar,” a woman struggles to free herself from her dominating, deceased mother. Despite the quality of the writing, this anthology’s guiding motif is too amorphous and general for overall thematic cohesion. While authors’ “notes to my younger self” follow each story, offering various tidbits of life advice, few of the stories center on young adults’ concerns.

Fans of speculative fiction are well served. (mental health and anti-discrimination resources) (Speculative fiction anthology. 16-adult)

CHEER UP!

**Love and Pompoms**

*Frazier, Crystal*  
*Illus. by Wise, Val & Jupiter, Oscar O.*  
*Oni Press (128 pp.)*  
*$14.99 paper | Aug. 10, 2021*  
*978-1-62010-955-7*

Two high school cheerleaders learn from each other while falling for one another.

Annie and Bebe were close until Bebe suddenly became popular, a change that happened to coincide with her gender transition. Now uber-academic, anti-social Annie needs some extracurriculars to beef up her college applications, and Bebe advocates to bring her onto the cheerleading team in the face of universal opposition. Brash, assertive Annie learns teamwork from people-pleasing Bebe, who in exchange learns to stand up for herself. Rather than the coming-out process, the story addresses some of the more subtle, everyday challenges of being transgender, and it tackles these themes simply and sweetly. It shows how being a trans girl can mean constant behavior policing, even from one’s closest friends and family. Bebe’s parents are supportive, but they see transitioning as a luxury that can be taken away: They tell her that she is not a “normal girl,” and they fear to let her out of their sight. The cheerleading squad members use Bebe for progressive points, but they don’t always act like real friends. Even Annie, who wants to stick up for Bebe, projects what she thinks is best for her. The art is cute and expressive, with tons of personality in the characters’ faces and bodies. The supporting cast is diverse not only racially, but in body type and gender expression as well. Annie reads as White; Bebe is cued as Latinx.

*Wholesome and heartwarming. (Graphic fiction. 12-17)*
At a time when the national landscape is being scorched by legislation targeting the civil liberties of transgender youth, *The Passing Playbook* (Dial, June 1) arrives as a welcome balm. The debut novel of Isaac Fitzsimons, a 31-year-old Washington, D.C.–based author who is trans, invites readers to consider a central character who comes of age at a new school after enduring bullying and ostracism. Spencer, a 15-year-old transgender soccer player, continues a journey of self-discovery and making new friends while living with the tension of hiding his trans identity from other students. The narrative winds through the halls of a high school, making its way through struggles that carry universal themes but with elements that are unmistakably emblematic of trans experiences: the politics of passing, safety in bathrooms, coming out, finding love, and participating in activities that evoke joy, such as sports.

Fitzsimons spoke to Kirkus by phone about the book and how the creative process unwittingly reflected both his inner world and LGBTQ+ justice issues that persist. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Tell us how you began foraying into the literary world.**
As a kid I was always into writing, but I never thought it could be a career path. My mom moved recently, and she found a bunch of my old papers. From kindergarten upward, I was writing random stories. Even my report card for kindergarten says that I like to go in on the computer, writing my own stories and drawing my own pictures. I found a whole bunch of really bad stories that I had written as a kid.

It wasn’t until I was in grad school, and I found myself having quite a bit of free time, that I got really interested in the business of publishing and making steps to become a writer. I started reading a lot of young adult books that I missed out on in high school because I was in the upper quarter of courses. I was reading the classics that were assigned, and I didn’t have time to read for pleasure in high school. In grad school, I started writing, and I finished the first draft of the book.

**Were there authors whose works influenced your desire to write young adult fiction?**
Becky Albertalli. I remember reading *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* after I graduated grad school. When I came to the end of it, I wanted more pages.

Also, Angie Thomas. I was reading *The Hate U Give* while I was in the early stages of drafting *The Passing Playbook*. I never really saw myself reflected in books meant for my age group while growing up. And so, at the beginning, it was the first time that I saw more of my experience reflected in books, and that was really impactful because it told me that people want these stories and that these stories are stories that I could tell.
Growing up, did you come across any young adult fiction that centered an LGBTQ+ character or even a trans character?

No, not at all. I mean, I think there were some indie books, but they were more difficult to find, and I was older then. But, you know, from when I was a teenager, I can’t think of any books that I read. There was a middle-grade book that featured a gay character—and he wasn’t a main character. It wasn’t about coming out, it was about kid spies. And so that’s the closest, but definitely never a book that had a character that shared all of my identity.

So you wrote that book, then!

Yeah, I wrote that book [laughs]. But I wasn’t planning on it. It just kind of came together that way.

What inspired you to write it?

One day I was listening to a radio program that traces the history of songs, and they invited people to come on and talk about their experiences with a song and how it impacted their lives. A man came on and spoke about Elvis Presley’s “Can’t Help Falling in Love.” He talked about his experience at a boarding school as a teenager, that when he was in his first year, a second-year boy taught him how to play the Elvis song on guitar. Then later, he played that song for his future wife on their first date.

The story really touched me, and my first thought was, “I really love the story. It’s so beautiful, but it would be better if it were gay.” And that planted a seed.

The Passing Playbook is coming at a time when there’s a wave of anti-trans sports and health care bills targeting youth throughout the nation. And the issue plays out in the book in a similar way.

I couldn’t have imagined that we’d be in the position that we are in now. I thought things would have improved at this point. I started writing the book in 2016. When I was doing research, I looked into transgender kids and people who transitioned as children, because I transitioned in my early 20s. I found Jazz Jennings and her case with being excluded from soccer as a kid, and so her case inspired [the storyline].

But for my book, I really wanted it to be more about healing from the trauma that Spencer, the main character, suffered at his previous school and him gaining the courage to come out and gaining the armor that he needs to go through life as a trans person. And to gain the confidence to gain allies. That’s all going to prepare him for moving forward.

What message do you hope will be conveyed by The Passing Playbook?

You can’t just declare yourself an ally. You have to be active. Ally is a verb. You can’t just declare something—you have to show it actively. And then there’s this idea of radical kindness that takes courage to show, even if at risk. It’s not just passive to be kind. It’s more of that radical kindness of putting yourself out there to improve somebody else’s life.

Derrick Clifton is a contributing writer for NBC News Digital, them, and other publications. The Passing Playbook received a starred review in the April 15, 2021, issue.

The Passing Playbook

ISAAC FITZSIMONS
“A complex and sophisticated thriller with haunting real-world connections.”

THE DEAD AND THE DARK

Gould, Courtney

Wednesday Books (384 pp.)

$18.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-250-76201-6

Logan Ortiz-Woodley’s dads return with her to their rural Oregon hometown, reawakening old tensions alongside a mysterious evil.

Snakebite is an insular ranching community where everything and everyone is reliably, stiffly familiar and normal...on the surface. It was paradise to wealthy Ashley Barton before her boyfriend went missing; now trusted adults are keeping secrets and blaming paranormal investigation show star Brandon, who’s in town scouting locations for the next season. The arrival of Brandon’s co-star and husband, Alejo, and their adopted daughter, Logan, prompts further scrutiny and outright aggression—escalated by the revelation that Brandon and Alejo grew up in Snakebite—and leads Ashley to question her beliefs about her town and herself. Meanwhile, Logan quickly realizes that her family’s ties to Snakebite run far deeper than she thought—and that they’re not just there for ParaSpectors. She’s never been close with Brandon, and Alejo refuses to spill, so Logan reluctantly turns to Ashley for help getting answers. But as the girls get closer to the truth, the pool of suspects increases, and their friendship is tested (as well as the growing attraction between lesbian Logan and questioning Ashley). The paranormal elements—sounds, ghosts, and possession—support and enhance Gould’s broader project of interrogating the racist, homophobic ideology that has festered in Snakebite for years. Most characters are White; brown-skinned, Spanish-speaking, bisexual Alejo is presumably Latinx.

A complex and sophisticated thriller with haunting real-world connections. (Paranormal thriller. 13-18)

EYES OF THE FOREST

Henry, April

Henry Holt (272 pp.)

$17.99 | Aug. 24, 2021
978-1-250-23408-7

When the police do not believe that Portland, Oregon, author R.M. Haldon has been kidnapped, it’s up to his young researcher, Bridget Shepherd, to save him.

Famous fantasy author Haldon, who bears similarities to George R.R. Martin, has been trying to finish the much-anticipated final book in his Swords and Shadows series. What happens when he wakes up trapped in a cabin, chained to a treadmill desk, with some food and water and a note ordering him to write? Communicating via coded messages, he can only hope that Bridget, the 17-year-old high school student who helps him with research, will realize something is wrong. Bridget came into his life at a reading during which she demonstrated her encyclopedic knowledge of his world. Her attachment to the Swords and Shadows books stems from reading them with her mother during the painful years before she died of cancer. Afterward, lonely Bridget had few friends left, and her workaholic father was frequently absent. Now the books allow her to open up to classmate Ajay as she shares with him the fantasy world she loves—but, like the police, Ajay doubts her theory, and Bridget must act alone. The excellent pacing, shifting between the perspectives of the main characters, adds to the suspenseful feeling of a ticking clock, and readers come to understand everyone’s motivations. Apart from Indian American Ajay, main characters are White.

Offers a suspenseful and dastardly plot entwined with fan culture and mystery. (Thriller. 12-18)

REDEMPTOR

Ifueko, Jordan

Amulet/Abrams (336 pp.)

$18.99 | Aug. 17, 2021
978-1-4197-3984-2

Series: Raybearer, 2

Tarisia of Swana learns to navigate life in power while under constant pressure from friends and foes.

Now 17, Tarisia adapts to being the new Empress and High Lady Judge of Aritsar. She hopes to live up to her honorific, Idajo, or the Just, and address economic inequalities that oppress anyone without noble blood. But she must also prepare to journey through the Underworld after offering herself as the last Redemptor child sacrifice to the abiku—demons—who dwell there. The abiku promise to forfeit future sacrifices if Tarisia makes it out alive, but she didn’t factor in the weight and trauma of being haunted by undead children holding her accountable for their justice. The book, infused with West African influences, blossoms at

An inspiring, powerful tale of belonging. (Paranormal. 14-18)
a perfect pace as readers travel around the continental empire both physically with Tarisai and through the memories of others, learning more about the lush world Ifueko has crafted. New magical beings are awakened and their connections to nature and the survival of the people around Arirts are explored with an emphasis on contemporary social issues of eco-justice seamlessly threaded through. This book is more reflective than the first volume, supporting insightful glimpses into the maturation of not just Tarisai, but other characters too; still, the action never lags, with the story remaining bright and exciting.

A strong and worthy successor that showcases the skill of a master worldbuilder. (map) (Fantasy. 14-18)

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STAR WARS THE HIGH REPUBLIC
Out of the Shadows
Ireland, Justina
Disney Lucasfilm (352 pp.)
$17.99 | Jul. 27, 2021
978-1-368-06065-3

As the dastardly Nihil inflict turmoil and bloodshed in the Outer Rim, the Republic and Jedi Order scramble to eliminate the space pirates and bring peace to the galaxy.

Rumors abound of ships forced out of hyperspace into realspace and then disappearing; the Nihil threat, it seems, is growing bolder and fiercer. Following the mysterious death of her mother, 18-year-old Sylvestri Yarrow is struggling to survive as a hauler. Then the Nihil launch a sudden attack on her ship in the Berenge sector, a rarely traveled part of space. Fleeing to Coruscant to alert the Republic, Syl falls into a political
Their debut YA novel, the story of a queer Mexican American teen, balances hard truths with hope

BY ANA GRilo

Jonny Garza Villa’s debut YA novel, Fifteen Hundred Miles From the Sun (Skyscape, June 8), celebrates the many facets of love as it follows Mexican American Julián “Jules” Luna during his senior year of high school in Texas. Closeted Jules grapples with his sexuality under his homophobic father’s crushing physical and mental abuse, but after a drunken night leads to his coming out on Twitter, Jules finds love and support from his close group of friends, his oldest sister, and his online crush, Mat, an LA–based Vietnamese American. Garza Villa spoke to me via Zoom from their home in Texas about the book’s gloriously cute romance between Mat and Jules and the story’s balance of tenderness and pain. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Your novel is a beautiful exploration of happiness and love in many forms, especially Jules’ found family of friends.

It was a very early decision of thinking back to when I was in high school and growing up in a very small town in Texas. In my own experience, I honestly can’t say that my own friend group would have reacted the same way [or] that I would have had that support or, at least minimally, some empathy, had I come out then. I knew I didn’t want Jules to be surrounded by people like that. I wanted a group of friends who were loving and protective, and I also just wanted moments where they were all together being normal teenagers as well as those intimate, one-on-one moments. That’s where we really get the most insight as to who each of them are as characters, and I really had a lot of fun doing those specifically. And contrasting that with his dad.

You highlight the difficult dynamics between Jules and his dad and how much Jules struggles with loving his dad, despite everything.

A big problem I have with a lot of the “It Gets Better” type of media is that it never really considers how hard the world might be—and remain being—even as we let ourselves be [who we are]. Those relationships that are potentially harmful don’t just stop. I wanted to be real about the complexities of being abused and trying hard to see the bright side of people who are supposed to love us. There are those moments where Jules can see that his dad loves him even though there are moments where it’s the opposite. In this story, Jules loves his dad, but it was essential to show him learning how to prioritize himself. On the other hand, I felt it was important to show that this machismo culture that his dad kind of lives by isn’t something that everyone embraces, which is why it was vital to have other male intergenerational characters be so supportive of Jules. One of my inspirations is the Netflix TV show One Day at a Time, about a close-knit Latinx family with a queer teen girl who comes out to her very religious grandmother (played by the amazing Rita Moreno) to be embraced and supported.
Going back to the happiness: The romance between Jules and Mat is romantic, cute, and sexy. How important was it for you to represent that kind of positive relationship?

Through the whole process of getting this book out, I have been pretty resolute about Mat and their relationship being the unquestionably good thing in Jules’ life without any major drama. I also wanted to keep in mind the complexities of long-distance relationships. But I did want it to be cute and as unproblematic as it possibly could. A lot of it stems from [their] being so open to hearing each other out, and it comes from where Jules mentions how Mat’s always known him as his most authentic self. The two of them together are just incredibly perfect, and I wanted to let that take me as far as I could.

The way things flow so well between them is also because of Mat’s background and his own vastly positive experience with coming out and being accepted.

Mat [has] queer siblings and queer friends and a much more open process of coming out than Jules. [It’s] having this person who comes in with so much knowledge but also empathy, because Mat’s very much an empathetic person who understands where Jules is in his own journey.

You also examine the intersection of Jules’ different identities as a gay, brown-skinned Texan who happens to be a vegetarian who loves to cook.

I wanted to make sure I did justice to the beauty of all of those identities, and being able to do it in ways like incorporating Spanish in the book, and the Selena references, and letting him fall in love with a boy for the first time. It helped encompass all those things while also identifying the unique hardships that being all these things at once brings. The question that really inspired this book is what a character’s journey would look like if he was a brown Mexican gay kid in South Texas. His journey wouldn’t be, and isn’t, the same as all the predominantly White stories that come to mind. With cooking, it did take me a minute to realize how important food and cooking [are] to Jules. It’s his way of remembering a grandmother he doesn’t have anymore, and it’s his therapy, his ability to not think about all the bad things for a while, as much as it’s something he does to keep himself alive with a dad who works literally all day most days.

There is a great scene where Jules bonds with Mat’s mom while they cook a meal.

It is an important moment for Jules, where he gets to cook with this motherly figure for the first time in years since his grandmother passed away and with an actual mother—albeit not his own—for maybe the first time in his entire life, to get to share something significant to her and how meaningful that was to him.

This is your debut novel. What’s been your experience so far, writing YA as an openly queer author?

