LGBTQ+ Literature in the Year of the Book Ban

Featuring 329 Industry-First Reviews of Fiction, Nonfiction, Children's and YA books

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REVIEWS

SPECIAL ISSUE

LGBTQ+ Literature in the Year of the Book Ban
FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK | Tom Beer

THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES

Reflecting on the state of LGBTQ+ literature as we close our fourth annual Pride Issue, it’s hard not to feel that we are living in the world of Dickens’ famous opening to *A Tale of Two Cities*: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times....”

On the one hand, we have an abundance of diverse queer books for readers of all ages. Our editors highlight some of the outstanding examples—fiction, nonfiction, children’s, and young adult—in their columns for the issue. We feature interviews with fiction writer Lydia Conklin (*Rainbow Rainbow*), historian Hugh Ryan (*The Women’s House of Detention*), middle-grade novelist medina (*The One Who Loves You the Most*), and YA novelist Tucker Shaw (*When You Call My Name*); their work illuminates many different aspects of LGBTQ+ history and experience.

At the same time, the backlash has been fierce. Book banning in schools and libraries is on the rise, and LGBTQ+ books are frequently in the crosshairs. On Page 170, contributor Michael Schaub recaps some of the most startling examples—from New York and Virginia to Texas and Florida—that have occurred this year. And on Page 171, cartoonist Damian Alexander (whose excellent 2021 graphic memoir, *Other Boys*, recounted his own queer youth) reflects on what this censorious climate means for LGBTQ+ creators—and the young people who look to these books for recognition and understanding.

The hypocris of the censors would be humorous if it weren’t so dangerous. After all, aren’t the very people looking to shield students from content they don’t like the same ones who turn around and decry so-called “cancel culture”? Apparently, it’s perfectly all right to “cancel” LGBTQ+ books—just don’t touch anything that upholds the cisgender heterosexual White patriarchy! For the cover of this issue, we asked cartoonist Robert Kirby to illustrate this contradiction. I first encountered Kirby’s work some 25 years ago when his sly and sweet comic strip “Curbside” ran in the New York weekly *LGNY* and other queer newspapers around the country—a sort of gay little brother to Alison Bechdel’s *Dykes To Watch Out For*.

Many of these strips were collected in the anthology *Curbside Boys*; Kirby also edited the anthologies *QU33R* and *The Shirley Jackson Project*, and his memoir, *Marry Me a Little*, is forthcoming from Graphic Mundi in 2023. Both his work and Alexander’s are a reminder that cartoons are a unique genre through which LGBTQ+ creators have always been able to express themselves and present their points of view.

We hope the Pride Issue inspires you to seek out some of these LGBTQ+ stories for yourself—as well as some banned books while you’re at it. As George M. Johnson discovered when his YA “memoir-manifesto,” *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, was widely banned—sometimes the free publicity of a ban is just the thing to bring more readers to your work. *All Boys* is now a bestseller.
The Kirkus Star is awarded to books of remarkable merit, as determined by the impartial editors of Kirkus.

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**IN THE NEWS: LGBTQ+ BOOK BANS**

**“CHALLENGED IDENTITY”: A COMIC STRIP**

Rimma Onoseta debuts with a riveting and emotionally insightful story about two sisters in Nigeria and the lasting impact of family dysfunction. Read the review on p. 144.

Don’t wait on the mail for reviews! You can read pre-publication reviews as they are released on kirkus.com—even before they are published in the magazine. You can also access the current issue and back issues of Kirkus Reviews on our website by logging in as a subscriber. If you do not have a username or password, please contact customer care to set up your account by calling 1.800.316.9361 or emailing customers@kirkusreviews.com.
A Jewish man in 1940 Argentina confronts his mother’s fate when she’s confined in the Warsaw ghetto.

Born in Argentina, Amigorena grew up in France, whose language he writes in and where this novel has been nominated for several prizes, including the Prix Goncourt. It is part of a series of autobiographical novels the author, also a prolific screenwriter, has been writing since the 1990s, and in a preface, he calls the present novel “the source” of the project. The last chapter clarifies the connection. The narrative follows a few years in the life of Vicente Rosenberg, who moved to Argentina from Poland in 1928, leaving behind his mother. Despite her many letters pleading for a response, he does not write to her for years, even as antisemitism rises in Europe. Then German troops invade Poland and the Nazis create the Warsaw ghetto. Shortly after the novel opens in late 1940, Vicente gets a letter in which his mother describes hardships in the ghetto and asks him to send money. He thinks of all the chances he had to get her out of Warsaw. He feels the onset of a “sense of the guilt that he would never truly erase from his heart.” The novel tracks the deepening of this guilt and its effect on Vicente and his wife and three children. In the next few years, the letters stop and news of the death camps starts to reach Vicente. His life becomes a “desolate void” in which “his wife and children scarcely existed.” He stops speaking and gambles compulsively. Amigorena charts the man’s guilt-driven psychological deterioration in careful detail, from small matters (“What difference would it make whether or not he ate more gnocchi?”) to abject misery. Even in extremes of emotion, the translation offers controlled, lucid prose.

A bleak, affecting portrait that points to immeasurable collateral damage.
AMERICAN FEVER
Amna, Dur e Aziz
Arcade (288 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-1-9509-9449-6

A Pakistani exchange student does her best to adjust to American life in this witty coming-of-age story.

“There’s a strain of story this could fall into,” says Hira, the narrator of Amna’s debut novel. “The foreigner trying to fit in, hindered by accent and Fahrenheit and the Imperial system…. The entranced documenter of America. The truth—I was bloody bored.” Hira, 16 when the novel begins, is a stranger in a not-so-strange land—she’s come from Pakistan to rural Oregon on a student exchange program. She’s heard plenty about the U.S. (“Lord, it was 2010, and everyone knew about America, the place that would upsell you on the thread count for your deathbed”), though she isn’t quite prepared for life in the tiny town of Lakeview, where her host mother, Kelly, lives with her high school-aged daughter, Amy. Hira befriends a few people at her new school, including Hamid, an Omani exchange student who’s fonder of the States than she is. “He was only mystified by the country, while I had also decided to be offended by it at every possible turn.” While Hira starts to get used to the U.S., befriending members of her school’s volleyball team, she finds herself both missing and resenting her parents, and things take a turn when tragedy strikes her family not long after she’s diagnosed with tuberculosis, forcing her to quarantine in Kelly’s house. In Hira, Amna has created a fascinating character, prickly but still vulnerable, in search of something but unsure what that might be: “I was tired of limits, aghast that life could be so small,” she reflects. Amna’s novel is a perceptive look at what home means—“It is the sole landscape of dreams, the only place that will ever convince you that its failings, its bounties, its excesses, and caresses are all your own. After all, where does it end and you begin?” This is a funny and affecting novel, understated but powerful, a wonderful new spin on the coming-of-age story.

A smart, charming debut.

2022 PEN Award for Poetry in Translation

Jerzy Ficowski
EVERYTHING I DON’T KNOW
Translated from the Polish by Jennifer Grotz & Piotr Sommer

“... the poet who lived at least seventeen lives, fighting in the Warsaw Uprising, and later traveling for years with the Roma people through the roads of Poland, opposing his government, and watching the authorities ban his poems, a poet who translated from Spanish and Romanian and Yiddish and Roma, but most of all from the tongue of silence.” — Ilya Kaminsky

“... the unassailable evidence that all along, there was yet another genius of twentieth-century Polish poetry.” — Matthew Zapruder

World Poetry Books [worldpoetrybooks.com]
June is a month to celebrate queer lives and queer literature, which feels more urgent than ever this year as some states try to block libraries from carrying queer books; there’s even a lawsuit against a Barnes & Noble in Virginia to prevent it from selling Maia Kobabe’s Gender Queer to minors without their parents’ consent, labeling the book “obscene.” Meanwhile, this year has seen a profusion of excellent fiction by and about people of diverse sexualities and gender identities—here is a selection.

Vagabonds! by Eloghosa Osunde (Riverhead, March 15): In Osunde’s debut novel, “the vagabonds of Lagos might be gay or lesbian, transgender, unwilling to conform to gender norms, or generally out of step with the dominant society.” Through a series of interconnected tales narrated by a chorus of “monitoring spirits,” Osunde tells the stories of these vagabonds, creating what our starred review calls “a powerful debut novel about the power of love and stories to save people shunned by society for being themselves.”

Little Foxes Took Up Matches by Katya Kazbek (Tin House, April 5): Set in 1990s Russia, this debut novel tells the story of Mitya, who swallows an embroidery needle when he’s a baby, linking himself forever to Koschei the Deathless, a gender-nonconforming character from Russian fairy tales who achieves immortality by ‘hiding the needle that is his death’ where no one can find it,” according to our starred review. “Kazbek deftly intertwines tales of Koschei’s exploits in heaven and hell with Mitya’s misadventures around Moscow as the preteen navigates a first crush and considers whether he wants to be a girl, a boy, both, or neither.”

Young Mungo by Douglas Stuart (Grove, April 5): The author of the Booker Prize–winning Shuggie Bain returns to 1990s Glasgow with a novel our starred review calls “romantic, terrifying, brutal, tender, and, in the end, sneakily hopeful.” Teenage Mungo, who’s Protestant, and James, who’s Catholic, fall in love as they take care of James’ racing pigeons—“but a same-sex relationship across the sectarian divide is so unthinkable that their every interaction is laced with fear.”

Chef’s Kiss by TJ Alexander (Emily Bestler/Attria, May 3): This delightful romance novel is set in the test kitchen of The Discerning Chef, a cookbook publisher in Manhattan that’s attempting a pivot to video. Recipe developer Simone, who’s bi, and kitchen manager Ray, who’s just coming out as nonbinary, have an on-screen chemistry that makes them online famous, and it seems to work offline, too. “Alexander whips up a delectable couple with Ray and Simone,” according to our review. “They are each on their own journeys for self-awareness and self-confidence.”

What We Do in the Dark by Michelle Hart (Riverhead, May 3): In her first novel, Hart, a former books editor at O, The Oprah Magazine, introduces Mallory, a college student who has an affair with a female professor whose husband is spending the year elsewhere. “Not a #MeToo story; instead, something more delicate and strange and, at this point, more interesting,” according to our review.

God’s Children Are Little Broken Things by Arinze Ifeakandu (A Public Space, June 7): Ifeakandu, a Nigerian writer who lives in Florida, has written a debut book of short stories that our starred review calls “nothing less than breathtaking and daring, each exploring queer relationships in all their nuanced and unpredictable configurations: secret romances, brief but passionate encounters, relationships that are tested by cultural pressures. At the centers of these carefully constructed stories are queer men whose identities and romances are constantly ruptured by political turmoil and by stratified social and cultural ideas of masculinity.”

Laurie Muchnick is the fiction editor.
What happens to a marriage when one spouse is no longer the person you married?

Leah and Miri lead a conventional married life of comfortable routine, shared love of movies, and happiness at having found each other. Then Leah, a marine scientist, embarks on a three-week submarine expedition during which things seem to go disastrously wrong, and she and her shipmates disappear for six months at the very bottom of the ocean. Miri’s narrative and excerpts from Leah’s diary of the mission relate their growing awareness—and grudging management—of the changes and relationship losses they both endure as a result of their prolonged separation. When Leah returns home, things do not go as Miri had envisioned; her unanticipated transformation—a terrifying dissolution of her human form into something unfamiliar and strange—challenges Miri’s assumptions about the course of their life together. Structured like the ocean’s levels, deepening and darkening the further one descends, the novel slowly reveals that the horrific situation Leah tolerated may not have been as accidental as it first seemed. The unearthly circumstances of Leah’s underwater captivity and mutation are horrible enough but take on new meaning in relation to other, more understandable situations Miri has faced in her life: the metamorphosis her mother underwent during a fatal illness and the sometimes-irritating voices she hears constantly emanating from an unseen neighbor’s television. Is Leah’s current circumstance just further along the continuum of human understanding of loss and endurance? Launching her book with epigraphs from both Moby-Dick and Jaws, Armfield guides the reader through the liminal spaces in the couple’s lives and approaches them with an occasionally ironic humor.

The bleakest horror story can also be a love story; Armfield deftly illustrates how.

An inveterate loner gives up her cherished solitude for the lure of love but finds that “the strength of family ties” may bind too tightly. When we first meet the narrator of this tightly controlled meditation on sensuality, passion, and duty, she is squatting alone in the rain waiting for the freighter that will take her away from her temporary job as a mess-hall cook at an isolated camp on the Chilean coast and into an uncertain future. Taciturn, self-reliant, and stubborn, our narrator has come to the tip of the world in search of “true zero,” a place where she can stop “pretending life had a structure.” Though her three-month contract at the camp has ended, she refuses to return to the “devastating possibility of the same old job” and instead signs on as the freighter’s cook, spending the next few years traveling up and down the South American coast. This itinerant life satisfies with its repetitive labor, its lack of expectations beyond the immediate needs of the body, the beauty of its vistas that can be appreciated from afar; but then our narrator meets Samsa, a young Icelandic woman with “white-blonde hair [and] swimmer’s shoulders,” in a port city cafe and falls in instant lust. Her feelings are reciprocated, and she soon becomes involved in an elliptical relationship with Samsa, who renames her Boulder after the “large, solitary rocks in southern Patagonia, pieces of world left over after creation, isolated and exposed to every element.” When Samsa accepts a position in Reykjavik, Boulder moves there with her and tries...
to settle into a landlocked life, rocked only by the swells of her passion for her lover. Samsa, however, wants to expand and solidify their family with a little yellow house on the outskirts of the city and a baby whose arrival will erase everything that came before but replace it with nothing as solid as “the strength of [the] family ties” that Samsa so fondly imagines for them. Boulder’s emotional isolation coupled with the poetic intensity of her sexuality makes her a striking character, unique in action and in thought, and the prose lilts in truly surprising ways as it navigates the plot’s more familiar tropes of love and desire, dedication and alienation. The book is a modern love story—global, queer, existential in its moral hierarchies—but it is also a rumination on those two most ancient of words: lover and mother.

A novel that lionizes the desire to be alone even as it recognizes the beauty and grace found within a family.

Two worlds meet unexpectedly as a Hasidic woman struggles with a porn addiction.

Raizl, the protagonist of Berliner’s debut, is an 18-year-old Hasidic woman attending college to get an accounting degree. She also has a part-time job to help support her family. For these reasons, she’s allowed a laptop. This is uncommon and slightly scandalous; many in her community only have “kosher” phones or do not use smartphones or computers at all. In a culture that prizes and often mandates conformity, any sort of deviation may raise eyebrows. But Raizl’s schooling, employment, and access to the computer are the least of her deviations. She has a shocking secret: She’s addicted to internet porn.
Given not only the taboo surrounding the secular internet, but also the stringent religious laws around sex and marriage, this is unthinkable in her community. As Raizl struggles to balance her job, her education, her complex family dynamics, her religious obligations, therapy, and the shidduch (matchmaking) process, her porn addiction threatens to tear her life apart. Other secular temptations—such as nonkosher food from street carts—also cause her to stray further and further from what is expected of her. The narrative has built-in suspense—Raizl's situation is so absurd, so precarious that surely it will come to a head of some kind—but unfortunately, it takes too long for that to happen. The first half of the book drags, with little plot or even character development. Part of Berliner's goal seems to be to humanize and tell an unexpected story about an underrepresented and much-stereotyped community; for that, she must be commended. Her representations of Hasidic culture and the Yiddish language are thorough and fluent. She also succeeds admirably in diverging from the overdone “off the derech” (leaving the Orthodox community) narrative; Raizl's story, and her relationship to Hasidism, is much more nuanced than the oversimple tale of an oppressed woman fleeing an oppressive culture. Ultimately, however, these attributes fail to redeem a plodding story.

A promising and unique premise that falters in its execution.

**GILT**

Brenner, Jamie

Putnam (384 pp.)

$27.00 | June 21, 2022

978-0-593-08782-4

A young woman’s attempt to forge her own path leads her back to her family.

Celeste, Elodie, and Paulina Pavlin lead seemingly charmed lives. They are the three wealthy daughters of Alan, who owns and runs his family jewelry business. Pavlin & Co is credited with putting diamond engagement rings on the map, and its signature emerald green packaging is synonymous with love. (Sound familiar?) But when Alan decides—half for publicity, half on a King Lear–esque power trip—to award the prized Electric Rose diamond ring to the first of his daughters to get engaged, all hell breaks loose. Flash-forward 15 years: Paulina was the first to get married, but she and her husband are dead; their daughter, Gemma, a recent art school graduate with a passion for making jewelry more accessible to the masses, has no contact with the Pavlins. Elodie and Celeste have been feuding for years. Desperate to hold a showstopping auction of the family’s private jewelry collection as a way to bring Pavlin & Co back into relevancy, Elodie, now the company’s CEO, makes her way to Provincetown, where Celeste, long since cut off from the family money, has made a life for herself. Elodie tricks Gemma into joining her there because she needs both her sister’s and niece’s signatures to auction the collection. Gemma’s obsession with the Electric Rose (an obsession that wears on the reader very quickly), Celeste’s conviction that it’s cursed, and Elodie’s familial resentment lead to tense moments and attempts at amends. The book suffers from stilted dialogue, and the choice to make Gemma the emotional center of the novel was a misstep. That said, when Brenner leans into descriptions of the colorful characters of Provincetown and mines Elodie and Celeste’s fraught relationship, she makes up for many of the novel’s faults.

A story of family, healing, and the power of a really great accessory.
A TIDY ENDING
Cannon, Joanna
Scribner (352 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-982185-57-2

Cannon’s third novel centers on a Welshwoman with a secret traumatic past in a town with a possible serial killer. What are the salient details in this story? Cannon, a master of obfuscation, makes it hard to tell. There is Linda, the narrator, certainly. She is married to Terry. She is miserable. Her childhood was ruined by allegations toward her father—sexual abuse or misconduct is implied—and his subsequent death. She and her mother relocated to the undistinguished English town where the book takes place. She is 43. As the book opens, a murder victim has been found in town, the second in recent times. Linda seems to spot a clue watching the press conference on TV but doesn’t say what it is. Meanwhile, she becomes obsessed with Rebecca Finch, former resident of her house, whose luxe catalogs still arrive in the mail. Linda is a slippery one, as a character and as a narrator. She describes to the reader, over and over again, how things are. What people are like. What people do or will believe. And she often sounds astute. But when she narratives herself in social settings, she seems tragically awkward and friendless. Time goes on and the bodies pile up. Linda stalks Rebecca and makes her acquaintance. So much time is spent on Linda’s daily movements and musings, so much time on the Rebecca plot. The murders are a hot topic in the neighborhood, but are they even important? Where will it all lead? Will it be satisfying? The ending is not, as promised, tidy.