It’s just been an incredibly exciting experience and so beautiful, especially considering all the other writers and bookish people who’ve become friends. I get to share this space with all the queer readers—and especially the young, queer, Latinx and Chicano readers—who’ve expressed how much happiness they have about this story coming out and how excited they are over this book, because ultimately it’s for them. I love hearing how ready they are for this because I’m just as ready to share it with them. Queer writers talk about getting to write the books that they wanted when they were younger. I don’t necessarily think of it as getting to write the stories I wish I had when I was younger, because I probably still would not have been in a safe space to even read them. I like to think of it as this is me telling 17-year-old Jonny, “Hey, we made it, look where we are now.” And hopefully that resonates [with] those who know what it is like to be Jules, who will be able to find some comfort and love from this story.

Ana Grilo is co-editor of the Hugo Award–winning blog The Book Smugglers and co-host of the Fangirl Happy Hour podcast. Fifteen Hundred Miles From the Sun received a starred review in the May 15, 2021, issue.
Field Hockey Championship, garner the attention of college Latinx and Liv as Chinese American. Order's involvement with the Republic in its campaign against fate, and raises awareness about toxic masculinity and rape culture. The exploration of Zoe's post-assault behavior is thoughtful and believable, particularly how she distances her self from a crush, fixates on saving other girls from the same predators, and late-night expeditions to rescue girls from would-be abusers at parties. The author's frequent use of curse-word stand-ins—fuckey, focking, and absofuckinglately—come to feel distracting and corny with repetition. Zoe is White; their names cue Ava as queer characters, including Ellis' older nonbinary sibling, Quinn, are crucial to the Nihil's hyperspace disruptions. The whole ordeal pulls a quartet of Jedi into the mix: Jedi Master Cohmac Vitus; his Padawan, Reath Silas; Jedi Knight Vernestra Rwoh; and her Padawan, Imri Cantaros. Meanwhile, concerns over the Order's involvement with the Republic in its campaign against the Nihil plague the four Jedi. Containing a dizzying number of overarching storylines and characters, this latest installment set in the High Republic era nonetheless excels, with enough political intrigue and intricate thrills once it yanks its disparate threads together. Per usual, Ireland's firm grasp of this universe keeps it all from running amok.

An essential tome for die-hard Star Wars fans, although others will find much to enjoy. (timeline) (Science fiction. 12-18)

**DANGEROUS PLAY**

*Kress, Emma*

Roaring Brook (352 pp.)

$17.99 | Aug. 3, 2021

978-1-250-75048-8

A field hockey captain guides her tightknit team in secret missions to save girls from predatory boys. In this contemporary feminist debut, Zoe Alamandar is a disciplined, goal-oriented team captain with an ambitious plan for her junior year: lead her team to the New York State Field Hockey Championship, garner the attention of college scouts, and earn a scholarship to UNC Chapel Hill, which has a top-ranked team. Zoe; her co-captain, Ava; and their hand-picked team are off to a strong start when Zoe is sexually assaulted at a football player’s alcohol-fueled party. At first, Zoe doesn’t tell Liv, her best friend and teammate—and she doesn’t want to burden her parents, who are dealing with her father’s chronic pain from a serious accident. Instead, she channels her confusion, hurt, and anger into the team’s parkour sessions and late-night expeditions to rescue girls from would-be abusers at parties. The exploration of Zoe’s post-assault behavior is thoughtful and believable, particularly how she distances herself from a crush, fixates on saving other girls from the same fate, and raises awareness about toxic masculinity and rape culture. The author’s frequent use of curse-word stand-ins—fockey, focking, and absofuckinglately—come to feel distracting and corny with repetition. Zoe is White; their names cue Ava as Latinx and Liv as Chinese American.

A timely and absorbing character study of a sexual assault survivor. (author’s note) (Fiction. 14-18)

**A LESSON IN VENGEANCE**

*Lee, Victoria*

Delacorte (284 pp.)


978-0-593-17740-2 PLB

A young woman’s return to her monetied boarding school is haunted by the trauma of her girlfriend’s recent death and the school’s rumored history involving witchcraft in this contemporary thriller. Felicity Morrow’s senior year was cut short after her girlfriend Alex died, and her decision to return to the Dalloway School because “being friendless at Dalloway was better than being friendless anywhere else” makes clear her feelings of isolation. It’s seemingly inevitable that she’ll be drawn into the orbit of infamous new student Ellis Haley who, despite her young age, has already written a Pulitzer-winning novel. Amid a fantastical, darkly atmospheric haze of cigarette smoke and hard alcohol, Felicity agrees to assist Ellis in her research about the Dalloway Five, girls whose gruesome deaths centuries earlier at the school are shrouded in mystery and who were the subject of her own abandoned senior thesis. Richly imagined queer characters, including Ellis’ older nonbinary sibling, Quinn, are the stars of this story, which incrementally reveals truths about Alex’s death as it winds the bond between Felicity and Ellis ever tighter, spinning a tale rife with literary references, magnetic romance, and occasionally melodramatic but menacing gothic tropes out to its end. The protagonists are cued White; there is ethnic diversity in secondary and background characters.

A layered, stylized, brooding mystery that will draw readers in. (Thriller. 14-18)

**BAD WITCH BURNING**

*Lewis, Jessica*

Delacorte (368 pp.)

$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Aug. 24, 2021

978-0-593-17738-9

978-0-593-30584-3 PLB

Desperate for money, a teen uses her superpowers to connect with the dead. Katrell Davis can talk to the dead. She doesn’t know why or even how her powers work, but for a small fee, clients pay her to communicate with their deceased loved ones. When she accidentally brings her dog back from the dead, everything changes. Understanding that a live body is worth a lot more than a ghost—and she might not have to worry anymore about the bills each week—Katrell moves forward with this lucrative new business even as each resurrection makes her sicker than the last. When bad things start happening and she attracts the attention of some dangerous people, she must decide whether the money is worth it. There are pacing challenges toward the
end as the narrative stalls due to some repetition, but the character development is outstanding, and each character is drawn in a way that evokes a reaction—even if it is anger or disgust. The positioning of school as a hindrance to earning money for daily survival expertly shines light on the experiences of people facing food insecurity. The exploration of foster care and related fears around the ramifications of entering the system are well written, with just enough information to cultivate understanding without overexposing young readers to trauma. Primary characters are Black.

A gripping, supernatural twist on the no-win decisions created by the cycle of poverty. (Paranormal. 13-18)

BROWN BOY NOWHERE
Lim, Sheeryl
Skyscape (334 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 1, 2021
978-1-5420-2776-2

Angelo is livid that his parents have uprooted their lives in San Diego to drive across the country to small-town, landlocked Ocean Pointe to take over Sloppy's Pit Stop, a greasy spoon. Leaving behind his girlfriend, Amanda; best friend, Mackabi; the ethnic diversity of San Diego; and a lot of his favorite foods, 16-year-old Filipino American Angelo Rivera starts off his junior year of high school with a plan to save up money flipping burgers at Sloppy's. He's saving up for a plane ticket to compete in the Streetsgiving skateboarding competition in San Diego in November—and he has a secret plan to try to finish high school there, living with his cool Tita Marie. When football jocks bully him on his first day in Ocean Pointe, calling him by the derogatory label brown boy, Angelo has even less confidence that he can be happy in this town. Lim's straightforward narrative follows Angelo on his journey through friendship, love, and acclimating to a new home. For anyone who has felt unjustly uprooted, Angelo's story can provide comforting reassurance that one can re-create home and community wherever they are. Readers seeking a predictable story with a happy ending straight out of a Disney movie will be satisfied; those looking for more depth and nuance should look elsewhere. Most of the population of Ocean Pointe is presumed White.

A light read that celebrates inclusion. (Fiction. 13-18)

ASHFALL LEGACY
Lore, Pittacus
Harper/HarperCollins (432 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 17, 2021
978-0-06-284536-8

A half alien teenager sets out for the stars in search of his missing dad.

In what rapidly devolves into a jumble of well-worn science-fiction tropes and typecast settings glued together by adolescent behavior and muddy thinking, the story follows 16-year-old Sydney, who has been on the lam with his gun-toting default-White human mom for 10 years. Syd meets and agrees to join his alien uncle on a training voyage to planet Denza, where he can take classes at the local star fleet academy and find his father, who vanished on an exploratory voyage years before. Syd discovers that all humans become super strong and super tough when they leave Earth—but die when they return. Might his father have come upon a cure hidden among the relics of a...wait for it...mysterious race of vanished galactic overlords? In his typically unsubtle way, the pseudonymous Lore chucks discrimination into the mix too—being a "murt," as one hostile shipmate put it, Syd gets a decidedly mixed reception from the specist Denzans, and a fellow hybrid angrily informs him that she identifies as human. Before arbitrarily cutting off midway through, the climax collapses into a glutinous mass of revelations including the fate of Syd's father and the nature of the aforementioned overlords. Oh, and there are space monsters and a magic ring.

A derivative mess. (Science fiction. 14-17)

LIKE OTHER GIRLS
Lundin, Britta
Freeform/Disney (384 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-368-03992-5

Closed Mara Deeble, who's always been one of the guys, confronts her own internalized misogyny after she joins her high school's football team and four other girls follow suit.

In rural Elkhorn, Oregon, life revolves around ranching, church, and sports—but Mara's aggression got her kicked off the basketball team last winter, and Coach Joyce won't let her rejoin without proof that she can play a team sport without fighting. She's certainly not trying to make a feminist statement when she joins her quarterback brother on the football team, but after her intense, out-and-proud lesbian arch nemesis, Carly Nakata; her gorgeous, tomboyish crush, Valentina Cortez; and two more girls join too, claiming Mara inspired them, everyone's talking about gender—and holding Mara to standards she's uninterested in meeting. Mara is refreshingly, authentically imperfect: judgmental, insipid, and terrified of being vulnerable yet desperate to be understood. While the
Elkhorn Five face open resentment and harassment from the male players, it's Mara's mother’s perplexed disappointment that's especially piercing. Thankfully, Mara finds a kindred spirit in Jupiter, an unapologetically butch farmer who is new to town and whose presence feels like “a nice long exhale.” Jupiter offers Mara—and readers—new perspectives on gender presentation and sexuality. Most characters appear White; several are cued as Latinx, and Carly is biracial (Asian/White). Readers need not like (or understand) football to wholeheartedly cheer for the Elkhorn Five.

Fiercely charming and achingly relatable—a glorious, empowering touchdown. (Fiction. 12-18)

OPEN SECRETS
Manuel, Jennifer
James Lorimer (160 pp.)
$8.99 paper | $27.99 PLB | Aug. 1, 2021
978-1-4594-1588-1
978-1-4594-1590-4 PLB
Series: SideStreets

Guitarist Ana “Shadow” Santos dreams of a music career, but when an amazing opportunity presents itself, how far will she be willing to go to achieve her goal of stardom?

To 17-year-old Ana, music is everything. She has an innovative style, a strong message, and the drive to see her dreams come true. When Gill Daring, a local club owner and mover and shaker, takes her under his wing, she is thrilled with the opportunities it brings. She and her band play regular live shows every Friday night and have a growing fan following. Gill seems truly fond of her and eager to help her get her big break, but he pulls her away from her friends and band mates and even out of school. He also encourages her to keep secrets about their time together. Meanwhile, others try to warn her that Gill may not be the good guy he presents himself to be rather a master manipulator, grooming Ana for more than her shot at stardom. Though the story is engaging for reluctant readers, the way red flags and warning signs of predatory behavior are woven through the narrative is its greatest strength. The subjects presented will educate and inform many readers on an important topic; it’s a shame no resources are included for those seeking support or information. Ana is cued as Mexican Canadian; other main characters read as White.

An absorbing #MeToo story that will increase awareness. (Fiction. 14-18)

LIKE A LOVE SONG
Martins, Gabriela
Underlined (304 pp.)
$9.99 paper | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-593-38207-3

A Brazilian American teen pop star hopes a fake relationship will turn her image around.

After a humiliating public breakup moments before winning an award, 17-year-old Natalie’s tearful breakdown becomes an embarrassing meme. To rebrand and fix her reputation, Natalie agrees to pretend to have a new boyfriend, and she signs a contract that sets her up for three months with up-and-coming British teen actor William Ainsley, who is White and Jewish. As she gets to know William, she unexpectedly starts falling for him. He’s sweet to her when the paparazzi are watching, but is it all an act? The romance is appropriately charming while the narrative also compellingly addresses the pressures of fame and social media. This entertaining debut seamlessly weaves in explorations of Latinx and immigrant identity: Especially heartfelt is Natalie’s struggle with not speaking enough Portuguese to connect with her grandparents in São Paulo. Natalie, who moved to the U.S. when she was 8, straightens her curly hair and shies away from her Brazilian nickname, Nati, since none of her classmates in the States could pronounce it properly. Her best friends, Pakistani American Padma and Brazilian American Brenda, two girls who are dating each other, provide a refreshingly supportive friendship, complete with delightful text message exchanges.

A joyful story that hits all the right notes. (Romance. 12-18)

COLLATERAL DAMAGE
The Mental Health Effects of the Pandemic
Mooney, Carla
ReferencePoint Press (64 pp.)
$31.95 | Aug. 1, 2021
978-1-6782-0076-3

A general overview of mental health issues stemming from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mooney handles a broad topic in six brief chapters, each centering one aspect of the many social-emotional challenges related to the ongoing health crisis. Together, they contextualize the overall impact of increased isolation associated with the loss of normal routines, from depression to stress and anxiety. The text discusses problems like the economic strain on families, challenges for those in caregiver roles, dealing with death and grief, substance use, finding resources for support, issues facing essential workers, and other topics. Many teen readers will recognize their struggles with changes in schooling and dealing with family concerns, but insights for marginalized communities are somewhat limited.
The photographs reflect some ethnic diversity, and specific stressors facing families of color are mostly acknowledged in financial terms. The disproportionate impact of anti-Chinese hate speech on Asian Americans is not mentioned; neither is the rise in domestic violence. Each chapter includes stories that offer varied individual perspectives that may resonate with many readers. The thematic chapters include some overlapping concepts and can stand alone. This carefully researched and informative title covers key concepts with an approach grounded in the importance of recognizing unhealthy behaviors and identifying coping strategies, thus meeting a need for digestible information on a much-needed contemporary topic.

A useful guide to counter feelings of helplessness. (source notes, resources, further research, index) (Nonfiction. 12-18)

SUGAR TOWN QUEENS
Nunn, Malla
Putnam (320 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-525-51560-9

A South African teen unravels the mysteries of her own and her mother's pasts.

Amandla's life is filled with the unknown. Not only are her mother AnnaLisa's "episodes" unpredictable, Amandla also knows next to nothing about either of their personal histories. Mixed-race Amandla does know that her father was Black, which is rather scandalous even in her post-Mandela nation given that AnnaLisa is White. When AnnaLisa returns from Durban on Amandla's 15th birthday, badly shaken and without her usual practical gifts, Amandla finds an address and lots of cash in AnnaLisa's purse. She decides to investigate in hopes of finally getting answers to her many questions. What she discovers could have led to a basic rags-to-riches story, but Nunn avoids that trope, choosing instead to focus on the amazing community of their township, Sugar Town; indeed, the setting is one of the strongest aspects of the story. The community of strong women who support Amandla is juxtaposed with one she later encounters that lacks the same cohesiveness. What follows are many highly dramatic turns of events and a narrative that shows a young woman reckoning with possible paths lying ahead and harsh judgments of women's behavior. The novel ultimately acknowledges that different people behave in different ways, even given similar circumstances. This origin-story mystery features a cast that reflects the diversity of its setting.

Engrossing to the end. (Fiction. 14-18)

WINGS OF SHADOW
Pau Preto, Nicki
McElderry (624 pp.)
$21.99 | Jul. 13, 2021
978-1-5344-6602-9

As war with the Golden Empire looms on the horizon for the outlawed faction of Phoenix Riders, a more devastating threat awakens from the shadows in this final installment in the Crown of Feathers trilogy.