An exercise in red herrings.

HOW TO FALL OUT OF LOVE MADLY
Casale, Jana
Dial Press (352 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-0-593-44772-7

Three young women come to terms with the roles of the men in their lives and the sad fact that they put them there. “I can’t hear them having sex, but I did hear her say one time, ‘There’s no way I’m doing that.’ And I can’t help but wonder what it is she doesn’t want to do...And if she won’t do it, would I? I don’t think so, but when she said that I wanted to scream out and say, ‘I’ll do it!’” This is Joy, who is hopelessly in love with her roommate Theo, who has an exquisitely beautiful girlfriend named Celine who frequently stays over and...yeah. In an even-more-impressive continuation of the work she began with her debut, The Girl Who Never Read Noam Chomsky (2018), Casale has again taken the detritus of women’s inner lives—the things we wished had never happened, the thoughts we wished we’d never had, the endless self-flagellation about our bodies—and made something funny, warm, and compelling; something sisterly in the finest sense of the word. Joy and her roommate, Annie, take Theo as a third housemate to help make ends meet, but then Annie’s boyfriend, Jason, invites her to move in with him. This would be more of a win if Annie didn’t have to manage every single interaction she has with Jason to avoid irritating him, asking something of him, or frightening him off. In one bitterly funny scene, he lights up the whole house with candles in order to tell her he’s not ready to get married but someday he will be. Casale’s narrative voice is deadpan, funny, and clean without being faux flat or pretentious. She controls the narrative not seamlessly but with interesting flexes of the storytelling muscle. Some times she tells you what’s going on from a God’s-eye view: “This is where Joy could have spared herself.” “Here was where so much came together for Annie.” Other times she lets us directly into the women’s internal monologues, with first-person sections. The most fascinating of these belongs to Celine, a person who has to live with being so attractive that it’s all anyone can ever think about.

Casale is an American Sally Rooney, so smart about friendship and love.
“Chai bears cleareyed witness, with righteous anger swirling beneath her pellucid prose.”

**TOMORROW IN SHANGHAI**
Chai, May-lee Blair (166 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Aug. 30, 2022
978-1-94946-786-4

Tales showing the tension and turmoil experienced by Chinese and Chinese American characters facing the binaries of city and country, men and women, home and away.

In “The Nanny,” the longest story from Chai’s second collection—following *Useful Phrases for Immigrants* (2018)—a woman named Anping travels to the New Shanghai Colony on Mars to work as a nanny for a 4-year-old girl. Anping is excited to earn a much higher salary than she had been, though most of the money will go toward paying down her debt back on Earth. As the story unfolds, Anping discovers there is much she doesn’t know about her new employers. Unlike “The Nanny,” most of the stories here are firmly grounded in an all-too-familiar America, and the secrets they hold are hidden only to those who refuse to see them. Chai’s narrators are often young Chinese Americans who experience racism in persistent, erosive ways. In “The Monkey King of Sichuan,” two women meet up and discuss their former professor, an expert in Asian studies, who sexually harassed one of them during their graduate program. Several of the stories feature protagonists similar to Chai herself—the daughter of a Chinese father and a White American mother. In “Jia” (the Chinese word for family or home), Lu-lu, a little girl newly arrived in the Midwest with her parents, is shocked to discover her neighbors’ open disdain for her family. (We see a college-aged Lu-lu in the following story, “Slow Train to Beijing,” falling in love with a woman engaged to a White male doctoral student.) Chai is straightforward in style, but her earnest, astute chronicling of the impact of the cruelties that people inflict on each other, whether in a small town on Earth or on a terraformed Mars, is powerful.

Chai bears cleareyed witness, with righteous anger swirling beneath her pellucid prose.

**CHRYSLIS**
Child, Lincoln
Doubleday (336 pp.)
$26.00 | July 12, 2022
978-0-385-54367-5

This sixth in Child’s Jeremy Logan series pits the vaunted enigmatologist against high-tech evil.

A scientist falls, with the help of an ax in his back, down a deep crevasse on an Alaskan glacier. Later, a business mogul suffers an apoplectic, bloody death in a Manhattan business meeting. Then a Beechcraft pilot fatally crashes for no obvious reason. All three are members of the board of directors for the mega-company named Chrysalis, and the connection among their sudden demises is a mystery. So the company urgently requests of Jeremy Logan, a paranormal sleuth who has at least five major successes under his belt. He drives his Lotus to a facility hidden deep in the Berkshires of Massachusetts. It’s a highly secure, secret building shaped like a torus, or doughnut. There, he meets with both techs and execs and receives complete authority to investigate—to ask any question of anyone inside the complex. Chrysalis is about to launch the newest version of its Venture product, and they are afraid that someone has programmed it to kill its users. Meanwhile, Logan is highly enamored of their current technology and already uses a virtual assistant called Pythia until his equipment is upgraded to the silken-voiced and ever so helpful Grace. “Grace, you’re a peach,” he tells her. “No, Jeremy,” she replies, “I am a virtual assistant.” It happens that the torus contains “a nest of fire ants,” and as Logan pokes and prods, people continue to die. What hath Chrysalis wrought? A killing machine? Whatever malware might drive the new device, humans amply supplement with intra-doughnut gunfires. Grace, Logan, and the dead mogul
stand out among the characters, while the others make a lesser impression. Logan’s fans won’t be disappointed—and it’s an enjoyable stand-alone thriller, so it’s not necessary to read the series in order.

**Plenty of imagination, with a peek at plausible near-future technology.**

**THE HOP**  
Clarke, Diana  
Harper/HarperCollins (528 pp.)  
$14.99 paper | June 7, 2022  
978-0-06-308-909-9

The author of *Thin Girls* (2020) turns from disordered eating to sex work in her second novel.

The novel opens with a *Vogue* features editor gushing about Lady Lane—about her hair, her skin, the way she moves—and complaining about the fact that Lady refuses to share any information at all about her past. She ends with the line: “There’s talk of a multimillion-dollar book deal on the table for Lady Lane’s biography, but no one can get her to agree to tell the whole story.” In the next line, Lady herself takes over the narration. Her first words are, “I’ll start from the beginning.” The tension between one sentence and the next is amusing, but it also hints at what’s to come. This is the “whole story.” It’s the story Lady chooses to tell about herself. But it’s also the stories that other people tell about her—and the fact that these stories are valuable currency is an inevitable product of her celebrity. Lady describes an impoverished childhood in New Zealand, the death of her loving but unreliable mother, and her decision to move to the United States to work as a Bunny in a legal brothel in Nevada. She recounts childhood crushes and how she began charging money for kisses as a girl. And she offers a look inside the sex industry. But there are other voices here, too, co-workers, friends, and other people who know her. Their stories add texture to Lady’s account, and they often contradict her memory of events or her sense of herself. The plot turns on her realization that, although she made the choice to work at The Hop, the brothel’s owner regards her as a commodity, essentially interchangeable with the woman she replaces. The choice to work for him is a one-time exchange; making this choice means giving him license to choose how he uses her. Liberating herself—and her fellow Bunnies—will require a full-scale revolution. Although the narrative ends with some of the trappings of a conventional happily-ever-after, they are hard-won, and Clarke refuses to turn this story into a morality play. Newly rich and famous, Lady doesn’t turn away from sex work. Instead, she uses her new freedom to imagine what sex work might look like if its practitioners were truly empowered and autonomous.

Like Clarke’s debut, this is technically adventurous, politically relevant, and emotionally engaging.

**WRATH GODDESS SING**  
Deane, Maya  
Morrow/HarperCollins (464 pp.)  
$27.99 | June 7, 2022  
978-0-06-316118-4

A retelling of the *Iliad* featuring an Achilles who’s a trans woman.

Finding an elasticity in the story of the *Iliad*, Deane pits Achilles against Helen of Troy in the Trojan War. The book begins with Achilles hiding in Skyros with the princess Deidamia. Under Deidamia’s tutelage, and using special herbs, Achilles is transitioning from a male body to her true female self. Athena intervenes and transforms Achilles completely into her ideal female body so she can feel fulfilled in her real identity. Athena also grants Achilles’ greatest desire—to have a child—by forging a womb in her center. The book holds close to the story of the *Iliad* in broad strokes but attempts to deliver a parallel journey for Achilles as she transitions and then explores the world of war while questioning what
“In DiMaria’s debut SF novel, a nanotech-implant corporation faces the possibility of frightening, potentially fatal hacker attacks.”

“...a modest breath of fresh air in a subgenre that too often feels like reboots of the same operating system.”

“An offbeat and refreshingly different cybercrime mystery.”
—Kirkus Reviews
Lydia Conklin has a truly impressive curriculum vitae. They have been published in *The Paris Review* and *Tin House*. They’ve been a Fulbright Scholar. They’ve even drawn comics for *The New Yorker*. Their debut story collection, *Rainbow Rainbow* (Catapult, May 31), makes it clear that these successes are well earned. These stories center the experiences of LGBTQ+ people. Sexuality and gender identity are, of course, important aspects of a person’s sense of self and experience of the world, but they are not the only attributes that make a whole person or an engaging character. The people Conklin creates here are multidimensional and diverse. In a starred review, Kirkus praised Conklin for their “open-eyed, tenderhearted, well-crafted stories.”

We spoke with Conklin, 38, via Zoom from Ann Arbor, where they were serving as the Helen Zell Visiting Professor at the University of Michigan; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Queer fiction has changed a lot in just the past few years. There are more stories about people who happen to be queer rather than stories that are about queer people. It’s as if LGBTQ+ people are simultaneously more visible and less visible. I think about that a lot. When I was a kid trying to find queer representation in fiction, I read a lot of books in which the queerness was coded. Dorothy Allison was out, but in her fiction, I could tell who the queer kids were because I recognized myself in them, not because they were actually practicing queer people out in the world, having queer relationships, or whatever. Carson McCullers was never out, but her characters are clearly queer.

I started finding more overt representation in literature—and in movies—and there were just a few very specific narratives. It was a coming-out story—and coming out was the point of the story. There might be a suicide at the end. But there were no stories in which coming out and being queer are just one part of people’s lives. People don’t just sit around waiting to have their sexuality and their gender identity validated. We all have a lot of other things going on.

Are there books you wish that you had been able to read when you were a kid, or do you feel like you needed to put the pieces together in these coded texts?
No, I don’t feel like it was enough. Because I had to do a lot of work to get there, and it wasn’t, like, *Here are some books about queer kids*. I mean, I do consider *To Kill a Mockingbird* to be one, possibly, but those kids never grow up and have a future, right? How was I supposed to imagine my future? Like, damn, do I just fall off a cliff?

“Sunny Talks” gets at some of the generational issues we just addressed. Sunny is a 15-year-old trans kid who has become a minor YouTube star making videos about “crucial queer Gen Z issues.” And it’s only through Sunny that his aunt finds the language to understand their own gender.

I have two trans niblings [the children of Conklin’s sibling]. They’re in their 20s now, but they were teenagers when they came out. When I started transitioning, I was like, *they’re just way ahead of me*. I’m part of that older generation looking to them for guidance.

When I was in high school, there was one out person who was bullied all the time. I had a girlfriend, but we kept our relationship a secret. The idea of being out was definitely scary—and I grew up in a liberal town in Massachusetts. And now there are kids on YouTube talking about their transitions. Obviously, not everything is great for queer kids, but I never would have imagined that much progress would be made in such a short amount of time.

It’s been interesting to watch authors respond to the pandemic. In “Pink Knives,” you explore how Covid-19 transformed our experience of proximity to other people’s bodies and connect that with discomfort with one’s own body. At what point in the pandemic did you feel the need to write about it?

It was actually pretty early in the pandemic—the first summer—that I wrote the first draft of that story. It felt fresh, but I also worried about it because I didn’t know how the pandemic was going to filter down culturally, and I was worried that I wasn’t going to have any insights that a million other people hadn’t already had. That’s why I focused on gender dysphoria, surgery, and open relationships. I felt like the emotional struggles around those, in the story, were tied to the pandemic but not just about the pandemic.

I mean, everyone’s had a different experience of the pandemic, but a lot of the challenges we all experienced were the same. We all had the experience of our lives shrinking. Looking at it through filters that were relevant to me seemed like a good way to write a story that expressed some of the ways that made my experience different from everyone else’s.

What are you working on now?

Right now, I’m working on a novel—one I’ve been working on for a while. I’ve written a couple of drafts, and now I’m reverse-outlining it. I can’t start with an outline because it makes writing feel like I’m just filling in the blanks. It deals with a lot of the same issues as the story collection—gender stuff, nonbinary identity—but I also focus on making art and toxic ambition and some of the issues that I touch on a little bit in the stories. I’m picking up some of those threads in the novel.

Jessica Jernigan is a writer and editor in Michigan. Rainbow Rainbow received a starred review in the April 15, 2022, issue.
it means to be a woman and a man. Achilles thinks, “Once, her
violent impulses had horrified her, evidence of a manhood that
would inevitably consume everything she loved about herself.
But on her journey to Skyros and here on the island, she had met
her share of violent women and knew better.” Despite know-
ing better, when Achilles arrives at the battlefield and attempts
to rescue Helen, she’s caught off guard by the realization that
Helen is not a damsel in distress but a megalomaniac, thrilled
by her effect on the armies who fight one another with her
name on their lips. Helen does not desire a quick end to war.
She is also vicious about Achilles' identity, saying, “Here’s an
idea: when you die, I will erase you from history. I will make it
so you were never a woman. Everyone will remember you as a
man.” This book is Achilles' fevered journey from womanhood
to childbirth to death. The premise of the parallel journeys is
effectively handled and integrated into the Homeric epic.

This fresh perspective is valuable even if the swashbuck-
ling style of the prose lands a little heavily on the page.
“An involving courtroom and family drama with strong connections to historical events.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“The book is interesting and fascinating to read. Suspense leaves the reader in want of more...”
—OnlineBookClub.org, 4/4 stars

“...Larry uses his expert legal background and sincere devotion to Judaism and the Jewish people to portray a story which will keep your attention, inform you about Jewish values and learn about life-saving sacrificial acts of kindness. You will be both enlightened and entertained by reading the book.”
—Rabbi Vernon H. Kurtz, Emeritus, North Suburban Synagogue Beth El

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love him in the wildest wastes?” he asks his two companions, who at first are awed by the holy man who has chosen them to serve him on this mission. Taking one of her regular breaks from contemporary fiction, Donoghue has left behind none of her ability to spin a compelling story and people it with sharp characterizations. Young Trian, given to a monastery by his parents at age 13 for an unnamed defect, grows in confidence on the island and becomes increasingly sullen about the endless copying of sacred manuscripts at the expense of pressing tasks like finding food. Elderly Cormac, who came to the cloistered life after the death of his wife and children, has myriad practical skills and an engaging love of storytelling; Christianity for him seems to be a series of marvelous yarns. But even resourceful Cormac struggles to keep the trio alive as winter approaches and Artt’s demands grow increasingly onerous: They must build an altar before a shelter to sleep in; he forbids trade with nearby islands for desperately needed supplies as a source of sinful contamination. Generating narrative tension from a minimum of action, Donoghue brings the monks’ conflicts to a climax when Trian falls ill and a long-kept secret is revealed. Artt’s bigoted response provokes a confrontation that brings the novel to a satisfying conclusion. Reminiscent of Room (2010) in its portrayal of fraught interactions in a confined space, this medieval excursion lacks its bestselling predecessor’s broad appeal, but the author’s more adventurous fans will appreciate her skilled handling of challenging material.

More fine work from the talented Donoghue.

THE THREAD COLLECTORS
Edwards, Shaunna J. & Alyson Richman
Graydon House (384 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Aug. 30, 2022
978-1-525-89978-2

This collaboration by longtime friends Edwards and Richman draws on the authors’ Black and Jewish family histories to build an expressly uplifting Civil War fiction.
The novel begins in 1863 New Orleans, showcasing the forbidden but abiding love between musically gifted William, a classically trained flutist who’s enslaved, and Stella, who lives technically free as the kept woman of William’s current owner. With Stella’s aid, William escapes to join the Union Army as a member of the Louisiana Native Guard. Meanwhile, in New York, trombonist and composer Jacob has been inspired by his wife, Lily, a suffragette and abolitionist, to join the Union forces on moral grounds. The novel balances three intertwining narratives: Pregnant with a child who could be William’s or his master’s, Stella struggles to survive in Union-controlled New Orleans, where food is scarce and Confederate insurrection a constant threat; William and Jacob experience wartime atrocities while their unlikely friendship deepens through their music connection; and in New York, Lily devotes herself to the Union cause with genteel moral certainty until she ventures South in search of Jacob and faces her naïveté about the war’s cost. Given that African Americans in the South had everything to gain or lose in this war, it is no surprise that Stella’s and William’s segments are the most compelling; the writing about New Orleans also creates a sensual, specific sense of place missing elsewhere. Lily reads like a mouthpiece for enlightened concepts, even in her love letters. There is no romantic chemistry between her and Jacob, who remains an undeveloped cipher. What should be an interesting twist, his discomfort as a Jewish outsider in the Union ranks, barely resonates, while his bonding with William comes too easily. All four protagonists are more noble symbols than characters, and key plot points—including Stella’s stitched maps and Jacob’s estrangement from his Confederate brother—border on Civil War story clichés.

Well-intentioned but overly familiar.

AFTER THE HURRICANE
Franqui, Leab
Morrow/HarperCollins (368 pp.)
$27.99 | July 19, 2022
978-0-06-320459-1

A woman’s search for her missing father brings her closer to understanding who she is.

Elena Vega is a graduate student in history at NYU desperate to connect with her alcoholic father, Santiago, when he unexpectedly arrives for a visit from Philadelphia. His drinking has made it hard for Elena to share her life with him, as he forgets everything she tells him, while his secretiveness about his own past has left her with little understanding of who he is. After telling Elena that he and her mother are separating and that he’s moving to Puerto Rico, where his parents grew up, he leaves abruptly without saying goodbye, creating a deep schism leading to six years of only intermittent communication between them. Then, when Hurricane Maria hits the island and Santiago goes missing, Elena’s mother asks her to fly to San Juan to try to find him, a mission Elena hesitantly agrees to. As she searches, she reconnects with family and learns more about the father she may have lost and his struggle to provide a better life for his daughter. Elena’s conversations with people who cared for Santiago as a child being raised by an unwell mother or a college student struggling to make ends meet or, later, a man ravaged by alcohol and mental illness are interspersed with flashbacks to Santiago’s own life, giving the reader a firsthand look at the man at the center of the story. With the exception of Santiago, though, the characters are unevenly developed, with the author telling more than showing and often leaning into hyperbole. The novel is also weighed down by brief repetitive statements that stretch a point rather than illuminating it. Describing a family house in San Juan, Elena thinks, “A piece of the past would be hers. A part of history, a part of the island for her, all her own. The house is a piece of her.”