Long-lost heir to the empire's throne, Veronyka Ashfire flies toward a future with heavy expectations of rulership on her shoulders. With her bondmate, Tristan, held hostage by a warmongering politician, Veronyka and the Phoenix Riders plot to rescue him and eliminate their enemies on the empire's council to stop the war before it begins. However, in the smoldering darkness of ancient ruins, resurrected queen Avalkyra Ashfire hatches a strix, a bird of hunger and shadow, thus granting herself the power to destroy anyone who stands in her way.

Slightly educational, mostly fun. (author's note) (Historical thriller. 13-17)
Mounting stakes, chapter-ending cliffhangers, and tightly integrated worldbuilding accelerate the narrative’s pace. Unfortunately, despite these strengths, the conflation of sex and gender carries over from the earlier books with repeated use of female to describe both people and phoenixes. Jealousy and possessiveness uncomfortably are portrayed as positive signs of affection in a romantic relationship. The vilification of those seeking independence and the positioning of Veronyka as a peaceful, self-sacrificial savior combine with the resolution to send a message that may read as pro-imperialistic. The cast of characters have pale to brown skin tones, and one of the primary perspective characters, a White animage girl, is blind.

A promising flame that doesn’t quite ignite. (map, timeline, glossary) (Fantasy. 14-17)

**MERCURY BOYS**  
Prasad, Chandra  
Soho Teen (360 pp.)  
$18.99 | Aug. 3, 2021  
978-1-64129-265-8

An insecure teen girl becomes fascinated by daguerreotypes and time travel through dreams. When everyone learns about her mom’s affair with a substitute teacher half her age, Saskia and her dad move from Arizona to Connecticut for a fresh start. Saskia is having trouble adjusting to her new reality and doesn’t feel like she fits in at school; she’s an outsider, mixed race, and not rich. A class assignment to study an early pioneer in photography and a subsequent visit to the university archive to see his original daguerreotype images results in an amazing discovery: Saskia can now visit the inventor in her dreams. In an effort to befriend the popular girls, Saskia shares her time travel secret and pressures Lila to help the rest of the group steal daguerreotypes and time travel photos of their own, forming the Mercury Boys Club. Prasad explores power dynamics among teen girls through an interplay of various influences such as wealth, appearance, and race (Lila is Latinx, Saskia has a Black mom and White dad, and the other girls are White). Although the character development is not strong, depictions of the teens’ dysfunctional family lives are woven throughout the story; making the appeal of the club and the girls’ hysteria convincing. The speedy conclusion leaves a lot of unanswered questions, however, and readers will wonder what was actually true.

An interesting premise with uneven execution. (daguerreotype images) (Science fiction. 13-18)

**THE ENDLESS SKIES**  
Price, Shannon  
Turtle Teen (304 pp.)  
$17.99 | Aug. 17, 2021  
978-1-250-30201-4

When a deadly disease threatens her world, a young warrior-elect risks everything to save her people. Seventeen-year-old Rowan has trained for years to become a full-fledged warrior. She is ready to prove her loyalty and protect theHeliana, her beloved city in the sky which is home to the Leonodai—magical, shape-shifting, winged lion people. Unfortunately, before the ceremony can take place, Leonodai children are infected with a fatal illness brought by birds from the human world. Soon, full-fledged warriors are sent to the human lands to find a cure. Wanting to do more than wait, Rowan finds her sister, Shirene, who is part of the King’s Council. Shirene lets slip information indicating that the situation is much more dire than anyone is letting on. Conflicted, Rowan must decide whether to stay and obey the rules or risk everything to save her people. Told from the alternating points of view of Rowan, Shirene, and Callen (Rowan’s best friend), this story is full of thrilling action, adventure, secrets, and a few surprising twists. There is some romance, but the primary focus is on loyalty, doing what is right, and bringing about change. Small details incorporated throughout offer just enough worldbuilding for readers to understand the characters and their history. The writing evokes a constant feeling of desperate last hope, which adds to the suspense. Leonodai in their human form have olive skin and a variety of hair colors.

A thrilling and fast-paced adventure. (map) (Fantasy. 13-18)

**THE GREAT DESTROYERS**  
Richmond, Caroline Tang  
Scholastic (400 pp.)  
$18.99 | Aug. 3, 2021  
978-1-338-26674-0

Underdog Josephine Linden fights for more than glory in this neohistorical thriller. An alternate historical timeline reimagines the Cold War arms race as a battle to enhance military technology called mechas. These human-shaped mechanical fighting suits were first invented during World War I and are now, in the mid-20th century, widely used in sports settings ranging from schools to professional fights. High schooler Jo is chosen as a last-minute replacement on Team USA for the 1963 Pax Games, an international championship tournament. Winning would mean validation as a girl fighter but also, more importantly, the prize money would help her family’s dire finances. Ultimately, Jo not only fights her opponents in the arena, but she also becomes involved in a geopolitical tug of war as mysterious accidents
Watchers, and their monoliths. Black-haired Jiara hails from a Mediterranean-feeling Azzaria while Raffar comes from racially diverse Farnskag, a kingdom that feels more northern European. The political passementerie is tiresome while the zero-to-hero/academics due to her learning disability (which an author’s note names as dyslexia), Jiara had no expectation of becoming a queen, but after her older sister, Scilla, is murdered, Jiara must wed young King Raffar of Farnskag in her stead to protect an important political alliance. Tattooed and bald per Farnskag’s customs, Raffar is handsome and attentive, but Jiara feels alienated in her new home. Struggling to learn the new language, Jiara grows suspicious of her husband’s trusted advisers and soon uncovers betrayals both personal and political. Contending with Scilla’s vengeful ghost, who is growing more violent as her murderer goes unpunished, Jiara also earns the protection of her new home’s deities, the elemental Watchers, and their monoliths. Black-haired Jiara hails from a Mediterranean-feeling Azzaria while Raffar comes from racially diverse Farnskag, a kingdom that feels more northern European. The political passementerie is tiresome while the zero-to-hero/ chosen-one trope is regrettably trite; the inclusion of a princess with a disability is welcome, if not unprecedented. Debut novelist Rueckert occasionally offers dazzling settings and swoon-worthy romantic moments, using Jiara’s emotional and literal journeys to hammer home the twin messages of acceptance and accommodation for different cultures, sexual orientations, and faiths. Neither grimdark nor frivolous, this is a middling political fantasy.

A DRAGONBIRD IN THE FERN
Rueckert, Laura
North Star Editions (392 pp.)
$9.99 paper | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-63583-065-1

An ordinary princess embarks on an unexpected journey. Neither the heir nor the spare with two older siblings, 17-year-old Princess Jiara of Azzaria craves adventures over academics due to her learning disability. Jiara finds herself an unwilling bride to King Raffar of Farnskag in a bid to prevent a war between the countries. Jiara struggles to fit in and learn the new language. She must navigate the political machinations of the Watchers and the monoliths, who are key to her new home’s defenses. Jiara’s journey is filled with danger, betrayal, and personal growth.

A solid, realistic reluctant reader title with an enticing video-game hook. (Fiction. 12-16)
that work. The book suggests fighting stress with a healthy lifestyle, including healthy eating, physical and breathing exercises, mindfulness practice, progressive muscle relaxation, and even aromatherapy. It offers ways to take control; for example, manage time, become more assertive, fight perfectionism, and get support. Examples from interviews with real teens and statements from public figures offer additional guidance. Callout boxes present quotations and help break up the text. Stock photographs show an ethnically diverse range of teens in action or reflection.

Clear explanations and practical advice for today's tense teens. (source notes, resources, further research, index, picture credits) (Nonfiction. 12-18)

CALL ME ATHENA
Girl From Detroit
Smith, Colby Cedar
Andrews McMeel Publishing (576 pp.)
$21.99 | Aug. 17, 2021
978-1-5248-6560-3

A multigenerational coming-of-age story centered around an immigrant community during the Great Depression. The novel begins in 1933 with Mary, 16, living in a small apartment in Detroit, Michigan, with her Greek father and French mother; twin sister, Marguerite; and three younger brothers. Her father, a shop owner struggling now that no one is buying Ford motor cars, wants to arrange her marriage to a fellow immigrant, but Mary longs for modernity, a job, and some fun with dashing, blond Billy. She finds a mysterious pile of unaddressed letters dated 1918, which leads to two other stories—that of Gio, a young Greek fisherman who, through complicated circumstances, ends up enlisted in the U.S. Army, and Jeanne, a wealthy French girl who volunteers with wounded soldiers at a hospital in Brittany. Eventually the strands come together to reveal the identities of Jeanne and Gio. At times, the plot seems too convoluted—Marguerite, Mary's twin, never feels necessary at all—and the cryptic nature of the letters makes them feel inauthentic. However, the author's sense of history brings details of the different times and cultures to life as she tells a story rich in discovery and self-discovery—not just for Worm, but for Becca too, with a climactic twist that leaves both ready, or reader, for whatever may come next. Spinelli shines at setting a tongue-in-cheek tone for a tale with serious underpinnings, and as in Stargirl (2000), readers will be swept into the relationship that develops between this adolescent odd couple. Characters follow a White default.

Characters to love, quips to snort at, insights to ponder: typical Spinelli. (Fiction. 12-15)

DEAD WEDNESDAY
Spinelli, Jerry
Knopf (240 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Aug. 3, 2021
978-0-593-30667-3
978-0-593-30668-0 PLB

For two teenagers, a small town's annual cautionary ritual becomes both a life- and a death-changing experience.

On the second Wednesday in June, every eighth grader in Amber Springs, Pennsylvania, gets a black shirt, the name and picture of a teen killed the previous year through reckless behavior—and the silent treatment from everyone in town. Like many of his classmates, shy, self-conscious Robbie “Worm” Tarnauer has been looking forward to Dead Wed as a day for cutting loose rather than sober reflection...until he finds himself talking to a strange girl or, as she would have it, “spectral maiden,” only he can see or touch. Becca Finch is as surprised and confused as Worm, only remembering losing control of her car on an icy slope that past Christmas Eve. But being (or having been, anyway) a more outgoing sort, she sees their encounter as a sign that she's got a mission. What follows, in a long conversational ramble through town and beyond, is a day at once ordinary yet rich in discovery and self-discovery—not just for Worm, but for Becca too, with a climactic twist that leaves both ready, or reader, for whatever may come next. Spinelli shines at setting a tongue-in-cheek tone for a tale with serious underpinnings, and as in Stargirl (2000), readers will be swept into the relationship that develops between this adolescent odd couple. Characters follow a White default.

Prompted by an unplanned pregnancy, an adoptee seeks out her birth mother. Lizzie has always felt out of place as a Black adoptee raised by White parents. She’s also a disappointment, with a boyfriend her mother doesn't like and poor performance at school. Certain she’s destined to be hated by her predominantly White community forever and finding herself pregnant and unsure of whether she wants to terminate or not, Lizzie flees town in search of her birth mom. When her Airbnb falls through, she lands in a women’s shelter where she experiences conflict with another resident before she serendipitously meets a counselor and other mentors. Those adults...
quickly track down a nurse who, nearly two decades after the fact, remembers when Lizzie was born and may be able to locate her biological mother. All the while, Lizzie finds herself in the position of many biracial teens: too Black for some people, too White for others. Taylor has clearly grasped the high interest part of hi-lo with her gritty plot, but the pacing makes the story difficult to follow, undermining accessibility for the target audience of reluctant readers. The varying portrayals of Lizzie’s mom as, at times, a distant, racist person, and at others a loving parent, don’t just give readers whiplash, they also present without nuance negative stereotypes about transracial adoption. A heavy reliance on racial tropes and outdated language that doesn’t ring true for zoomers make the work feel out of touch.

**Tackles a complex subject without sufficient depth.** *(Fiction. 14-18)*

**HOW MOON FUENTEZ FELL IN LOVE WITH THE UNIVERSE**

Vásquez Gilliland, Raquel

Simon & Schuster (432 pp.)

$19.99 | Aug. 10, 2021

978-1-5344-4866-7

Moon accompanies her twin sister, Star, a wealthy influencer, on a life-changing cross-country tour. Seventeen-year-old Moon Fuentez is used to being her stunning twin's designated photographer and size-16 shadow as well as their cruel momager’s less-loved daughter. Two weeks after their high school graduation, Star, a religious model whose brand is purity, lands a lucrative gig for a summer charity tour arranged by Andro Philips, a sexy, young social media app founder. Moon is coerced into working the tour, earning money to help fulfill her dream of attending Tulane’s art program. Her partner at the merchandise table is enigmatic, gorgeous Santiago, Andro’s younger brother. After a disastrous first meeting, Moon and Santiago slowly get to know each other through bickering and banter. She’s a flower lover who’s designing a deck of tarot cards; he’s an incredible gourmet cook. Their initial animosity turns to attraction and affection in a simmering but steamy slow burn. As in her debut, the author’s prose is lush and lyrical, emphasizing the natural world and ancient spirituality. The story’s magical elements are integrated beautifully, as is the main characters’ Latinx heritage: The Fuentez sisters are Mexican American, and the Philips brothers have a Colombian mother and presumed White father. In addition to important sex-positive messages, the book sensitively explores grief, trauma, abuse, disability, and sisterhood as well as the negative impacts of homophobia and purity culture.

**Readers will fall in love with this poignant, powerful, and poetic coming-of-age tale.** *(Magical realism. 14-adult)*

**LOST ON PLANET EARTH**

Visaggio, Magdalene

Illus. by Aguirre, Claudia & Saam, Zakk

Dark Horse (176 pp.)

$19.99 paper | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-5067-2456-9

A young woman’s future in the interplanetary fleet suddenly changes. It’s 238t in Richmond, Virginia, and 21-year-old Basilisa Miranda is a focused examinee from a Latinx family that has for centuries served in the interplanetary fleet, bringing peace, equality, and democracy to the galaxy. Despite her pale, red-headed best friend Charlotte’s constant requests to relax, Basil carefully controls every aspect of her life in order to prepare for the Fleet Exam: physical training, studying, self-actualizing meditation, and protein shakes instead of home-cooked meals with her family. Then suddenly, all her anxieties and uncertainties surface as she wonders what truly makes her happy and whether she still wants to do her service in the fleet, let alone enlist for life. After breaking down and fleeing during the exam, Basil’s life changes completely as she engages with and expands her world, meeting a friendly, green-skinned, pointy-eared Xanthippan named Velda and charismatic, brown-skinned Ethne, two anti-fleet protestors. The story’s social commentary on negative aspects of cultural assimilation is intriguing, however, the delivery lacks nuance and fails to develop the subjects with sufficient depth. While Basil’s personality and relationships are well depicted, one-dimensional secondary characters, choppy time skips, and the rapid pace weaken the work overall. The illustrations are beautiful, however, with strong transitions, luminous colors, and a natural flow.

An overly rushed storyline undermines an intriguing premise and sympathetic characters. *(author’s note, additional art)* *(Graphic science fiction. 14-18)*

**FRESH**

Wood, Margot

Amulet/Abrams (352 pp.)

$18.99 | Aug. 3, 2021
978-1-4197-4813-4

Elliot McHugh chronicles a freshman year of college filled with new friends and sexual escapades. In this story loosely inspired by Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Elliot is an outgoing, undeclared, new student at Boston’s Emerson College. She immediately becomes close friends with her roommate, Lucy Garabedian, who comes from a large Armenian American family and has far more ambitious college and career plans than she does. Elliot’s primary goal is to sleep with many people of any gender and with no commitments. This comes to fruition but isn’t as fulfilling as she thought, especially as she dwells on a conversation with Rose Knightley,
her gorgeous resident adviser, about what constitutes good sex. Additionally, her courses are more of a struggle than she expected, and her behavior results in friendship hurdles. As the year progresses, Elliot learns more about who she is, what she wants, and what it takes to be a good friend and romantic partner. Elliot’s meta, first-person narration is conversational and often hilarious, with footnotes and sections directly addressing readers and inviting their participation. While it’s sometimes over-the-top, it all fits with Elliot’s exuberant persona. She’s a well-crafted, messy character who makes mistakes but ultimately means well. Unabashedly sex-positive and queer, this story is mostly light and breezy, but it has serious moments as well. Elliot is assumed White; there is some ethnic diversity in secondary characters.