This multigenerational novel could have been better developed.
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An ensemble of oddballs occupies a dilapidated building in a crumbling Midwest city. An 18-year-old girl is having an out-of-body experience; a sleep-deprived young mother is terrified of her newborn’s eyes; someone has sabotaged a meeting of developers with fake blood and voodoo dolls; a lonely woman makes a living deleting comments from an obituary website; a man with a mental health blog covers himself in glow stick liquid and terrorizes people in their homes. In this darkly funny, surprising, and mesmerizing novel, there are perhaps too many overlapping plots to summarize concisely, most centering around an affordable housing complex called La Lapinière, or the Rabbit Hutch, located in the fictional Vacca Vale, Indiana. The novel has a playful formal inventiveness (the chapters hop among perspectives, mediums, tenses—one is told only in drawings done with black marker) that echoes the experiences of the building’s residents, who live “between cheap walls that isolate not a single life from another.” Gunty pans swiftly from room to room, perspective to perspective, molding a story that—despite its chaotic variegation—is extremely suspenseful and culminates in a finale that will leave readers breathless. With sharp prose and startling imagery, the novel touches on subjects from environmental trauma to rampant consumerism to sexual power dynamics to mysticism to mental illness, all with an astonishing wisdom and imaginative wholeness. “This is an American story,” a character hears on a TV ad. “And you are the main character.” In the end, this is indeed an American story—a striking and wise depiction of what it means to be awake and alive in a dying building, city, nation, and world. A stunning and original debut that is as smart as it is entertaining.

...a new, wholly original voice you won’t want to miss...”
—Jane Heller, New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

“...fully immersive, wildly entertaining and as authentic as it gets.”
—Steph Post, Author of Miraculum

“...It’s entertaining and more—a romp with heart.”
—John Capouya, Author of Florida Soul

“An irrepressible Florida frolic filled with lost dreams, forlorn love, and horror movie lore.”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)
well with Cameroon writer Patrice Nganang’s novel *A Trail of Crab Tracks* as a document of the colonial experience, and it is impeccably written.

A novel with an epic feel, even at 320 pages, building a complex, character-based story that stretches over generations.

**THE LAST OF THE SEVEN**

Hartov, Steven
Hanover Square Press (336 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-1-335-05010-6

A fact-inspired novel about a German Jewish soldier fighting for the British as a member of two secret, all-Jewish commando units disguised as Nazis.

The book begins in the North African desert in the spring of 1943. Having miraculously made it across an endless stretch of sand in the blistering heat on a shattered leg, Bernard Froelich convinces his British captors that despite his Nazi uniform, he is one of them. He is the last surviving member of an infiltration squad comprised of escaped German and Austrian Jews who, having lost their families in the Holocaust, are out for revenge. Boasting a gangrenous wound, Froelich is told his leg will be amputated before the charismatic, cigar-chomping American commander of an understaffed field hospital in an Italian monastery overrules the order and devises a makeshift way to set and heal the leg. Soon enough, Froelich is recovered enough to take charge of another all-Jewish team of fake Nazis whose mission is to parachute into a German village on the isle of Usedom to disrupt an advanced Nazi missile project. A one-time merchant mariner and member of a Special Operations branch of Israeli Military Intelligence, Hartov is at his best capturing the torture tests his protagonist is put to. The desert scenes scorch the imagination; the bombing of a transport ship is horrific. While never less than entertaining, the rest of the novel doesn’t rise to that level of intensity, comfortably plugged into the *Dirty Dozen* formula (Froelich and his fellow commandos...
Alexandra Lapierre is well known for chronicling the extraordinary lives of historical women. Born in France, educated at the Sorbonne and the University of Southern California, the acclaimed novelist and biographer travels the globe in pursuit of primary sources, with the intention of restoring these women—Fanny Stevenson, Artemisia Gentileschi—to the collective consciousness.

“I am interested in telling, as accurately as possible, the lives of people that have been forgotten,” Lapierre tells Kirkus, via Zoom, from Paris. “And it generally starts by being a little bit mad, saying, “How is it possible that this story has not been told?”

Those as yet unacquainted with Belle de Costa Greene, the subject of Lapierre’s outstanding new novel, Belle Greene (Europa Editions, June 14), translated from the French by Tina Kover, may soon find themselves similarly outraged: How is it possible we’ve heard so little about the remarkable Belle Greene? Born into an elite Black family in Washington, D.C., in 1879, Belle Marion Greene moved to New York City with her mother and siblings as a teenager and made a pact with them to pass as White. This secret threatened their safety every day; it also enabled Belle to secure a librarianship post at Princeton University, which led her to manage and develop banking magnate J.P. Morgan’s personal library. She eventually became one of Morgan’s most trusted advisers and the highest-paid woman in the United States. Bold, ambitious, and insatiably curious, she lived life to its fullest: She drank, danced, traveled the world, loved freely, and dressed to the nines. “Just because I’m a librarian doesn’t mean I have to dress like one!” she famously remarked.

“I became completely obsessed with her,” says Lapierre, who first learned of Greene while doing research for Fanny Stevenson: A Romance of Destiny at the Morgan Library in the early 1990s. “She broke all the rules: to be unmarried at the beginning of the 20th century, to have a career where you start from zero and you’re going to become the [highest-paid] woman in America. To think that she was working like hell but at the same time dancing, drinking, meeting everybody, [with] this fear of losing everything every second! She lived as if she was going to die the next day. She is amazingly alive.”

For Lapierre, bringing a historical figure back to life in fiction required extensive research. Among
the archives she visited in order to write Belle’s life was Villa I Tatti, the Tuscan estate of art critic Bernard Berenson (1865-1959), with whom Belle had a significant, tempestuous love affair. The estate possesses the full cache of Belle’s letters to Berenson: 628 in all, and the longest is 28 pages. When Lapierre arrived in Florence, she had no idea she’d be prohibited from scanning or photographing the letters (they were being proprietarily scanned by the Morgan Library at the time). To extract the information, she’d have to copy them by hand—using pencil, not pen—and fast.

“I was furious at the beginning,” Lapierre says, laughing. “But it was an incredible experience because after the 10th letter, I was in her head. If you copy with your own hand, ‘my love, you are just betraying me in every way’... little by little, after a week, you’re in the woman’s head. That proved absolutely fantastic, because I could think like Belle after a while. The way she built her sentences, the way she joked, the way she manipulated Berenson, making him jealous. When you do it yourself, it is incredible.”

The dialogue of Belle Greene draws on Belle’s own words, and, as Lapierre writes in a note to readers, “even the most novelistic scenes, the most trivial incidents, are the fruit of thorough archival research in Italy, England, and America, and... even the smallest details are based on documented evidence.” These methods created an undeniably compelling, multifaceted character with an unforgettable voice:

“I have no intention of marrying anyone, Mr. Morgan,” [Belle] said finally, her voice toneless. “But if I did, your threats to cut me out of your will would not change my decision. I am free to love whomever I choose. Free to start a family, if I wish. Free in myself, and free in my feelings. The time I share with you—the evenings, the Sundays, the summers, every national holiday, every vacation—I choose to share, of my own free will. I care for you very much, and it’s a gift on my part. Because I could leave here at any time. Contrary to what you believe, you have no rights over me. I am not your possession!”

By the time readers reach this heated exchange with boss J.P. Morgan, on the subject of whether she intends to wed, the response will read as typically Belle: daring, clever, and brave—words that wouldn’t be out of place in characterizing Lapierre’s own achievement. In a starred review, Kirkus calls Belle Greene “an engaging story about a brilliant woman who risks everything,” joining an international chorus of acclaim. The novel has already won awards and praise in France, where it was originally published in January 2021. Now the author is excited to share it with an American audience.

“Belle is the portrait of an amazing American lady in every way,” she says. “She embodies everything that we are fighting for today—against racism, against [chauvinism], equality for everyone, women and men. She’s all that. For me to be able to show that there was, at [this] point in history, a woman who embodied all that freedom is extremely important.”

Editor at large Megan Labrise is the host of the Fully Booked podcast.
are called FJDs, as in “filthy Jewish dozen”). There are extended training sequences, plenty of gallows humor to go around, Rommel makes a low-key appearance, and Froelich falls in love.

A little-known story enjoyable told.

The Darkness of Others
Holahan, Cate
Grand Central Publishing (368 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Aug. 23, 2022
978-1-5387-0918-4

Less than a year into the pandemic, a wealthy filmmaker is shot dead and his wife goes missing, exposing the “deep darkness” at the heart of marriage, friendship, and professional relationships.