A fresh, funny, college-set, coming-of-age tale. (Fiction. 15-18)

**IN THE WILD LIGHT**

*Zentner, Jeff*

Crown (432 pp.)

$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Aug. 10, 2021

978-1-5247-2024-7

978-1-5247-2025-4 PLB

East Tennessee teens Cash Pruitt and Delaney Doyle met at a support group for kids whose parents struggle with addiction.

Cash has lived with Mamaw and Papaw ever since his mother died. After brilliant Delaney discovers a mold with antibacterial properties in a cave on the Pigeon River, she’s given a full ride to a Connecticut prep school—which she accepts on the condition that Cash be admitted too. While Delaney is eager to go, Cash is reluctant: deeply grounded in the natural beauty of his home, unsure he can keep up academically, and dreading leaving Papaw, whose emphysema is worsening. Traveling from their mostly White, economically distressed town to Middleford Academy, a school filled with global elites, brings measures of disorientation, inspiration, mockery—and true friendship. Cash quickly befriends Alex, a working-class Korean American scholarship student, and they form a tight foursome with Delaney and her wealthy Brazilian roommate, Vi. A poetry class with a teacher who becomes a trusted mentor becomes a lifeline—and an anchor to his roots—as Cash struggles with homesickness, attraction to Vi, and tension with Delaney. In writing suffused with raw emotion, Zentner shows respectful care for his characters; natural dialogue and a strongly developed sense of place demonstrate their evolution. The beauty of the language will invite readers to linger over sentences that speak to deep truths. 

A brilliant treasure of a book that holds up a mirror to the best parts of our humanity. (Fiction. 14-adult)
A guerrilla guide focuses on money management for young adults.

Financial consultant–turned-entrepreneur Amin has crafted a debut that adopts just the right tone for the intended primary audience of college students. Rather than convey fundamental information about personal finances in a typically dry fashion, the author injects the would-be boring topic with breezy, wise-cracking prose. This immediately signals to youthful readers that Amin can relate to them—and she does so in a noncondescending yet very basic way. The objective of the book is to help a young adult develop a “30-day plan” for financial enlightenment. The work starts out with wonderfully chatty definitions of 10 key financial terms (principal, interest, down payment, etc.) followed by the useful “9 Golden Rules of Personal Finance.” These two chapters lay the groundwork for the more substantive discussions to come, including such things as conducting a “personal spending analysis,” creating a budget, devising saving strategies, dealing with debt, understanding insurance, and examining the basics of investing. In each chapter, Amin makes no assumptions, clearly explaining financial terms and concepts using simple language. She often employs relevant, amusing analogies, such as “Budgeting is the ‘eat your veggies’ of the personal finance world.” Her use of colloquialisms is appropriate and engaging as well; for example, “Damn, youngster! I know you’re thinking, Retirement? Are you kidding me? That’s for old people.” Hidden beneath the informal language and humorous wink-winks is solid financial advice about important issues such as the risks and rewards of debt, the meaning of credit scores, the psychology of spending, and a lucid explanation of paying taxes. A particularly helpful chapter addresses “multiple income streams,” providing numerous creative ideas for generating secondary sources of revenue. Also useful is the book’s bulleted lists of pros and cons for a variety of investment vehicles. While Amin writes from Britain, she does an excellent job of dividing portions of the guide into sections specifically targeting United States versus British readers, right down to suggested American and British financial apps. Each chapter ends with day-by-day action plan reminders.

A refreshingly lighthearted, youthful approach to an oft-dreaded financial topic.
Being LGBTQ+ often involves some measure of activism, whether one’s chosen or been forced into the fight. These recommended works of nonfiction and poetry document the lives of three queer men who advocated for their own and others’ rights and visibility, often with the help of their communities and straight allies.

In Justin Barker’s debut memoir, Bear Boy, which includes a foreword by Jane Goodall, he recounts being a lonely, queer teenager in Sacramento and working with local animal rights organizations to improve animal habitats in the Sacramento Zoo. When Barker learned about two black bears named Brutus and Ursula living in appalling conditions in Roseville, California, he launched a national media blitz to raise $250,000 to relocate them. Our reviewer says, “Barker’s casual writing style establishes an easy flow to a narrative that spans years; along the way, it presents detailed snapshots of specific animals’ plights and moments in the author’s personal life, resulting in an unpredictable and original work.”

Christine A. Yared’s Private Love, Public School chronicles teacher Gerry Crane’s fight to keep his job at a public high school that tried to fire him for being gay in the 1990s. “In presenting Crane’s inspiring story, the author skillfully depicts the culture of a time when personal protests and supportive communities joined forces against discrimination, paving the way for activists to earn more rights for LGBTQ+ citizens everywhere,” says our reviewer. “An important and touching account of a community’s struggles against LGBTQ+ discrimination.”

In the Selected Poems of Emanuel Xavier, Xavier—a regular at Manhattan’s Nuyorican Poets Cafe and a star of Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry on HBO—writes about being gay and Latino in New York. His poems “infuse searing social and political commentary into achingly personal reflections,” says our reviewer. “A superb poetry collection that renders compelling imagery in a singular voice.”
THE SHOEMAKER’S PURSUIT
Beauchamp, Wade
Melange Books (260 pp.)
978-1-95-373550-8

In this steamy set of interconnected erotic tales, a pair of high heels passes from one woman to another, catalyzing wild sexual adventures.

The story begins in 1952, as Italian footwear designer Paolo DeLuca crafts a pair of superlatively sexy pumps, dubbed la Rampa, for the express purpose of inducing more wiggle in his new girlfriend’s walk. She’s offended when he presents them to her in church, but her mother, Maria Fallarino, finds them fetching and takes Paolo up to the bell tower for oral sex. Paolo’s shoe line conquers the world, but the original pair of shoes embarks on a picarasc joke journey across decades and continents, provoking each new owner into scandalous misbehavior. Hollywood actor Temple Holliday wears them in an iconic 1960s film scene and then to the Oscar ceremony, where she performs oral sex on a male nominee when the lights go down. Subsequent owners include a North Carolina restaurant worker who, in 1976, has an encounter with a handsome drifter; a lesbian punk rocker in the 1980s who wears them during a session of noisy oral sex that’s recorded and turned into a hit single; and a lap dancer in the 1990s who uses them to stimulate a customer who turns out to be a private detective hired by Paolo to recover the shoes. Most of the book tells the story of Andie Warner, a New York City architect who buys the shoes from a vintage clothing store in 2019 for a Temple Holliday party costume. The 49-year-old is so compelling in the shoes that she attracts the amorous attention of 20-something Trey Maas; their affair that she turns her experiences into a metanarrative complete with a crossword puzzle whose clues are found in the collection’s other tales. Overall, a tone of hopefulness and fun runs through the stories; even the dark premise of “Better Luck Next Time,” a Star Trek parody in which a spaceship crew is destroyed in battle time and time again, yields more fully realized entries, such as the romantic “Time Cleaners,” which features workers trying to keep their superiors from causing rifts in the timestream, effectively show off the author’s abilities. “Time for Everything” offers moving insight into the tangled relationship between religion and time travel while “Tempus Pompeius,” a seemingly far-fetched story about a modern man transported to pre-eruption Pompeii, slowly transforms into an engaging tale of a father and daughter. In the closing story, “Behind the Timestream,” Bellan introduces a metanarrative with a crossword puzzle whose clues are found in the collection’s other tales. Overall, a tone of hopefulness and fun runs through the stories; even the dark premise of “Better Luck Next Time,” a Star Trek parody in which a spaceship crew is destroyed in battle time and time again, yields a lighthearted and ultimately joyful read. A brief final section, “Timely Story Notes,” offers a glimpse into the author’s thought processes and some of his works’ origins.

A promising and nostalgic collection.
Readers learn all about life in the Indian student ghetto—culture shock, scribbling and saving, and practical matters (in Indian higher education, computers were a dispensable curiosity; at NCSU, they were, of course, a necessity). Six years later, she had a psychology Ph.D., but her relationship with Vikram was fraying. Nonetheless, she followed him to Silicon Valley. Job prospects were dim, but what was worse—one of the book’s major themes—were the obstacles that the American government put in the way of foreign job hunters, the H-1B visa, for example. After she landed a position, she was not allowed to work until the visa came through, which took months. She separated from Vikram and fled an unstable roommate (among other misadventures), but ultimately things improved. Homesick, she returned to India and eventually realized that prospects there were bleak: “In India I was too American, and in America I was too Indian”—a common plight for someone caught between two cultures. Finally, she began a fruitful career as the director of research and evaluation for the Institute for International Education in New York City. Bhandari is a very talented writer, knowing that in a sea of data there is no better life raft than the telling anecdote. On the other hand, she is a fierce numbers cruncher who makes real the damage that 9/11 caused in terms of international education programs. The author recounts that the other hit these programs suffered came from the xenophobic Donald Trump administration. This is a valuable study of an extremely important area of “soft diplomacy,” dispelling all sorts of easy and false assumptions. Bhandari’s informative memoir is for readers who want to understand how interconnected the world really is.

An Indian woman’s wonderfully written, illuminating account of her graduate student experiences in America.

A TWILIGHT REEL Stories
Cody, Michael Amos
Pisgah Press (300 pp.)
$17.95 paper | May 25, 2021
978-1-942-01-666-3

Cody spins linked tales of mountain-town life in this collection.

It’s 1999, and in the small Appalachian town of Runion, North Carolina, the old and the new brush up against each other in uncomfortable ways. In “The Wine of Astonishment,” a minister sets out on a winter night to deliver some news to the estranged sister of one of his parishioners. On his way up the mountain, however, he picks up a hitchhiker, who, at the point of the knife, redirects the course of the minister’s evening. In “Overwinter,” a college professor gets snowed in at home on the same day his wife was planning to leave him for a new man. He can’t deal directly with his collapsing marriage, however, because he must try to find a way to keep the senile woman next door alive when the power goes off. A girl and her great-grandmother sit on their porch in “Conversion,” watching men turn the old church next door into a mosque; it isn’t long before some locals in pickup trucks come to start trouble with the new neighbors, and the woman and girl are eyewitnesses. In these 12 tales, which span the 12 months of the year, Cody documents the cycle of death and life in a colorful American town. The author’s prose is precise and frequently surprising, alternating between moments of peril and humor. “When Dr. Brian Anderson used up his last breath on a moderately difficult ascending passage in Gaubert’s Nocturne and Allegro Scherzando and fell over dead...the Department of Music at Runion State University—for the first time in forty-one years—faced the task of finding a new Professor of Flute.” The stories all sing on their own, but it is in the harmonizing of characters and events as they appear in multiple tales that the real joy of the collection is found. From intimate moments of personal crisis to communitywide occasions, such as those found in the rambling “Decoration Day,” Cody effectively captures conflicts of American life at the turn of the last millennium.

A delightful, richly detailed set of stories.

THE TIGER’S EYE
Angels in Mumbai
Delaney, Scott B.
Xulon Press (362 pp.)
May 31, 2021
978-1-66-280910-1

An American-founded ministry group in India faces a band of terrorists in this Christian thriller sequel.

Andrew Morrison helped start The Call, a Christian movement in the United States. Now that it has gone worldwide, Andrew and his family and friends plan to spend two years in India to aid in developing the Global Calling Ministry. Sadly, not everyone welcomes the Americans’ religious message. A radicalized militia against the West and “any formal religion” launches a devastating terrorist strike at a crowded GlobalCalling event. Meanwhile, seven guardian angels “protect the chosen”—presumably individuals serving God in any capacity. The angels can’t prevent the terrorist attack but may be able to help when one of the culprits, Sanjay Swaminathan, seems to have a change of heart. Intelligence agencies can use him to take down the faction, which brutally trained him and other recruits at a camp. Sanjay’s role becomes even more important once terrorists kidnap members of the Global Calling, including someone close to Andrew. While the authorities take on militia operatives and angels battle demons, good strives to triumph over evil. As with Delaney’s preceding book, The Shaft (2018), the supernatural facet doesn’t overwhelm the plot. The angels act more like guides; they visit Sanjay, who merely surmises what their nonverbal presence means. This supports a notable theme of divine will; even the angels don’t know God’s plan. As Andrew and his family settle in India, the author vividly describes the country, from the bad (unpleasant smells) to the wonderful (its linguistic diversity and stunning landmarks). Nevertheless, the Morrisons, prominently featured in the series opener, take a back seat this time despite Andrew’s...
“DeMallie’s rigorous analysis is often accompanied by anecdotes from her time in the classroom.”

**CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?**

Join the Conversation To Make Public Education a Better Choice

DeMallie, Suzanne Rupp

Houndstooth Press (316 pp.)


Jan. 13, 2021

978-1-54-451795-7 paper

A former teacher assesses the problems that plague public schools in the United States in this debut education book.

During her tenure teaching elementary math in Baltimore County public schools, DeMallie was time and again “a teacher without a voice.” Her own professional opinions, based on the interests of the students she knew best, were constantly vetoed by the schools’ administrations. Tired of seeing how the public school system itself “enabled the problem and failed to provide a solution,” the author resigned after seven years in the classroom to become a national voice for education reform. This book’s first half identifies some of the major issues confronting America’s public schools, ranging from corrupt superintendents to the misapplication of technology. DeMallie’s nuanced analysis tackles the controversial Common Core, noting areas where it “benefits” students but also highlighting spots where it falls short of its intended goals. Even America’s century-old grading system is put under the microscope, as the author encourages readers to ask if “grades motivate students” to learn or even are accurate reflections of their knowledge. The second half of the volume centers on “Ten Steps To Improve Public Education,” which range from mental fortitude (“be resilient” and “focus on the positive”) to pragmatic tips, such as the efficacy of teacher microphones in reducing academic and behavioral issues. DeMallie’s rigorous analysis is often accompanied by anecdotes from her time in the classroom as well as her own experiences as a parent whose son initially struggled in school due to a hearing issue. A teacher without a voice. These vignettes, combined with the author’s conversational yet informed writing style, make for an approachable read. Designed to spawn future parent/teacher activists, the book also includes questions for small group discussions as well as practical advice on how individuals can speak up and make changes on a local and even national level (as DeMallie did as the founding director of the Institute of Classroom Hearing). While some may disagree with the author’s suggestion to not “rely on politicians” for reform, this is a remarkably well-written, balanced, and impassioned case for change.

A well-researched, disheartening, yet relentlessly hopeful examination of American public schools.

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**BLIND BOMBING**

How Microwave Radar Brought the Allies To D-Day and Victory in World War II

Fine, Norman

Potomac Books (256 pp.)

$29.95 | $29.95 e-book | Dec. 1, 2019

978-1-64-012220-8

An engineer hails a lesser-known technological breakthrough of the World War II era.