As bitter weather ushers in the first full winter of the pandemic, restaurants are hurting for business, and masks are still the normal accessory for any social interaction. Fear is already a bosom companion of most people’s lives—fear of illness, fear of eviction, fear of debt—so when a cleaning lady discovers the bloody body of movie director Nate Walker in his Brooklyn Heights town house, it’s another sign of how far removed people are from any sense of safety. Suspiciously, at least to the cops, no one can find Nate’s wife, Melissa, so her best friend, Imani Banks, steps in to break the news to their daughter. Meanwhile, Tonya Sayre, a single mom and struggling waitress, finds that a closely guarded secret about her daughter’s parentage may not be enough to guarantee her financial stability, so she throws herself on the mercy of the man who owns the restaurant where she works. The owner—Imani’s husband, Philip—is already dealing with his own financial troubles. Over the course of the next week, despite several misdirections and misunderstandings, Imani will fight to find Melissa and to clear her of suspicion. The chapters switch perspectives among many of the characters, but with a small cast, there’s not much mystery—or satisfying motive—to drive the action. The more interesting and psychologically engaging parts of the novel explore the pandemic’s effects on social and economic stability. The human capacity for selfishness and evil is a well-established reality, but the realities of loving and surviving in the midst of a global pandemic are still fresh and evolving themes.

Aims for biting commentary but falls short of revelation.

The Devil Takes You Home
Iglesias, Gabino
Mulholland Books/Little, Brown (320 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-0-316-42691-6

A desperate father finds himself drawn into a paranormal underworld.

Faced with a growing stack of medical bills to pay for his daughter’s cancer treatments and prone to hallucinatory visions, Mario contacts Brian, an old meth-head acquaintance, who sets him up with a contract killing. Mario executes the job with unsettling ease but discovers otherworldly worms inhabiting the body of the man he just murdered. This first portent signals strange and nasty things to come for Mario, whose extralegal efforts fail to save the life of his child. When his marriage subsequently falls apart, Mario smokes meth, kills several more people, and agrees to one final assignment: Rob a Mexican cartel. Disturbing supernatural encounters en route to this suicide mission intensify the impossible danger of this unlikely feat, which culminates in monstrous battles with a cartel that is not what it seems. While Iglesias pulls off vivid characterizations (one man’s face is described as “a fistful of sliced ham”) and he threads enough Spanish through the dialogue and narration to appeal to bilingual readers, the story feels stretched and uneven. Less genre-defiant than genre-dysmorphic, the book never quite settles into a storytelling groove and instead cycles between pulse-pounding thriller, diabolical horror, and violent narcoliterature. Nevertheless, readers captivated by
the characters’ motivations and the occult pyrotechnics will quickly devour it whole.

A vivid, if unbalanced, supernatural thriller at the U.S–Mexico borderlands.

LONG PAST SUMMER
Kirwan, Noué
HQN (384 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-335-44882-8

A woman with clear focus and ambitious career aspirations has a tough struggle to acknowledge the man she really loves.

Mikaela Marchand was a Black girl—now Black woman—with lofty goals. She’d been planning her departure from small-town Georgia all her life. She and her friend Julie Robertson, who’s White, went through grade school as besties; Julie, “bubbly, wholesome, ridiculously pretty,” and Mikaela with her “witheringly incisive gaze.” A senior prank in which they streaked across their high school football field landed them in the slammer just long enough for Mikaela to be booked by Cameron, a tall, lanky, impossibly good-looking White boy working his way through school. A romance ensues with this budding photographer, but Mikaela leaves Cameron for college and law school in the Big Apple. She’s just short of making partner in a fancy New York law firm and living with Rashad, a handsome Black pediatric resident, when her past comes back with the ferocity of a windstorm. This debut novel addresses what it’s like to grow up with absent and deceased parents as well as the pressure on Black professionals to overperform while conforming to White norms. The harsh realities of Julie and Mikaela’s fractured friendship, Mikaela’s fraught relationship with her mother, and Mikaela’s inability to see Cameron for who he is all developed with skill and empathy. Mikaela’s sister, Vanessa, pokes fun at her, providing pitch-perfect humor. Most of all, Mikaela travels a long road to stop hiding from her own emotions and

STOOD BEFORE A WORLD THAT TETERS WITHIN YOUR REACH WOULD YOU DARE? WHICH WAY?

“While this is obviously a character-driven tale—even secondary players are adeptly developed—it’s the meticulous worldbuilding and extensive backstory that make Magleby’s series opener so effortlessly immersive.”

“...masterful worldbuilding, a rich tapestry of character-centric threads, and nonstop action and adventure make this a must-read for those who enjoy shelf-bending and genre-blending storylines.”

“At absolute grand-slam first installment of an SF/fantasy series.”
—Kirkus Reviews

For Agent Representation or Information on Publishing and Film Rights, Email Sterlingktb@gmail.com • reddit.com/r/Magleby
needs. If the novel feels like it could have been shorter, with multiple moments that could have been stopping points, the payoff is the steamy sex, saved for the end.

This fast-moving novel spotlights a smart woman’s journey to find what she wants.

THE HAUNTING OF HAJJI HOTAK
And Other Stories
Kochai, Jamil Jan
Viking (288 pp.)
$25.99 | July 19, 2022
978-0-59-329719-3

A short story collection full of tragedy, humor, and keen insight.

In his second book, following the excellent novel 99 Nights in Logar (2019), Kochai offers a dozen short stories focusing on the lives of Afghans and Afghan Americans. The collection kicks off with “Playing Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain,” the story of Mirmawis, a young man whose video gaming session turns surreal when he realizes the nonplayer characters he encounters seem to be his father and other relatives in 1980s Afghanistan. The story is told in the second person, lending an urgency to the narrative: “You’ve been shooting at Afghans in Call of Duty for so long that you’ve become oddly immune to the self-loathing you felt when you were first massacring wave after wave of militant fighters who looked just like your father.” In “The Tale of Dully’s Reversion,” the title character, a California student teacher who has lost his religion, finds himself transformed into a monkey when he steps in front of his devout mother’s prayer mat. Following an imam’s advice, his mother takes him to Afghanistan to fast at a martyr’s shrine in the hopes that it will make him human again. Things don’t work out that way, and the story ends in tragedy, though Kochai uses humor throughout, which somehow both leavens and amplifies the sadness. The collection ends with the stunning title story, about a West Sacramento family trying to hold itself together through financial difficulties. Like the first story, it’s told in second person, but the perspective this time is that of a shadowy figure, perhaps a government employee, spying on the family and developing an unexpected fascination with them even after determining they’re not a threat: “You should update your superiors. You should advise them to abort the operation. But you won’t.” Like every other story in this collection, it’s brilliant and written beautifully, with real precision and compassion. Kochai doesn’t make a false move in this book; like his previous one, it’s a master class in storytelling and a beautiful reflection on a people that have endured decades upon decades of tragedy.

Stunning, compassionate, flawless.

MEET US BY THE ROARING SEA
Kumarasamy, Akil
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 23, 2022
978-0-3741-7770-6

An AI programmer’s mourning process takes her into her own past and the unusual manuscript she’s translating.

Kumarasamy’s slippery debut novel concerns an unnamed young woman whose mother has recently died. To stay connected with her Tamil heritage—and her interest in language and communication—she dedicates herself to translating a document written years earlier by a group of female students at a South Indian medical school. In the meantime, she’s assisting a friend with art projects and cohabitating in her family’s Queens house with cousin Rosalyn, who has opened their home to a homeless veteran who’s appeared on a popular reality show called Soldiers’ Diaries. (We’re in a near future where the military occupies “stabilization zones” in unnamed places and citizens are obligated to keep their “carbon score” low.) And at work, she’s shoveling...
data sets into an AI model she’s nicknamed Bogey and discussing the nature of consciousness with co-workers. Where is all this going? Kumarasamy’s language can be delightfully lyrical: “All along you think you have control, moving along a straight line, from one point to another, but really you’re spinning with the earth so deep in that vortex of girlhood.” It can also be frustratingly abstract. (A line the protagonist asks of the Tamil manuscript might apply to this book: “Why is your syntax so elliptical?...Is this a testimony, a final note, written to no one, everyone?”) Kumarasamy’s core interest is with “radical compassion,” a term the medical students use often to discuss their obligation to alleviate others’ suffering. Our own struggles to articulate that compassion—symbolized here in shows like *Soldiers’ Diaries* or AI or other technologies—reflect either human nature or a human problem that requires solving. Difficult emotions may require difficult writing, but Kumarasamy’s demanding approach creates less a well-woven story and more a mass of interesting but unbraided tendrils.

**Intensely mournful but jagged storytelling.**
Paul, Gauguin. At first Noa Noa and the surrounding village of Lazeaux, with its close-knit, creative group of villagers and its jazz festival, seem charming. In fact, by the end of the week she’s supposed to spend there, Frances is torn about whether to proceed to her next assignment. By then, she’s sleeping with Paul, who fits perfectly into the hole left by A.B. Sometimes astrology really nails it—as Paul’s brother the astrologer will explain, Frances’ Venus is in her 12th house. “Alors, immobilizing passivity; tendency to idealize others and swallow down feelings to please them, to play dumb or shut down completely to avoid conflict; difficulty in making decisions and/or identifying own needs—.” Hel-lo Frances! No wonder Paul rushes in to shut him up. Lafarge succeeds in creating the sunny, drowsy, sensual atmosphere of Southern France, the precariousness of the plans of young backpackers and ride-sharers, and the claustrophobic psychology of a predatory relationship.

A cautionary tale with warning lights flashing.

**OTHER TERRORS**

*An Inconclusive Anthology*

*Ed. by Liaguno, Vince A. & Rena Mason*

Morrow/HarperCollins (368 pp.)

$16.99 paper | July 19, 2022

978-0-358-65889-4

Horror writers representing varied cultures, genders, and sexual orientations contribute stories cataloging anxieties of, and toward, “the other”—whatever that “other” may be.

The subtitle, *An Inclusive Anthology*, hammers home what Bram Stoker Award winners Liaguno and Mason have assembled: a trailblazing anthology in which LGBTQ+ characters and people of color are both feared and preyed upon in jolting, haunting, sometimes funny, and/or graphically violent tales. Dramatizing fears, anxieties, and phobias held by and against those perceived as socially marginal can be a delicate, even dicey process. But the stories here are mostly tough-minded and emphatic in such provocative variations on this theme as Jennifer McMahon’s tautly woven, wickedly ingenious “Idiot Girls,” about teen lesbian lovers whose secret trysts pit them against the immigrant groundskeeper of their apartment complex—and put them in the path of a serial killer. Then there’s “Night Shopper,” Michael H. Hanson’s revenge fantasy in which a Muslim trans woman with a penchant for Wittgenstein’s aphorisms finds unlikely salvation from hate crime in the shut-ins to whom she delivers groceries. Similar if subtler gratifications are available in Usman T. Malik’s “Mud Flappers,” which reaches further afield to an island off the Karachi coast whose residents have sustained an effective—and grisly—way of resisting would-be exploiters. A different, if no less bizarre, act of retribution is submitted for our approval by the crime writer S.A. Cosby in “What Blood Hath Wrought,” in which a Black history professor calls upon otherworldly powers to seek out from among a motley collection of Pancake Shack diners the homicidal descendant of a sadistic slaveholder. The terrorism of anti-Asian racism aroused by Covid-19 swells into more widespread and profoundly transfiguring scientific phenomena in Denise Dumars’ “Scrape,” while in Hailey Piper’s “The Turning,” adolescent girls are swept up by a plague that transforms them into prehistoric mammals, thus creating newer, scarier forms of “the other” that frighten the grown-ups—and resist any efforts to change back to whatever they were before.

One could go on and on citing stories by such writers as Alma Katsu, Gabino Iglesias, Nathan Carson, and others.

The face of horror fiction continues to be enhanced, both in representation and in relevance.
This is my story in all its nakedness. It is the truth as much as I remember it. I tell you this because it’s been many years since it occurred and sometimes, even I don’t believe that it happened.

Yet, it did.

Replete with mystical, magical details, this novel deals with transcendent themes that relate to our very existence.

“This a deeply moving story of spiritual awakening! East meets West in the life of John Asanga, a young man of Indian ancestry coming of age in America.”
—Soul & Spirit Magazine

“One man’s personal and spiritual adventure makes for a profound and intriguing tale.”
—Kirkus Reviews

For All Inquiries, Please Email
douglas@yogaalovestory.com • yogaalovestory.com
SOPHIE GO’S LONELY HEARTS CLUB
Lim, Roselle
Berkley (336 pp.)
$16.00 paper | Aug. 16, 2022
978-0-593-33561-1

A young Toronto woman has just returned from training as a matchmaker in Shanghai and begins to set up her business.

Sophie Go has a rare ability: She can see the red threads that dangle from people’s hearts, indicating that they are open to romantic love. When a pairing is made, a couple’s red threads join together. The strength of their bond is indicated by the thickness of the connection and their trials and tribulations, by its knots. She has inherited Toronto as her territory, and she has major—and well-respected—shoes to fill now that Madam Chieng has died. But at the party where she is to be launched into high society, her mother shows up and tells everyone that Sophie was expelled without graduating from the matchmaking academy. What follows is sweet, earnest, candy-loving Sophie’s effort to set up her business while she works on getting accredited. She meets the Old Ducks, a group of men in their 70s who could use her matchmaking help, including Mr. Regret, who listened to his parents and never married the woman he loved; Mr. Wolf, obsessed with his show cats; Mr. Sorrow, a widower of 23 years; Mr. Durian, lover of that smelly, delicious fruit; Mr. Dolphin, humorous and perfectly put together; and Mr. Porcupine, prickly and disbelieving about matchmaking as a profession. This engaging book takes a close look at love, friendship, sorrow, loss, and responsibilities to family—both the family members you are born with and the family members that you find.

Personal quirks are embraced in this delightful story about seeking—and finding—love even if you need help along the way.

THE LONG CORNER
Maksik, Alexander
Europa Editions (288 pp.)
$27.00 | May 17, 2022
978-1-60945-751-8

A young man wrestles with his artistic soul at the retreat of an enigmatic art patron.

In 2017, as he reaches his mid-30s, writer Solomon Fields has abandoned a promising journalistic career for the financial security of a spirit-crushing job in the advertising industry and a relationship with a young woman named Charity whose life is bound up in the striving of materialist culture. He also feels trapped between the clashing worldviews of his maternal grandmother, Lina, a Holocaust survivor and advocate for seizing the pleasures of life and art, as she did after fleeing Berlin for New York City in 1940, and his mother, Charlotte, a Marxist-turned-conservative and passionate defender of Israel. At the invitation of a woman named Plume, he travels to a tropical island where her employer, the mysterious Sebastian Light, has created a haven for artists he calls The Coded Garden. When Sol arrives, he meets people with names like Crystalline and Siddhartha, at first observing and then participating in the retreat’s curious rituals, including one bacchanalian evening in a sweat lodge, all the while fending off persistent questions by the residents about whether he intends to write about them. There are recurring conversations about the meaning of art and frequent flashbacks to moments in Sol’s relationship with Lina, one that’s much closer than his with Charlotte. Though the questions Maksik raises are provocative ones, the novel too often has a static feel as Sol struggles to solve the riddle of whether Light is a sincere patron of aspiring artists, a pretentious charlatan, or something much more sinister. While the portrait of Sol’s colorful and outspoken grandmother is vibrant and entertaining,
Light and his acolytes in The Coded Garden too often feel more like devices for advancing competing arguments than fully realized fictional characters.

The spark of a story about the challenges of a creative life fails to catch flame.

When Natasha Manksa relates the myth of Daphne to the rest of the team at a sleepover the night before a big game, no one is more freaked out than star player Kit Lamb, who is immediately overwhelmed with fear. Even as she wins the contest with a clutch free throw, Kit is consumed by the threat of Daphne, a one-time Samhattan baller who died a mysterious death many years ago. Then freshman-to-be Tammy Jones is found dead in her bedroom with “trauma to her head. To her head.” Could it have been Daphne? Kit suffers from intense anxiety, which she closely documents in her diary, and believes she is somehow responsible for Daphne’s return because she’s been thinking about her. As Daphne—who can be seen only by her victims but leaves behind the smells of smoke and whiskey—continues her murder spree, secrets from the town’s past begin to emerge. Daphne has inspired a cult following, perhaps because she’s covered in KISS makeup. Malerman, whose thrillers—including Bird Box (2014)—are uncommonly varied, now ventures into the teen sports territory owned by novelist Megan Abbott and the Showtime series Yellowjackets. Though he effectively captures the team’s group chemistry, this is one
of his spottier efforts. Too much is invested in the theme of making a thing true “just by thinking about it”—and, ultimately, reversing that process—and the climax is convoluted. The book may well have fared better as the novella Malerman says he initially wrote.

Hoop dreams with too much explaining to do.

PICTURES OF THE SHARK
McNeely, Thomas H.
Texas Review Press (205 pp.)
$21.95 paper | June 28, 2022
978-1-68003-271-0

McNeely’s collection abounds with flawed relationships and fraught situations. There’s a moment early in “Snow, Houston, 1974,” the first story in the book, in which Buddy, a young child, watches his father put out a fire in their home. His father makes an offhand joke to him that his mother doesn’t understand: “She hadn’t caught the joke in his father’s voice,” McNeely writes, and it leads to heightened tension between mother and father. The subtle complexities of that encounter act as a summary of what’s to come next: stories that follow Buddy as he grows up and his parents divorce as well as a few that trace the life of Turner, a would-be writer who develops a drinking problem at a young age. In returning to these characters several times and showing them from different angles, McNeely achieves an often heartbreaking level of detail.

An emotionally taut and often haunting collection.

WHEN WE WERE BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL
Medoff, Jillian
Harper/HarperCollins (352 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-0-06-314-202-2

A rape accusation and its aftermath threaten to tear apart a superrich New York family.

The Quinn family is among the one percent. Lawrence, the patriarch, runs a charitable nonprofit; his wife, Eleanor, is an old-money socialite. Together, they have two sons—Nate, the eldest, and Billy, a Princeton athlete and pre-med student. They also have a daughter, Cassie, whom Lawrence and Eleanor unofficially adopted when her own parents, close friends of the Quinns’, died a short time apart. Cassie narrates the novel, part courtroom drama, part domestic thriller, beginning with a phone call from Nate informing her that their brother has been accused of rape. The circumstances of the assault (borrowed closely from the 2016 Brock Turner case) can’t shake the Quinns’ faith in Billy and in each other, and their only focus becomes Billy’s acquittal and revealing the truth to the world: The girl accusing Billy is vindictive and ruthless. There are men in the age of #MeToo, they insist, who are falsely accused and run the risk of ruined lives. But as Cassie unspools the story of the investigation, the preparations for trial, and then, finally, the courtroom theatrics, her narration pulls back layer after layer of secrets and manipulations like a magician pulling scarves from a sleeve. Medoff’s greatest feat in this novel is not the twisty plotting but rather Cassie’s evolving relationship with the reader, with storytelling itself, as she moves from suspiciously naïve to clearly unreliable, and always with a questionable moral compass. Readers who can orient themselves to Cassie’s “double vision” (“one world layered on top of the other, neither of them reality”) will be rewarded with a thoughtful, if salacious, thriller about the nature of wealth, loyalty, and the ripple effects of trauma.