The United States’ weaponization of nuclear technology and England’s cracking of the Enigma code are often discussed in conversations about the roles of scientists and mathematicians in the Second World War. However, this book suggests that “one small piece of hardware” may have been “the single most important physical invention” that ended the war in Europe. The resonant cavity magnetron paved the way for microwave radar systems that gave Allies a distinct advantage over Nazi Germany. The difference between the radar used during the early years of the war and this new version, the book notes, “was akin to that between the musket and the rifle.” The author convincingly suggests that microwave radar’s abilities to detect U-boats and to give bombers the ability to “see” through overcast skies were essential prerequisites to the successful D-Day campaign. Indeed, the book notes that microwave-enabled bombing campaigns on Nazi factories and infrastructure essentially disabled Germany’s air force before a single Allied soldier stepped foot on the beaches of Normandy. Some academic historians may balk at the author’s overreliance on a handful of secondary sources for historical context, and cynics may question the book’s hagiographic tendencies. However, as a retired electronics engineer who helped design radar equipment used in air traffic control towers, Fine expertly breaks down the complex technology and deftly guides readers through myriad acronyms used by the military and government agencies. The book also tells a compelling story of how a network of “unlikely partners”—including politicians, businessmen, army generals, and university presidents—transformed what was previously a “hazy dream to a few scientists” into a deployable tool. Original interviews with those who made and used the tech, including project engineers and B-17 navigators, complement the narrative, as do ample photographs and illustrations.

A riveting addition to the literature on scientific innovation during the Second World War.
NOT SO HEARTWARMING STORIES
Gimba, Arran
Self (286 pp.)
$11.99 paper | $2.99 e-book
Jan. 24, 2019
978-1-79-500876-1

In this collection of very short stories, Gimba blends fantastical elements, odd premises, and humorous situations. Most of the tales in this book are no more than a few pages in length, but they show the author’s knack for finding unorthodox angles on familiar subjects. In “Beginning,” for instance, two cosmic mechanics craft universes in a workshop. Another tale, “Fifteen Percent,” shows the powers of Light and Dark singing the world into existence only to be interrupted by a talent scout who promises to make them big stars. In “Inspiration,” an accomplished writer reveals to a former classmate the dark secret behind his success only to receive a much-deserved comeuppance. In another story, a young man named Max Zane tries to learn the family business of villainy, and the story becomes more interesting as readers’ sympathies align with Zane and his fellow bad guys rather than with the sanctimonious, dimwitted heroes. “I Have a Cunning…” tackles similar themes, as the main character acts as a consultant for an unusual clientele: “He was the man that evil masterminds went to once they found out that they couldn’t quite live up to the second half of the job description.” Although Gimba’s stories can lack emotional heft and don’t create much sense of consequence, they’re often pleasant diversions. Many act as showcases for their author’s voracious imagination, which metabolizes tropes of fantasy, fable, and film to create enjoyable vignettes. The collection’s title is a bit of a misnomer; although the stories display a biting sense of humor, they also have an air of hopefulness, showing great affection for their characters and offbeat worlds. At times, reader may crave a story that isn’t so intent on reinventing existing genres, but at best, the results are charming, as if one is reading a script for a fantasy-based sketch-comedy show.

Ambitious and energetic flash fiction.

CROSSING MERIDANS
Engineering Disruption to Become a More Effective Leader
Hardy, Cynthia
AuthorHouse (200 pp.)
Jan. 14, 2021
978-1-66551-261-9
978-1-66551-260-2 paper

This debut manual/workbook focuses on self-directed leadership enrichment.

Some business leadership processes concentrate on organizational dependencies that could possibly impede personal development. Hardy’s methodology is decidedly different. She puts the responsibility for leadership squarely on an individual’s shoulders, suggesting that one must undergo a transformation by “engineering disruption in your life to become a better leader.” The approach is aptly named “crossing meridians” by the author, whose own development as a leader is emblematic. She rose from family poverty in the Mississippi city of Meridian to earn a law degree, hold senior positions at major insurance companies, and eventually form her own global consulting firm. This excellent work shows novice and experienced leaders alike how to chart a course through a deftly organized process of discovery, planning, and acting—with the ultimate goal of sustaining personal leadership excellence. The metaphorical use of meridians to represent both personal and organizational lines that must be crossed is very appropriate. It also serves to anchor the book around a strong, memorable concept that cleverly links the text to Hardy’s hometown of Meridian, a “symbolic origination point.” “Beginning Meridian” signifies a familiar, comfortable place from which any leadership journey starts. While it is easy to get too caught up in the volume’s “meridian” terminology, the approach is both logical and practical. During the author’s superb explanation of her self-improvement system, she recounts pertinent examples from her own life and cites several client illustrations to make the process come alive. A section on racial justice/workplace diversity is particularly timely and enlightening. Hardy stresses the importance of “empathy, openness, and resiliency” as “the bedrock—the ballast—of leadership.” She also highlights “leadership fluency” (the ability to “fluidly and continually navigate across divides” within organizations) as well as the need to build a distinct, personal “leadership brand.” Such concepts raise the content to a strategic level while the workbook integrated into the volume allows individuals to dive into the details and execute their own unique leadership development plans.

Cohesive and impassioned; a bold, engaging path to effective leadership.
A biscuit-loving dog makes a tough choice in this playful picture book about positive decision-making.

Luna, a big black dog with “curly wavy hair,” lives with blond, blue-eyed siblings Luke and Lilly in a house next door to mischievous, smelly pup Ollie. A special jar with a purple ribbon, made lovingly by Lilly, stores Luna’s beloved biscuits. Every day, Lilly gives Luna a treat—but when Lilly forgets to close the jar one day, Luna and Ollie start planning how Luna can get her extra biscuits. The pups draw a treasure map for their sneaky plan. Soon, however, Luna has second thoughts and realizes that she loves Lilly more than biscuits. Hewitt, who introduced the dog and her human pals in Where Did Luna Go? (2020), sets up the expectations that things will go horribly wrong: lap readers can be invited to imagine what disasters will occur when Luna tries to get her treats. The way Luna thinks before she acts gives readers a great model for ways to handle temptation and subverts the lessons-learned expectations of familiar picture books. The fun, uncredited cartoon illustrations generally keep the dogs doglike, with the exception of drawing their plans, and the settings have a storybook feel. Hewitt’s use of repeated rhymes—“crickety, rickety old house” and “creaky, leaky old kitchen”—makes for a delightful read-aloud experience.

For young readers who love dogs—or need a model for making good choices—this is a sure bet.

A history of tattooing in Boston emphasizes the role of the Liberty family.

Since the 1970s, Lyle Tuttle (“tattooer to the stars”) has been accumulating art, artifacts, and ephemera of American tattoo history. A centerpiece of his collection and the focus of this well-crafted book by Bray and Hodges is the story of Boston’s Liberty family. Showcasing Tuttle’s collection, in addition to oral histories and secondary source research, the first half of this work uses the Liberty family as a lens to explore the wider history of tattooing in Boston during the 20th century. The volume begins in the “carnivalesque neighborhood” of Scollay Square and Edward “Dad” Liberty’s forging of a “tattooing dynasty” through “blunt enterprise” and a willingness “to skirt the edges of middle-class social norms.” Woven into the history of the Liberty family is a broader account of the evolution of tattooing, from the “Freaks and Curiosities” niche of the early decades of the 20th century to its broadening appeal among “soldiers, sailors, civilian patriots, and draftees” during World War II. The book’s latter half turns out to be as well-researched and captivating as the narrative overview of the Liberty family tree. The second section features the family’s catalog of original art and other “designs painted on sheets, boards, books, window shades, and scraps of repurposed paper.” In over 70 pages, readers are treated to the sheer diversity of the catalog that spans from topless women and crucifixes to highly detailed East Asian-inspired watercolors and brash “Folk-meets-Americana-and-Seamanship” imagery popularized during World War II. This catalog is complemented with historical photographs, signs, advertisements, memorabilia, and newspaper clippings that make for not only an engaging read, but also a gorgeous, unique book best suited for coffee-table displays. Despite the volume’s many strengths, some readers may long for additional editorial commentary in the catalog beyond the basic descriptions provided. Moreover, an extension of the history of tattoos into the 21st century, when ink has become extremely ubiquitous across sociocultural lines, would have created a more complete timeline.

A remarkably thoughtful and elegant history of Boston’s place in tattoo lore.

This volume chronicles the fictional history of a superhero and the motley individuals who have donned the red hood.

Twenty-three-year-old Gracie Chapel fled her abusive household as a teenager. She grows into a capable woman who squares off against violent men in Titan City. When taking down one abuser leads to legal trouble, Gracie gets help from an unlikely source—the Crimson Wraith. He’s been the city’s resident superhero for 80 years. Around 1940, William Finn first wore a red hood and white-skull mask to “defend the defenseless.” Decades passed, and a handful of people (mostly men) took on the persona as well as that of the Crimson Wraith’s sidekick, the Wily Wisp. As Gracie learns, the superhero has a sordid background; one Crimson Wraith died in costume, and another is serving a life sentence for murder. But Titan City still needs protection from the likes of Queen Cleopatra and Dr. Oblivion. Gracie has the skills and tenacity to stand up against such supervillains, and she trains at Finn Manor to further hone her combat proficiency. She also may be able to help with a murder mystery: Someone has fatally poisoned Edward Finn, William’s adopted son and former Crimson Wraith. Gracie ultimately

**LUNA LOVES BISCUITS**

*Hewitt, Stephanie*

T tellwell Talent (26 pp.)

$26.00 | $15.00 paper | $9.00 e-book

Nov 28, 2020

978-0-22-883668-7 paper

**LOUD, NAKED, & IN THREE COLORS**

*The Liberty Boys & the History of Tattooing in Boston*

*Hodges, Margaret & Bray, Derin*

Rake House (160 pp.)

$70.00

978-0-378-75840-4

**THE CRIMSON WRAITH Legacy of the Hood**

*Hughes, J. Griffin*

Illus. by Moore, Justin

Self (411 pp.)


979-8-68-066048-5

**THE CRIMSON WRAITH Legacy of the Hood**

*Hughes, J. Griffin*

Illus. by Moore, Justin

Self (411 pp.)


979-8-68-066048-5
must decide if she wants to become a superhero. It seems like an extraordinary opportunity, but the good guys don’t win every battle. Sometimes innocent lives are lost, and Gracie wonders if the fight, in the end, is worth it.

Hughes’ engrossing book comprises four previously released novellas. Gracie’s story gives the quartet cohesion as she, along with readers, gradually absorbs the Crimson Wraith’s tumultuous history. Her narrative alternates with decades of the superhero’s tales, primarily set in the ’40s through the ’80s. The titular superhero has obvious similarities to DC Comics’ Batman, who, like William Finn, is a wealthy man with a secret crime-fighting headquarters in his manor and a frequent sidekick. But Hughes wisely concentrates on the saga’s distinctive characters and their lives. One Crimson Wraith, for example, is gay during a time that practically demands he stay in the closet; he faces a betrayal when a past lover threatens to out the superhero. The book generally takes itself seriously with few instances of humor. Likewise, the author doesn’t aim the work at young readers, as characters use profanity freely. But violence doesn’t overwhelm the volume. As Hughes favors character development over action, there aren’t many face-offs with supervillains. Still, descriptions of the Crimson Wraith’s goodies at the Finn estate are a treat: “Against one wall, an empty display case…stood amid an arsenal of smoke pellets, flash bombs, grappling irons, various pieces of surveillance equipment, a nest of flying drones” that Gracie “would learn were called Haunts.”

An enthralling crime-fighting saga that focuses on the people behind the mask.

FACES OF EVIL
Jefferson, E.L.
E.L. Books (522 pp.)
978-1-6629-1178-1

A lengthy set of stories that explore many facets of fear and human wickedness.

Retired police officer-turned–horror novelist Jefferson continues to explore how evil infiltrates the lives of his predominantly Black characters in this new collection of arresting stories. In the harrowing opening tale, “Stimulated by Evil,” a trio of burglars stake out the mansion of a wealthy vacationing couple, but after they rob the house of its priciest items, a grisly comeback awaits them. Other tales are equally menacing and come spring-loaded with surprising twists, as in one about a desperate ploy by a wife to save her marriage from infidelity or another about two siblings and their dying father who abandoned them. Each story packs a punch, but one of the most intense is “Consumed by Evil,” which features a physician with a uniquely abrasive bedside manner—he smokes while he treats patients, spews racial diatribes, has a stocked liquor cabinet in his office, and delivers tough-love diagnoses to a series of bewildered patients. Revenge, vigilante justice, and the agony of betrayal are also key themes. Jefferson’s tales are reminiscent of episodes of The Twilight Zone in which everyday people face unspeakable horrors or grim challenges—often without the satisfaction of a happy ending. As in the author’s past Touched by Evil collections, the stories don’t skimp on explicit sex, gore, or expletives, and, as such, sensitive readers may want to proceed with caution. There are also occasional awkward passages, including unnatural dialogue (“Now that we have reconnected, let me tell you why it was so urgent for me to find you”) and a lack of clarity in some sections. These quibbles, however, shouldn’t deter devoted genre fans who will appreciate these addictive, frightening works.

A memorable collection of provocative horror.

22 CHILDREN’S STORIES
Kalyvas, Errikos
Illus. by Gottardo, Claudia
Self (117 pp.)
978-618-5174-04-0

This illustrated children’s book includes fables, fairy tales, and other short stories. In the 22 stories collected here, characters can be young or older, and the plots can be fairly realistic or fanciful. The volume features both animal and human characters in a variety of settings: a garden, under the sea, the present day, and a fairy-tale past. While most are original, some employ familiar elements from children’s literature or fables, such as a naughty, carrot-stealing rabbit or, in “The goat who didn’t have any milk to feed her kid,” a narrative reminiscent of “The Little Red Hen.” In these cases, though, the tales provide fresh takes, as in “The true story of the ant and the cicada.” A lazy insect idles the summer away, but instead of leaving him to starve, the ant king invites him to exchange shelter for entertainment. Several tales feature the classic motif of being rewarded for kindness to animals, as in “Once upon a time, a bear went to the circus,” in which a little girl frees a captive circus bear who later gives salmon to her picnicking family. Kalyvas, writing his second children’s book, has a good ear for dialogue and appealing repetition, even supplying read-aloud suggestions for one story: “Tickle-tickle-tickle, he tickled its nose with her whiskers (author’s note to parents: tickle your child’s nose at the same time).” The tales emphasize altruism, compassion, and a spirit of fun, always concluding: “And they lived happily ever after!” Illustrating her second children’s book, Gottardo supplies digital pictures that capture the tales’ humor. Apart from a Bedouin family, all the human characters appear to be White.

A playfully sweet and amusing collection that’s an excellent choice for reading aloud.
“Keck’s clever story elicits an authentic sense of childlike wonder.”

THE MOON THIEF

Keck, Kristine
Illus. by Barnett, Heidi
Atmosphere Press (42 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Apr. 1, 2021
978-1-63649-578-4

A boy discovers who is taking pieces of the moon in Keck’s picture book.

A White-presenting boy is concerned when he notices the moon getting smaller. He believes that someone must be stealing pieces. He thinks, “The Thief is very clever. He only takes a sliver at a time” and imagines that the Moon Thief, a “pale-faced and shadow-eyed” man, carries the slivers in a “tall velvet hat” and takes them to the place where the shadows disappear. With his dog Luna in tow, the boy sets out to stop the perpetrator. The shadows direct him to the Shadowland, “a hilltop…only an arm’s reach to the hoarded moon.” There, the boy confronts the Moon Thief, who insists he is only borrowing the moon. He says, “Once your moon is nearly gone, I’ll bring it back, piece by piece.” The boy is relieved. He and Luna dance with the Moon Thief and the shadows under the moonlight. Back home, the boy peers out the window, noticing the shining crescent moon. He says, “I will see more of you tomorrow.” This clever story elicits an authentic sense of childlike wonder. Keck’s writing is spirited and rhythmic (“The shadows laugh and swoop and scoop me up! Saddling the shadowy wind, I’m crashing through the night air”). Barnett’s fantastic painted illustrations include swirly brush strokes and colorful, dreamy scenes, such as silhouettes offset by a lovely deep blue sky. They also include unique details like the shadows that have humanlike figures.

A beautifully illustrated, poetic nighttime tale.

TAO
A New Interpretation
Kazden, J. Joseph
Self (80 pp.)
979-8-71-578203-8

A writer reinterprets the Tao Te Ching in this timely study.

Kazden’s writing is intent on examining the peripheries of illusion and reality. His novel Gita (2018) drew on Eastern and Western philosophies to excavate concepts of truth and time. In his latest work, the author turns his attention to the Chinese spiritual text the Tao Te Ching. Diverging from his customary role as a novelist, Kazden reinterprets the classic using his own agenda. “This ‘interpretation,’ it is not a translation,” he underlines in his preface, “is focused primarily on the congruence between my conceptions of totIs reality and the Tao Te Ching’s conceptions of the Tao.” TotIs reality is a term found often in the author’s work and can be defined as the one “true” reality that lies beyond the veil of illusion. Kazden’s stimulating interpretation honors the Tao’s original form, presenting 81 short stanzas that signpost a way to navigating life with integrity. But it is immediately discernible that the author’s approach has a contemporary edge, reflecting and informing the spiritual and moral crises of the current age.

Kazden’s trademark as a writer is his ability to express complex ideas with clarity and succinctness. This talent proves particularly effective when interpreting the Tao. The author skillfully echoes the poetically laconic writing style found in the original text: “The Tao shows, that the highest renown, / Cares not for renown, / The desire for glory, and riches, / Are not the source of wealth, and happiness.” Kazden maintains the careful balance of resolved contradictions and declarative statements central to the Tao. It is a delight to discover specific anomalies in the author’s reinterpretation. For instance, in Darrell D. Lau’s scholarly translation of the text, the closing lines of stanza 18 read: “When the state is benighted / There are loyal ministers.” Kazden’s take on this evokes recent political affairs: “And when the country is in chaos and confusion / The perfidious patriots will appear.” In such instances, some purists may criticize the author for interpreting the Tao too loosely. Others will find his thoughtful version genuinely refreshing, no more so than when they discover that the sage depicted is now a woman: “Such a sage comes to love the world as she loves herself.”

Ingeniously executed: a Tao for our times.

OVERCOMING THE IMPOSTOR
Silence Your Inner Critic and Lead With Confidence
Kelso, Kris
Dexterity (208 pp.)
978-1-947297-23-4

An entrepreneur advises colleagues suffering from imposter syndrome.

In this debut business book, Kelso acknowledges his own battles with imposter syndrome (or “The Impostor,” as he dubs it) and offers advice for others facing the same challenges to personal and professional success. The author, who founded a consulting business, vividly describes the feeling of being out of his depth, which he confronts even after years at the helm of a company: “I suspected they were just being nice, the way a group of football players lets a little kid run with the ball and everyone pretends to be unable to tackle him.” With examples from his own career and those of others, the book explores how imposter syndrome manifests, its primary causes, and strategies for mitigating its effects. Kelso explains how developing a network of mentors,
mentees, and peers in similar circumstances can help entrepreneurs deal with valid concerns and move past their insecurities while not overcorrecting for imposter syndrome and suffering instead from clueless overconfidence. Each chapter concludes with a concise bulleted list summarizing the main takeaways, making the volume useful for quick reference as well as in-depth reading. Kelso is an animated and enthusiastic writer, and the text is full of motivational lines (“When you hear The Impostor saying, ‘You’re about to fake something,’ you should translate that to mean, ‘You’re about to learn something’”). While the author is explicit about writing a book aimed at fellow entrepreneurs, with the examples drawn from the leaders of small and growing businesses and advice targeted to them, readers in other fields are likely to find the content helpful as well. Despite the focus on business, Kelso encourages readers to discover a definition of success that extends beyond the boardroom and growing businesses and advice targeted to them, readers in other fields are likely to find the content helpful as well. Despite the focus on business, Kelso encourages readers to discover a definition of success that extends beyond the boardroom and the bank account, arguing that a holistic approach to achievement is crucial in coping with imposter syndrome. Readers already familiar with strategies for managing the syndrome may find the work too heavy on the basics, but for many, the author’s empathetic and energetic approach does an effective job of concisely presenting valuable and actionable information on a relevant topic.

A well-written guide to establishing confidence.

CROMBY’S AXIOM
Kirchner, Gary J.
FriesenPress (204 pp.)
Mar. 16, 2021
978-1-52-559607-0 paper
978-1-52-559608-7

In a future world where almost all of humanity is mentally connected by a universal, digital mind/internet, a famous athlete suddenly becomes unlinked and a captive of free-thinking rebels.

Kirchner’s debut SF novel envisions the year 2084. Following a war in which 2 billion people died, humanity adopted the pseudo-utopian solution of universal connectivity to the “Hive” via neural implants. Now, a placid, highly regulated global community of rather shallow citizens enjoys distractions of instant information, entertainment, gossip, sports, and social media. Meanwhile, the surveillance state, aka “Mother,” ruthlessly patrols their thoughts and quietly eliminates any troubling dissent or forbidden subjects (like religion or forbidden subjects). At first, the hero is disgusted by their primitive ways and taboo offline ideas. But while indulging in his elitist privilege of hiking and adventuring unattended in the Swiss hinterlands, he becomes disconnected from the Hive. Truly alone for the first time, the athlete is captured by a band of “Ketchen,” off-grid dwellers. At first, the hero is disgusted by their primitive ways and taboo offline ideas, but with time and the hosts’ patient hospitality, Teepee starts to revel in the privileges of privacy and freedom of thought, and he too comes to hate Mother and the dictatorship. Then the rebels invent a method to sabotage the all-seeing Hive, reliant on Teepee’s superior speed and timing. But something isn’t quite right. Readers should spot fairly easily the takeoff on George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (a shoutout to Ray Bradbury also conjures that writer’s dystopias). Indeed, much of the engaging story settles into confined debates—cum—brainwash sessions (à la Winston Smith versus O’Brien in Orwell’s classic). These discussions focus on the Hive’s insidious methodology and, at least to the ostensible, surprisingly sympathetic villain of the tale, why such a society became necessary, and perhaps even inevitable, for Earth’s survival. But will the much-abused Teepee carry out the system’s destruction, will he escape somewhere else, or will he repent and learn to love Big Mother? With a brief page count and consistent intelligence, Kirchner’s novel may not reinvent the dystopian future cautionary tale, but it renders an effective update/upgrade for the age of the smartphone. His portrayal of a surveillance state is as disquieting as Orwell’s vision in the analog era.

An engrossing and disturbing glimpse into a digital totalitarian future.

ONLY SOFIA-ELISABETE
Kokayashi, Robin Elizabeth
Self (347 pp.)
$0.99 e-book | Jun. 29, 2021
978-1-7367866-0-4

Romance, adventure, and danger attend the travels of a British Portuguese teenage girl in this literary historical novel.

Sofía-Elisabete Fitzwilliam made her first appearance in I, Sofía-Elisabete, Love Child of Colonel Fitzwilliam (2018), recounting her experiences as a 5-year-old in 1815. The girl’s mother, Doña Marisa, who’d abandoned her in a convent years ago, stole her away from England and her father, Col. Fitzwilliam (the poor cousin of Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice). After some time, her father tracked her down, and Sofía-Elisabete’s parents agreed to take turns raising her. But when she was 11 and ready to return to England, her father never showed up. In this sequel, it’s 1825, and Sofía-Elisabete, almost 15, feels stifled by her authoritarian stepfather, Don Rafael, and the expectations that young Spanish women be pious, pure, and think only of marriage and babies. Further, Sofía-Elisabete longs to experience the passion of love—in a country where women don’t allow men even to touch their hands. When her flirtation with handsome bolero dancer Antonio de Silva goes too far, she is sent posthaste to her beloved grandfather in Cádiz. There, Antonio is soon eclipsed by Kitt Munro, a 20-year-old Scottish student traveling as a research assistant. Sofía-Elisabete is bewitched by his intelligence, good manners, and freckles, and he’s equally enamored. But their burgeoning romance is interrupted when Kitt is called home to Scotland, leaving Sofía-Elisabete to deal with her cash-starved family’s
insistence that she marry a rich, thoroughly loathsome older man. She manages to escape and makes a long and dangerous journey toward Britain, experiencing such misadventures on the way that she loses her wits. Kitt finds and rescues her, but that isn’t the last of their struggles. Grueling travel, reported deaths, amnesia, injury, and separation stand between Sofia-Elisabete and the fulfillment of her dreams.

In this volume, Kobayashi develops her charming child hero into a thoughtful, passionate, and equally delightful teenager. While she’s a typical adolescent in her impatience to burst through restrictive bonds and experience life, Sofia-Elisabete exhibits insightful maturity, as when she reflects on the accusation that she’s lazy, pampered, and spoiled and admits she has been selfish and desperate to get her own way. She also has a wonderfully lyrical imagination, as when she plays the harp for Kitt and fantasizes about drifting down a river to a marsh, where he becomes a swallow: “A balmy breeze swept us to sea, and so, I raised high my mantilla to make a sail, guiding us into the bay of Cádiz, past the tangle of ship masts, past the naked sea-bathers, past the urchins angling for St. Peter’s fishes. Mr. Munro fluttered his wings and he settled upon my shoulder, to sing tenderly in my ear.” The complicated plot’s melodrama is balanced with humor, poignancy, and moments of magical realism, particularly when Kitt disappears and Sofia-Elisabete searches for him in the haunted islands of the Inner Hebrides.

A rich, original, and engrossing drama featuring a remarkably engaging hero.

This edition of the first book in the Sons of Sinclair series picks up with the story of Joshua Sinclair, the brutal Horseman of War who was last seen heading for foreign lands to polish up his mercenary skills. After a bloody battle at South Ronaldsay, Joshua travels to Orkney Isle to train Lord Robert Stuart’s soldiers in defensive maneuvers, though Joshua is far less interested in making war than he used to be. He’s ready to head back to his home when he’s waylaid by fierce fighter Kára. She’s desperate to suppress her ownership of her physical actions: clean your plate (even if you’re not hungry); let grandma kiss you (even if you don’t want her to). She contends that most people extend their deficient training into their adult lives: “Not only do we go along with something, we often try to make ourselves like it more.” To break this momentum, she proposes not only the simple question “How do you want me to touch you?” but also its follow-up: “How do you want to touch me?” These principles are further elaborated throughout the book.

Martin, who founded the School of Consent in 2018, repeatedly makes it clear that the clarifying concepts she’s outlining will at first seem peculiar to her readers. They will challenge them, she asserts: “Long-held assumptions will crack open, and there will be insights that shake you up.” She elaborates on the four “quadrants” of giving and receiving touch—“the Serv- ing Quadrant,” “the Taking,” “the Accepting,” and “the Allowing”—and their permutations (are you touching someone for your pleasure or theirs? Are you allowing yourself to be touched for your pleasure or theirs?). And she continuously reassures her readers that this fundamental realignment of old reflexes will be challenging: “It tends to feel odd, sometimes foreign, occasionally impossible, but when it clicks, there is often a feeling of relief and of recovering something you had lost.” She compensates for this strangeness with, among other things, a marvelously open and welcoming prose style, clearly breaking down her concepts in order to help her readers construct a new idea of what touching is—and, by extension, sex and all issues of consent. She stresses that the instructions she’s explaining are in fact extremely simple—the hardest part for many of her clients is merely taking them seriously enough to practice them. Admittedly, many readers will need this encouragement; despite the clarity of the author’s prose, her explanations can often feel jarringly alien. Surely, some readers will think, there are aspects of interpersonal touching that are basically instinctual; surely, it can seem oddly artificial to dissect every aspect of touching so analytically. The implicit response of Martin’s valuable book, written with Dalzen, is simple: Readers can—and must—do no more than just follow their instincts.

A smartly written and revelatory reexamination of readers’ most intimate experiences.

**HIGHLAND WARRIOR**

**Sons of Sinclair**

McCullum, Heather

Entangled: Amara (400 pp.)


978-1-68281-570-0

A warrior gives up everything for love in McCollum’s latest historical romance.

This second installment of the Sons of Sinclair series picks up with the story of Joshua Sinclair, the brutal Horseman of War who was last seen heading for foreign lands to polish up his mercenary skills. After a bloody battle at South Ronaldsay, Joshua travels to Orkney to train Lord Robert Stuart’s soldiers in defensive maneuvers, though Joshua is far less interested in making war than he used to be. He’s ready to head back to his home when he’s waylaid by fierce fighter Kára. She’s desperate to suppress her ownership of her physical actions: clean your plate (even if you’re not hungry); let grandma kiss you (even if you don’t want her to). She contends that most people extend
to help her people defend themselves from Lord Robert and his men, who, Joshua learns, hunted, raped, killed, and imprisoned many of them in the past. Joshua quickly falls for Kára, but he’s hesitant to join in her fight, as he’s seen the terrible cost of combat and knows that the Orkney inhabitants don’t stand a chance against the men he helped to train. But Kára’s persistence and her people’s desperate plight convince him to help; he lobbies for a way to avoid an all-out war, but a murder and a kidnapping alter his plans. McCollum’s lengthy novel wastes no time jumping into a romance. Joshua and Kára kick their relationship off with a steamy sex scene early on, and the story’s pace never slows down. Joshua is a very attractive Scottish warrior, complete with bulging muscles and a soft side (he’s great with kids), but he’s also rather complicated. It’s a nice twist to see the Horseman of War seek out alternatives to violence, and it’s always lovely to see a swordsman who’s fully capable of extracting herself from danger. A clever trick and other unexpected events precede the ending, which ties things up nicely.

Love is a battlefield in this engaging wartime tale.

RATTLESnake ROAD
A Small-Town Mystery Romance
McKinney, Amanda
HHTisevich (447 pp.)
978-1-7358681-0-3

In this novel, a woman hoping for a new start in a small American town struggles with alcoholism and catches the attention of two handsome admirers. After drinking precipitates the loss of her fashion editor job, Grey Dalton ditches her cheating husband and New York City penthouse. She heads south to her new cabin in Berry Springs—a fixer-upper she bought online. She also uses this move as an opportunity to give up booze for good. Before Grey is settled in, gorgeous hotel/resort owner Lucas Covington knocks on her door. He wants her property, but Grey is hesitant to sell. He offers her a chance against the men he helped to train. But Kára’s persistence and her people’s desperate plight convince him to help; he lobbies for a way to avoid an all-out war, but a murder and a kidnapping alter his plans. McCollum’s lengthy novel wastes no time jumping into a romance. Joshua and Kára kick their relationship off with a steamy sex scene early on, and the story’s pace never slows down. Joshua is a very attractive Scottish warrior, complete with bulging muscles and a soft side (he’s great with kids), but he’s also rather complicated. It’s a nice twist to see the Horseman of War seek out alternatives to violence, and it’s always lovely to see a swordsman who’s fully capable of extracting herself from danger. A clever trick and other unexpected events precede the ending, which ties things up nicely.

Love is a battlefield in this engaging wartime tale.

THE LAST MANHUNT
Morris, Tom
Self (437 pp.)
$12.00 paper | $6.00 e-book | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-73633-642-7

Texas ranchers set out to find a couple of murderous bushwhackers in this knotty Western adventure. The final installment of Morris’ trilogy opens in 1885 with the 50-something ex-Texas Ranger Raifford MacReynolds and his stepson, Tom McLauren, as comfortable, married ranch proprietors with past conflicts with Native Americans and cattle rustlers long behind them. However, Raifford’s past resurfaces when a couple of his cowhands are killed by prison escapees Bob Boudroux and Slade Pierce, who have old grudges against him. He and Tom saddle up once more for an epic trek to bring the perps to rough justice, equipped with a state-of-the-art arsenal that includes a Sharps Creedmoor rifle, Winchester 76 Centennial repeaters, Greener 10-gauge shotguns, and miscellaneous revolvers. In previous outings (2010’s The Edge of Forever and 2017’s Reflections in a Distant Mirror), Raifford and Tom confronted the anarchic violence of the open frontier, but 19 years later, they traverse a tamer landscape where the range is fenced in and lawmen insist that criminals be tried. The pair pursue the escaped prisoners in saloons and brothels in towns ruled by corrupt officials; the villains leave a trail of hoofprints and dead bodies that leads into Comanche territory. There, the story gravitates to previous installments’ core elements: Comanche warriors, who now warily coexist with the main characters; long-range marksmanship; and nerve-wracking cat-and-mouse strategies. Morris offers his usual meticulously rendered action— “[Raifford] reached down and jerked his Winchester out of my hands, worked the lever, turned toward the rear, took aim, and fired three times in rapid succession at the trio behind us, who had already broken like a covey of quail”—and energetic prose that features sharply etched characters and punchy dialogue, as when Raifford notes, “The buffalo are gone; you can't ride ten miles anymore without running into this godforsaken barbed wire.” The result is an acerbic elegy for the Old West with a larger-than-life protagonist.

An entertaining shoot’em-up whose heroes have to think as carefully as they aim.
“Osterman’s poetry is captivating in the way that it freshly describes the traditionally masculine endeavor of military combat.”

SHELLBACK

Poems
Osterman, Jeanne-Marie
Paloma Press (82 pp.)
$16.00 paper | Feb. 1, 2021
978-1-73449-653-6

A daughter recalls her relationship with her father, a World War II sailor, in this volume of poetry.

This collection opens with Osterman explaining that a “shellback” is a veteran sailor, particularly one who has taken part in an often brutal initiation ceremony after crossing the equator for the first time.

The poems contained here recount events from the Pacific War theater, where the poet’s father served in the Navy, along with moments from her childhood and adulthood, including caring for her aging dad. Closing lines from the title poem summarize Osterman’s emotional quest: “This is one shellback’s daughter / trying to find that wiser self within / who can forgive these men.”

She examines the psychological impact of war that reverberates through the lives of those who served. Poems such as “Portrait of My Father as a Dad” recall threats of punishment: “I’ll break every bone in your body / if you don’t turn down that TV.”

The author charts her pathway to forgiveness: “I let memories I can’t erase / rest in peace” and portrays her father’s struggle with aging and sickness. Osterman’s poetry is captivating in the way that it freshly describes the traditionally masculine endeavor of military combat.

The poet includes her father’s spoken memories in italics: “Those shells were the size of a little league bat.” But in poems such as “Think of It,” childbirth is used to depict the destruction of the combat zone: “Ships giving birth— / landing tanks tumbling / from the monster hole, / scuttling to shore.” In doing so, she lends a vulnerability to the apparatus of war, which counters her father’s tough male bravado. But Osterman is also unafraid to face the shocking realities of battle. Describing the corpse of a kamikaze pilot, she notes: “He’s just a torso— / the end like a sponge / filled with blood.”

The manner in which the poet captures her aging father’s descent into infirmity can be similarly unflinching yet never without a vein of tenderness: “Without muscle to sniff or swallow, your mouth / and nose let drain what’s left of your life. / I touch your shoulder. Happy Father’s Day, I say.” Set against the brutal backdrop of war, this is an emotionally perceptive, poignant, and thoughtfully nuanced examination of the father-daughter relationship.

Courageous, insightful, and unsettling poems about war and family ties.

THE CHIRAL AGENT
The Biogenesis War
Richman, L.L.
Self (436 pp.)
May 8, 2021
979-8-50-011720-5
979-8-58-456617-3 paper

In the opener to the Biogenesis War SF series, set in the far future, the Akkadian Empire craves access to a distant planet’s exotic biology for nefarious purposes.

Richman starts his sprawling new military/SF series with an infodump, but patient readers will be rewarded. We learn that in the 25th century, humankind has acquired faster-than-light modes of travel, but the scheming, despotic Akkadians are shut out of a space-folding stargate technology developed by the prevailing Geminate Alliance. So the Akkadians activate their hidden network of sleeper agents and assassins in a desperate bid for supremacy and control of a terrifying biological weapon. Within the bounds of the Geminate Alliance lies the unique planet of Vermilion—the one place where organic matter evolved in right-handed, or chiral, molecular form. The rest of the universe is left-handed. At the deGrasse space station, Clint Janus, a psychotic top Navy scientist, is an Akkadian spy. He stages murders and coverups to smuggle experimental samples to his villainous leaders. But along the way, he dabbles in illegal human cloning using the right-hand chiral DNA. As a result, Micah Case, a space pilot who’s part of an elite commando team, now exists in twain. The original Micah is a badly mangled survivor of an arranged “accident”; his reverse-chiral clone shares his memories and a “quantum entanglement” telepathic link. Both are initially presumed dead—but still wind up scapegoated and pursued by a deceived Navy intelligence. Fortunately, a small group within the Geminate upper echelon suspects a conspiracy. After a bumpy but bracing beginning, the intricately plotted material holds reader interest throughout. Technology and bizarre extrapolations show a high level of narrative imagination, and even when the author introduces an unlikely menagerie of “enhanced” talking-animal sidekicks, the material binds together. Despite deep-space settings, no intelligent alien life is mentioned. That’s fine; competing human empires are trouble enough. Numerous future volumes are promised.

Advanced physics and tech and talking ferrets add to the fun in this lively SF series launch.
OWN YOUR OWN SHIFT
The Passion, Power & Freedom To Be Unstoppable
Ruth, Stacey
Self (185 pp.)
978-0-99-951563-1

A leadership coach lays out a personal transformation plan in this debut manual.

Self-empowerment is the basis for most books in the self-help category, and this lively work follows that pattern. Here, Ruth’s focus is on helping readers make fundamental change, even if it does not come easily: “Wherever we experience the most resistance, either internal or external, to a shift we want to make, that is where we have the greatest growth opportunity.” To facilitate making a major “shift,” the author details a process called “Twelve Stages of Transformative Shift,” borrowed from the workshops she conducts. The stages are lucidly explained in individual chapters, each ending with immersive exercises readers are asked to complete. Such stages as “Surrender,” “Get Clarity,” and “Get Uncomfortable” are not necessarily for the faint of heart, but Ruth is a sensitive, positive instructor whose writing is both inspirational and practical. The text is augmented by examples from her own life and coaching practice. She exhorts readers to work tirelessly on their own behalf, urging them to “learn to trust the fire within” and advising that “there is really no greater freedom or power than realizing we always have choices, and we get to take the responsibility for making them.” Throughout the book, the author offers helpful tools and techniques as well as insightful observations and counsel. For example, “Five Power Questions”—which include “How does this align with my values?” and “How am I owning this decision?”—are designed to encourage deep introspection.

Inspirational and uplifting; a thorough guide to making a change.

PRACTICAL MINDFULNESS
A Physician’s No-Nonsense Guide to Meditation for Beginners
Sazima, Greg
Mango (312 pp.)
978-1-64250-437-8

A beginner’s guide to the basics of meditation.

Debut author Sazima’s work as a practicing psychiatrist in San Jose, California, often brought him into contact with people who wanted to be “collaborators in their treatment.” He and his colleagues noticed that several patients seemed stuck in a cycle of poor health. However, after the author established a class on the basics of breath control and meditation, some patients quickly showed improvement, he says. Sazima goes on to recommend these same methods to his readers, offering a series of painless, jargon-free introductions to their basic tenets. His overviews present clear instructions and explanations, as when he urges the reader to concentrate, during meditation sessions, on the simple beating of one’s heart: “The stilling of activity to allow witness of the heart beating,” he writes, “can itself bring great calm, even literally allowing that beat to gently rock the body at rest.” In addition to these general approaches, Sazima also provides a steady thread of simple encouragements aimed specifically at beginners who might be frustrated by minimal initial progress: “The overall trajectory for just about everybody...is of overall improvement.” The combination of Sazima’s expertise and upbeat spirit make his book an inviting reading experience. It also uses helpful photos, graphs, and illustrations to make its points, and Sazima makes the inspired decision to often adopt a carefree, joking tone; he knows that his subject may be intimidating to newcomers, and his occasional wisecracks (such as the chapter title “You’d Better Sit Down for This: A Few Preparatory Words on, uh, Sitting”) effectively work to defuse that reaction. At the same time, he makes it clear throughout his book that the key enemy of meditation is distraction and that regaining the power to focus is of great value.

An insightful and demystifying look at mindfulness practice.
“Scotti maintains a sense of realism by avoiding easy or saccharine solutions.”

BIG AND BAD

ON LINGERING
AND LITERATURE
Routledge Focus
Schweizer, Harold
Routledge (136 pp.)
$59.95 | $22.95 e-book | Mar. 26, 2021
978-0-367-74037-5

In this thought-provoking study, Schweizer explores representations of lingering in literature and considers the significance of this often overlooked experience.

In Schweizer's book On Waiting (2008), he examines the practice of waiting, drawing on literary examples. In this new study, the author draws a careful distinction between the experiences of waiting and lingering, declaring the latter a largely voluntary, pleasurable practice: “While every waiter waits too long, we have rarely heard a lingerer complain that she lingered too long.” Inspired by a moment in his childhood when he lingered on the steps of his front yard savoring the smell of pine trees and lavender, Schweizer embarks on a journey to identify and examine experiences and performances of lingering in literature and philosophy. The author draws on a wide range of texts but pays particular consideration to works such as Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust’s Swann’s Way as well as the poetry of Walt Whitman and the novels of W.G. Sebald. In doing so, Schweizer seeks to describe the deeper level of perception that the lingerer experiences during a pause. Schweizer has a contemplative approach to writing, elegantly outlining his philosophy: “One can’t wait for the beautiful. But one can linger in it. The beautiful happens—but only to one who lingers; it is not a thing but something that happens.” The author is at his best when he's concise. On occasion, his sentences become unnecessarily long and turgid: “It is inversely (or dialectically) the very indeterminacy of lyric poetry, its freedom from conceptual and utilitarian constraints, its unaccountability (to use a Stevensian term), that makes it a vehicle for the intuition of the kind of supersensible reality that Marcel [Proust] intuits in ‘this unknown thing.’” Schweizer's close reading of poetry is nevertheless erudite and illuminating. Examining Elizabeth Bishop's poem “The Moose,” he notes: “The moose’s appearance...briefly corresponds to a complex internal state that had ‘waited longingly to be observed’ and is now strangely actualized.” Drawing on Rilke, the author examines the “overlapping” of temporaliities that elicits the sense of joy triggered by the moose’s “visititation.” Although greater consideration of contemporary literature would make this a more comprehensive study, it’s a thoroughly researched, thoughtfully conceived exploration of lingering that will appeal particularly to academics.

Stimulating reading despite its dense passages.

BIG AND BAD
A Novella
Scotti, Anna K.
Texas Review Press (138 pp.)
978-1-68003-196-6

The lives of a downtrodden teenage girl and a shepherd dog intersect in Scotti's debut YA novella.

Candace “Candy” Scott lives in Southern California with her father. She should be a sophomore in high school, but she hasn’t had the will to attend class since her mother died. Her father does odd jobs to pay the bills, including collecting stray dogs for Clement, a liquor store owner and dogfighting enthusiast. One day, her dad brings home a “big shaggy shepherd with biscuit-colored fur” and keeps him in their building’s basement. Candy also starts noticing Carlos, an older teen who lives in the building with his uncle, Rafael Gomez, and his family. Carlos helps Candy briefly care for the dog until Clement comes to pick him up. Then they witness Clement kicking the animal and saying, “you gotta be tougher than that, little man.” The dog’s name is Bear, and he’s had a horrible life ever since he failed to keep his boy companion, Jared, from running out of school. Bear, meanwhile, makes a fragile connection to JuJuBee, a Chihuahua. Scotti’s portraits of resilience, though harrowing, reveal much overlap in the emotional lives of humans and animals. When readers meet Bear in the first of his many first-person chapters, he says, “I am not a bad dog, but I did a bad thing,” echoing Candy’s attitude toward dropping out of school. She and Carlos are a charming couple; for instance, she claims not to like her nickname, saying, “I’m not that sweet,” and he replies by calling her “Lemon.” Clement comes off as menacing from his very first scene, when he tries to brush Candy’s hair off of her face without her permission. Various scenes of brutality involving Bear in a dogfighting ring are effective without being excessively graphic. Scotti maintains a sense of realism by avoiding easy or saccharine solutions but still offers hope.

An affecting tale that shows how people and animals can change each other’s lives.
Skloot recounts an emotionally turbulent marriage to her mercurial husband. When the author met her future husband, Steve Skloot, in Haifa, she found his playfulness refreshing—he was “like a big kid in every way,” a welcome contrast to the sullen gravity she associated with the typical Israeli men she encountered. They didn’t have much time to get to know each other—he was visiting Israel from New York to volunteer at a kibbutz—but during that brief courtship, she became pregnant. Within six months, they were married and headed back to New York to start a life together, a frighteningly radical decision for the author. She missed her family and hated New York—it “was too much of everything: too much noise, crowds, eternal gray skies, and, more than anything, loneliness.” Also, she learned that Steve was maddeningly unpredictable, hardworking, and affectionate, but also angry and imperious. “Being married to Steve was riding a roller coaster, up, down, up, down—wonderful music at five o’clock then angry words at five thirty; champagne dinners giving way to lonely weeks; mutual showers one day and slammed doors the next.” Skloot poignantly limns the chaos of their marriage and her husband’s sometimes-bizarre eccentricity—he once brought a goat home to their New York City apartment, intending to make it their pet. She discusses her travails with admirable candor and ultimately furnishes an impressively balanced account of their marriage and three kids, affectingly painting Steve as a “crazy, wonderful, tormented soul.” Steve died young from a malignant brain tumor, and the author was heartbroken but exhilarated to once again have the freedom to govern her own life. Skloot’s writing style is companionably informal—her remembrance reads like a story conveyed from one old friend to another with great sensitivity and insight.

A moving recollection, thoughtful and bracingly honest.

### WHITE TRASH WARLOCK

**Slayton, David R.**
Blackstone Publishing (320 pp.)
978-1-09-406796-4

A down-and-out warlock tries to help his estranged brother in this debut fantasy. Adam Binder has always been different. He’s gay, for one, which wasn’t the easiest way to grow up in Guthrie, Oklahoma. He also has the Sight, which allows him to perceive the Other Side: the paranormal world of elves, demons, and lizard people hidden from most humans. To others, of course, he just seems disturbed, which is why his older brother, Robert, convinced his mother, Tilla Mae, to put Adam in a mental health facility when he was a teenager. Released two years ago when he turned 18, Adam has since become an independent detective of sorts. He’s been hunting down and destroying dark artifacts—objects like dice or pool cues constructed with magic materials—in order to trace their creator, a warlock who Adam believes may be his missing father. When Adam’s not battling the forces of darkness, he’s staying with his great aunt Sue in an Oklahoma trailer park, broke and underemployed due to his lack of a GED diploma. Unbeknownst to him, things are about to change. He’s just received a text from his brother, who—finally acknowledging Adam’s supernatural gift—needs help with some crazy disturbances revolving around Robert’s wife, Annie, who has recently been behaving quite strangely. Despite their past differences, Adam agrees to help the couple. Family is family, after all. But when Adam gets to Denver, he discovers that the problem is much larger than Annie: a dark force is corrupting people across the city. The nemesis is a lot bigger than an amateur warlock like Adam is equipped to handle. He finds an unlikely partner in Vic Martinez, a police officer whose life Adam saves, inadvertently binding the two men together. In order to salvage his relationship with his relatives—if he really even wants to—Adam will first have to figure out a way to save them.

In this series opener, Slayton’s prose, which shifts between Adam’s and Robert’s points of view, is expressive yet controlled. Here, Adam ruminates on Tilla Mae’s role in his hospitalization: “His mother hadn’t stopped Bobby from locking him up. Hell, she’d signed the papers. And she hadn’t listened, hadn’t stopped the drugs, the tests, or the endless counseling sessions and group therapy, which had been the worst of it. He’d absorbed the horrors of the others and he’d fled further and further into the spirit world.” Adam is a wonderfully sympathetic protagonist, in part because so many of his conflicts with the world around him have nothing to do with fantasy. He’s poor, gay, abandoned by his family, and treated as if he’s crazy by nonmagical people. The Sight doesn’t have to be a metaphor for anything—everything is right on the page—and yet it works perfectly as a complementary attribute for someone who moves regularly through different spaces. The fantasy elements are familiar but fresh; the pacing is urgent; and the relationship between any two characters is usually more than a little bit fraught. Readers will wait with anticipation for further adventures in this rich underworld.

A stylish urban fantasy with fully realized characters.

### THE FORTUNES OF BLUES AND BLESSINGS

**Sloan Brown, Karen**
Brown Reflections (296 pp.)
$3.47 paper | Mar. 10, 2014
978-0-9915517-0-5

The horrors of slavery give way to the discontents of freedom for an African American clan in this melancholy historical novel.
Sloan-Brown's saga starts in 1827 when 19-year-old Zokaya is kidnapped by slave catchers and sent across the sea from his homeland in Sierra Leone to bondage on Georgia's Ossabaw Island. He is renamed Hercules and becomes an overseer thanks to his smarts and rice-growing skills. Unfortunately, he can't help his 11-year-old biracial stepdaughter, Maia, when she catches the eye of the plantation owner, Richard Bailey. Bailey installs Maia in the big house, and when she turns 18, he makes her his unwilling concubine and thus the rival of his frosty wife, Eliza Barren. When pregnancies result, Eliza gets her revenge by stealing Maia's babies and spiriting them off to a fate unknown. The Civil War brings freedom to Maia, who manages to keep her last daughter, Diana, and it knows everybody's name, but inside it's going one-zero, as it broke through limits imposed by racial oppression.

When his 11-year-old biracial stepdaughter, Maia, when she catches the eye of the plantation owner, Richard Bailey. Bailey installs Maia in the big house, and when she turns 18, he makes her his unwilling concubine and thus the rival of his frosty wife, Eliza Barren. When pregnancies result, Eliza gets her revenge by stealing Maia's babies and spiriting them off to a fate unknown. The Civil War brings freedom to Maia, who manages to keep her last daughter, Diana.

Poisonous office politics and employees than a flesh-and-blood human boss, including an ambitious subordinate named Pamela Steinman, who stews against Andy's position and mutters to her own home servitor, Dick. She routinely keeps him in a closet until an expansion of his programming leads him to notice her sexual needs, albeit cluelessly (“If the purpose of her striptease has nothing to do with my arousal,” he contemplates at one point, “then it is only logical that she is doing it to enhance her own arousal”). The author’s depiction of androids is intensely familiar; SF readers will find no new concepts in these pages. But he tackles the novellas’ ethical questions with energy and a very readable prose style.

A richly textured, affecting tale of a family’s resilience in the face of injustice.

THE ANDY SERIES
Season One
Walvoord, Dirk
Self (324 pp.)
978-1-95-054728-9

A series of novellas focuses on an android fighting for his survival in a world of humans.

Webber recounts how his Prince fandom kept him alive through personal crises and an industry-hopping career in this debut memoir.

The death of Prince Rogers Nelson in 2016 at the age of 57 hit the author hard, as if the music legend was a member of his own family: “My body went slack and I slumped down into my already uncomfortable office chair.” At the time, Webber was working as a publicist for the label Psychopathic Records, where various Insane Clown Posse-affiliated staff stuck their heads into his office to see if he was OK. How did Prince come to mean so much to a 40-year-old anxiety-ridden husband, father, and juggalo? The story stretches back to Webber’s California childhood, where he grew up as the adopted son of violent, evangelical parents. He discovered Prince during the Purple Rain-infused summer of 1984, despite his mother and father’s attempts to keep him from listening to his songs. Prince became a sort of model for Webber: a norm-flaunting style icon who made music that spoke to the boy’s soul. In this memoir, the author documents the ways in which Prince’s art sustained him through his unlikely career trajectories in news, politics (he once worked for the mayor of Toledo, Ohio), and the music industry as he grappled with feelings of alienation and abandonment, mental health issues, and fatherhood. Webber’s vivid prose is a perfect match for the colorful fandoms of both Prince and
Insane Clown Posse; he worked for the latter performers, and here, he describes an ICP live show: “Faygo. Chicken feathers. Streamers. More Faygo. Lots and lots more Faygo. The Clowns went through about 500 two-liters of diet Faygo cola and root beer each show...because the sugar from the regular brand ate away at the foam rubber of their stage sets.” Webber’s trials are tragic and relatable even for those who don’t share his musical tastes. Like the best storytellers, he seems a magnet for odd characters and unusual situations, but the book is ultimately about fandom itself and how music can offer an antidote to the problems of real life.

An often affecting and always entertaining remembrance.
the threat of his health insurance being cut off guide him back to his old career as a mercenary. Eamon Tor, the world’s first trillionaire and Moran’s former college roommate, makes him an ethically questionable offer that he can’t refuse: He wants Moran to destroy a competitor’s cell-editing technology called Eden Therapy. It’s the result of billions of dollars in research and is said to have cured its creator, 80-something Olivia Rusk, of stage 4 brain cancer. But Tor claims that Eden Therapy has devastating side effects, including paranoia, megalomania, and psychosis. If Moran can break into the heavily fortified research facility, wreck the therapy equipment, copy the technical plans, and retrieve a doctor who’s working undercover on Tor’s behalf, then the trillionaire promises to cover all of Benjamin’s treatments. The mission doesn’t go well for Moran, who’s captured and learns some shocking truths, and his rescue is up to his comrades in arms Haley, the daughter of a former colleague, and Kyle Thomas “MeatTank” Johnson, who’s “tall, lanky, and oozing with victorious swagger.” First-time author Wilcox takes his cue from vintage SF by presenting the novel’s high-tech, futuristic setting in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way; in the opening pages, for instance, a pre-retirement Moran is seen on a mission to wipe out “a bunch of robots…controlled by an evil dictator going village to village killing people.” One of the book’s most intriguing characters is Carol, Tor’s virtual assistant, who plays a more integral role in his organization than merely greeting visitors. Although the banter could have been sharper, it does clearly define the relationships between various characters, specifically those between Moran and his colleagues.

An involving adventure in which the protagonist’s commitment to his child drives the story.

**ÉKLEIPSIS**

_978-1-7774088-0-0_  

**ÉKLEIPSIS**  
_Wino, Tanel_  
_Self (176 pp.)_  

A debut collection of horror stories delves into the secret recesses of obsession and paranoia.

Is there anything more frightening than what might be going on in the mind of another person? A spouse, a co-worker, the man next door? In these five tales, Wino shows just how scary seemingly normal people can be. “The Other Son” follows a lonely, harried man on his 50th birthday. His life is empty now that his mother and dog are both gone, but just how far will he go to find some companionship? In “Closing Costs,” a realtor is called to meet with her lover and his wife, ostensibly about a real estate deal. The wife doesn’t know about the affair—at least, the realtor doesn’t think she does. But is she certain enough that she’s willing to see the woman alone when the husband is called away at the last minute? “When in Doubt” follows an intelligence officer just back from a two-year combat tour who is dealing with more than a touch of PTSD. He discovers that his wife has been spending a lot of time with the neighbors in his absence. He’s sure she isn’t telling him the full story, but he knows just how to get to the bottom of it. Wino’s prose is taut and unsettling, as here, when the veteran, an experienced torturer, grabs a tool of the trade: “From the bedside table, I retrieved the Taser that I bought for Tracey before I left. It was tucked beneath a pile of her leggings and gym clothes. I tucked it deep into my back pocket. My vision was tunneling now, my mind crystal clear. Mission mode.” The author commits strongly to his premises, bringing the claustrophobic perspectives of his characters to life in a way that will pull readers right down into their psyches. There’s a fair bit of sensationalism to the stories—often the twists are not entirely believable if you sit back and think about them—but while the tale is being told, readers can’t help but turn the pages.

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_Wino, Tanel_  
_Self (176 pp.)_  
literary experiment that supplies a thoughtful commentary on the “discourse virus” of our age.

A strikingly original book that astutely captures an era of division.

**BLUE**

*And Other Stories in the Manner of Ethnographic Burlesque*

**William Young**

Bowker (149 pp.)


978-1-73442-362-4

The subtle rules and rituals of relationships are unveiled in these quietly penetrating stories.

Young’s yarns capture ordinary Americans in moments of stress and resolution that change their attitudes toward marriage, love, and life. Tales include the following: A man takes boxing lessons and deploys them against his wife’s lover; a Harvard graduate student engages in a game of mutual exhibitionism with a neighbor through a window, which falters when he encounters her in a bookstore; a dad becomes fascinated with a 13-year-old neighbor girl’s lesbian affair with a classmate; a young woman arriving in San Francisco meets the playboy scion of a famous painter on a nude beach and accompanies him back to his yacht; a formerly homeless woman picks up a currently homeless man on the beach in Venice, California; a Mexican American English professor in Los Angeles is drawn to a splendidly manly actor brimming with alt-right conspiracy theories; and a four-story cycle tracks a young man growing up in the 1960s from a high school romance to young adulthood as he withers under a failing marriage and an agonizing job as a door-to-door cookware salesman under the shadow of the Vietnam War. Young’s protagonists are adrift and dissatisfied, full of ruminations about their lives and larger political and racial tensions, and they’re usually pretty horny and avid for sex as a transformative or at least edifying experience. His spare, clear prose is rapidly observant of mundane moments (“He wanted to know more about her—but having already said goodbye twice, no doubt starting up once more would strike the girl as odd, or aggressive”). But in lyrical passages, he conveys a sense of something grander underlying the everyday (“She laid out the bedroll, opened the wine, and watched as the light from the sunset curved and spread throughout the valley, like the hand of a god”). Young’s characters are steeped in confusion, but the collection is lit with a painful awareness and yearning that make them fascinating.

A richly textured, engrossing collection of tales about people discovering who and why they love.
ATTACHMENTS
Jeff Arch
Fine writing, memorable characters, depth of feeling, and gripping drama—a real keeper.

THE CONJURING OF ZOTH-AVAREX
K.R.R. Lockhaven
An irreverent and utterly charming dragon tale.

REALITY TESTING
Grant Price
A bracing blast of neo-cyberpunk with some smart tweaks to the operating system.

ART | COMMERCE
Steven J. Riskind
An engrossing portrait of artisanship as a blend of mechanical genius and human fulfillment.

NIMUE
Ayn Cates Sullivan
Illus. by Belle Crow Ducray
This exuberant fantasy calls on readers to conceive of a loving, balanced world.

SELECTED POEMS OF EMANUEL XAVIER
Emanuel Xavier
A superb poetry collection that renders compelling imagery in a singular voice.
POSTHUMOUS NOVEL BY JOHN LE CARRÉ COMING IN FALL

The final complete novel by the late, legendary John le Carré will be published this fall.

Penguin Random House imprint Viking will release *Silverview* later this year, the publisher announced in a news release. It’s the “only complete full-length novel left unpublished at the time of his death,” Viking says.

Le Carré, widely considered to be one of the best spy novelists of all time, died last year at 89.

“Set in modern Britain, *Silverview* is a brilliantly conceived novel about the tension between personal and political loyalty,” Viking says. “It interrogates the concept of moral goodness in the face of public duty.

*Silverview* will be the first le Carré novel since *Agent Running in the Field*, which was published in 2019.

“This is the authentic le Carré, telling one more story,” said Nick Harkaway, le Carré’s youngest son, himself a novelist. “The book is fraught, forensic, lyrical, and fierce, at long last searching the soul of the modern Secret Intelligence Service itself. It’s a superb and fitting final novel.”

Le Carré’s editor, Brian Tart, called *Silverview* “a brilliant novel. His inimitable voice is on every page, and I am so pleased that readers everywhere will be able to hear it once again,” Tart said.

*Silverview* is scheduled for publication on Oct. 12, one week before what would have been the author’s 90th birthday.

BOOK CANCELED FOR OMITTING BLACK HISTORY

The latest book from author Richard Cohen has been canceled in the U.S. because of its insufficient focus on Black historical figures, the *Guardian* reports.

Cohen’s *The History Makers: 2,500 Years of Who We Are* was set to be published in the United States by Random House, but the press decided not to proceed with the title. A webpage for the book has been removed from Random House’s site.

Cohen said the publisher asked him to add more material to the book about cultural and historical contributions of Black people, and he wrote an additional 18,000 words, including passages about Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois. But that apparently didn’t satisfy Random House.

The *Guardian* reports that Kathy Robbins, Cohen’s wife and a literary agent, is attempting to find a new American publisher for the book.

The U.K. publication is going ahead as planned. On a webpage for the book, publisher Weidenfeld & Nicolson describes it as “unusually authoritative and supremely entertaining” and “a unique exploration of both the aims and craft of history-making.”

Cohen, a former Olympic gold medalist in fencing, is the author of several books, including *By the Sword*, *Chasing the Sun*, and *How To Write Like Tolstoy*.

*The History Makers* is scheduled for publication in the U.K. on June 22.

Michael Schaub is a Texas-based journalist and regular contributor to NPR.
There’s an old saying: You can pick your friends, but you can’t pick your family.
Nonsense, replied Armistead Maupin in a series of novels collectively called Tales of the City. There always comes a moment when a family member leans across the table to say something profoundly hurtful to a gay relative. “Reverend Harker says that things have gotten so bad in Miami that the homosexuals are kissing each other in public,” reads one letter from back home to Maupin’s Michael Mouse, a young gay man. “Your Papa doesn’t believe that, but I say the devil is a lot more powerful than we think he is.”
Small wonder that such alienating words cause their recipients to seek out people of kinder hearts.
Maupin, a Southern conservative who had served in Vietnam, wandered into San Francisco in the late 1960s, when liberation was in the air. “There was a new San Francisco being born in a chrysalis in the crumbling shell of the old city,” wrote fellow journalist David Talbot in Season of the Witch. “And no one captured the feeling of this butterfly world better than a young gay writer named Armistead Maupin.”
Maupin had been working a news beat at AP when a gruff old editor at the San Francisco Chronicle, recognizing the young man’s talent, demanded that Maupin be hired to write pretty much whatever he wanted. Just days before, Maupin had nervously rehearsed a coming-out confession to a friend, a bohemian woman long resident in the city. When he told her he was gay, she answered, “Big fucking deal.” It was a revelation for Maupin, who recounted, “I had landed in a place where the heterosexuals were more comfortable with homosexuality than I was.” Behold: A new beat was born, a chronicle of city life in a city like no other.
In 1976, Maupin began spinning out his “Tales of the City” as a serial novel, centering his narrative on an eccentric family-by-choice, its members gay and straight but always tangled in some complication or another, who lived in a marijuana-scented complex at 28 Barbary Ln. Readers were hooked, and the Chronicle’s circulation boomed.
A pleasantly surprised Maupin turned in weekly installments for the next two years, sandwiching his deadlines between vigorous explorations of every corner of the town. Much contemporary history figured in his stories. “Through the imaginary residents of 28 Barbary Lane,” he recalled in the foreword to an omnibus edition of the first three novels published in 1990, “I could comment on the follies of the moment in a way that journalists wouldn’t dare.” He did, and headline-makers such as Jim Jones and Patty Hearst made their ways into his pages. He eventually left journalism to expand the newspaper serial into a multivolume chronicle of a place and time, which later became a hit cable TV show.
Much of Armistead Maupin’s San Francisco of yore is gone. Some remains. What endures most memorably is the love of those characters who, rejected at home, find their own family, their own people. It’s an affecting affirmation of our power to craft happiness—and our own lives—out of sorrow.

Gregory McNamee is a contributing editor.
WE CELEBRATE PRIDE YEAR ROUND

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