A layered and compelling peek into the darkest consequences of privilege.

CONFIDENCE
Mina, Denise
Mulholland Books/Little, Brown (336 pp.)
$28.00 | July 5, 2022
978-0-316-24272-1

A missing woman and a rediscovered religious artifact drive a fast-paced chase by two podcasters and a possible con man.

When Anna McDonald and Fin Cohen leave Glasgow for a family weekend at a rental house, she expects minor disasters. She and Fin are work partners in a popular true-crime podcast, but their domestic situation is intertwined as well—her ex and his ex
“...the novel’s sheer narrative energy carries the day. A multilayered and consistently engaging rags-to-riches story.”

—Kirkus Reviews

“...a fast-paced financial thriller full of twists and turns that entertains while showing how thinking outside of the box can work—but not without consequences. Magical, witty, and unique, the novel is a trip back to the seventies and an amazing roller-coaster read! Highly recommended.”

—Stephen Spignesi, New York Times Bestselling Author

“...a rags to riches story that isn't short on thrills and intrigue...If you love mob-style stories filled with energy, this one should be on your list.”

—Readers’ Favorite

For All Inquiries, Please Email Davef1151@aol.com
are now a couple, and all of them are co-parenting Anna’s two young daughters. They all get along, but a new addition to the mix is Sofia, Fin’s young, pretty, poison-tongued girlfriend. So Anna is glad to be distracted by news of the disappearance of a young woman named Lisa Lee—a story that’s a prime candidate for their podcast. Lisa is part of an online community centered on urban exploring, UrbEx for short—people who break into abandoned properties and livestream what’s inside. Lisa vanished from her home near Glasgow shortly after she aired a visit to a creepy French chateau full of religious artifacts. And now one of those artifacts, a sealed silver box, is making news. It’s about to be sold at a Paris auction house, and there are rising rumors that it’s a long-missing object called the Voyniche Casket, said to contain a mysterious proof of the resurrection of Christ. The seller is anonymous; the question for Anna and Fin is what its sale has to do with Lisa’s disappearance. Then Fin gets a text from someone named Bram van Wyk wanting to know if they can help him contact Lisa. As the pair piece together Lisa’s background and the history of the Voyniche Casket, they also research Bram and find that he’s a well-known South African antiques dealer with his own sketchy past. When Anna and Fin flee their family holiday for work-related reasons back in Glasgow, Bram, rather alarmingly, shows up at Anna’s house, offering to help find Lisa. He has his surly 12-year-old son, Marcos, in tow. Bram charms them into coming to Paris for the auction with him (he has a private plane), kicking off a mad dash around Europe. It’s clear he’s a con man, but how much so? Are Anna and Fin unwilling players in an elaborate ruse, or are their lives in danger? Mina keeps the plot charging at a breathless pace, and Anna is an engagingly tart narrator.

Even for true-crime podcasters, the truth is tough to find in this brisk, entertaining thriller.
Signs of Life
—an anthology

Edited by Sarah Sasson

ISBN: 978-1-92-254254-0

An international and unforgettable collection of memoir and fiction that explores experiences of mental and physical illness, and of care giving.

“...an extraordinary anthology, an astutely put together collection, that peels away the layers of health so we can see the complexity underneath... a visceral understanding of the fierceness of being alive and the love that forms the scaffold of how we care for one another.”
—Michelle Johnston, Emergency Physician & Author of Dustfall: A Novel

“I only wish that this anthology would find its way into the hands of every trainee health professional.”
—Joanna Nell, Author of The Single Ladies of Jacaranda Retirement Village

“A rich and varied set of ailment-related works.”
—Kirkus Reviews

For All Inquiries, Please Email sarahsasson01@gmail.com sarahsassonblog.wordpress.com/signs-of-life-anthology
fun reflecting that Violet is well and truly gone. Ten years later, her appearance, and the annual candlelight vigil at the location of her last show will be a huge event to mark the anniversary. Her sister, Sasha Dwyer, is still angry at Violet in the way that only sisters can be: for slights perceived and real, for actions that hurt her and those she loves. Sasha’s husband, Gabriel, has spent decades trying to protect her from the worst of Violet’s egoism. Their daughter, Quinn, is nearing college graduation and trying to figure out her future, her past, and what it means to be Violet Volk’s niece. A podcast about Violet’s life and disappearance is being taped, and host Cameron Frank is pulling out all the stops to try to get Sasha to appear. Author Montimore has written a layered story told in fragments of documents, emails, podcast transcripts, and narrated segments that jump through time, place, and voice. It’s a whirlwind of information and characters, much like a magic show with smoke, mirrors, and misdirection consuming the viewer’s attention before the final big reveal: Is Violet alive or dead? And if she is alive, where has she been for 10 years?

A story of the lifetime bonds of sisterhood that also touches on the paranormal subtext inherent in magic acts.

**LIFE CEREMONY**

*Murata, Sayaka*  
*Trans. by Ginny Tapply Takemori*  
*Grove (256 pp.)*  
*$25.00 | July 5, 2022*  
*978-0-8021-5958-8*

A singular collection that probes the most foundational rituals of human society.

“Everyone always says that things like common sense or instinct or morals are carved in stone,” Yamamoto, an affable 39-year-old businessman, muses. “But…actually, they’re always changing….It’s always been that way.” In her debut short story collection, the author of *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) investigates the validity of our most basic rituals—how humans eat, marry, procreate, and die—and incisively explores the rich, messy stuff left behind when they’re violated. “A First-Rate Material,” set in a society whose severe population shrinkage has turned procreation into a form of social justice, spurs the creation of “life ceremonies”—wake-like celebrations that involve partaking of the deceased’s body and finding an “insemination partner” for “copulation.” “Recently I’d been getting the feeling that humans had begun to resemble cockroaches in their habits,” the dubious businesswoman Maho muses, given their propensity to

**ACTS OF VIOLET**

*Montimore, Margarita*  
*Flatiron Books (336 pp.)*  
*$27.99 | July 5, 2022*  
*978-1-250-81506-4*

A winding tale of two sisters pulled together and pushed apart by fame, magic, and the cult of celebrity.

After a yearslong hiatus from performing following a disastrous Las Vegas show, Violet Volk—magician, self-help author, motivational speaker, and celebrity—stages a comeback in her hometown of Willow Glen, New Jersey. But during the big disappearing-act finale, the Flaming Angel, she fails to reappear as expected. Slowly, the audience and security come to realize that Violet is well and truly gone. Ten years later, her fans—the Wolf Pack—have remained obsessed with her disappearance, and the annual candlelight vigil at the location of her last show will be a huge event to mark the anniversary. Her sister, Sasha Dwyer, is still angry at Violet in the way that only sisters can be: for slights perceived and real, for actions that hurt her and those she loves. Sasha’s husband, Gabriel, has spent decades trying to protect her from the worst of Violet’s egoism. Their daughter, Quinn, is nearing college graduation and trying to figure out her future, her past, and what it means to be Violet Volk’s niece. A podcast about Violet’s life and disappearance is being taped, and host Cameron Frank is pulling out all the stops to try to get Sasha to appear. Author Montimore has written a layered story told in fragments of documents, emails, podcast transcripts, and narrated segments that jump through time, place, and voice. It’s a whirlwind of information and characters, much like a magic show with smoke, mirrors, and misdirection consuming the viewer’s attention before the final big reveal: Is Violet alive or dead? And if she is alive, where has she been for 10 years?

A story of the lifetime bonds of sisterhood that also touches on the paranormal subtext inherent in magic acts.

**SUCH A GOOD MOTHER**

*Monks Tahir, Helen*  
*Random House (320 pp.)*  
*$17.00 paper | Aug. 2, 2022*  
*978-1-9848-5599-2*

Danger and chaos ensue when a financially struggling British mother sends her child to an elite elementary school in their up-and-coming neighborhood.

Despite the school’s obvious flaws—which mostly center around the dangerously competitive nature of the other parents—Rose O’Connell, a junior bank teller with a haunted past, is determined to send her son to the Woolf Academy, where children are molded for success from a very young age. Considering that Rose went to the same school back when it was a regular public high school in a seedy neighborhood and she was known as the daughter of an infamous con man, this seems like an effort to overcome the ghosts of her traumatic teenage years, which come up frequently. These same issues compel Rose to obsess over fit, ably, Rose would have been better off sending her son some place else and saving herself the trouble.

Less a story about motherhood than a lesson about how grade school politics can last into adulthood.

A singular collection that probes the most foundational rituals of human society.

“Everyone always says that things like common sense or instinct or morals are carved in stone,” Yamamoto, an affable 39-year-old businessman, muses. “But…actually, they’re always changing….It’s always been that way.” In her debut short story collection, the author of *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) investigates the validity of our most basic rituals—how humans eat, marry, procreate, and die—and incisively explores the rich, messy stuff left behind when they’re violated. “A First-Rate Material,” set in a society whose severe population shrinkage has turned procreation into a form of social justice, spurs the creation of “life ceremonies”—wake-like celebrations that involve partaking of the deceased’s body and finding an “insemination partner” for “copulation.” “Recently I’d been getting the feeling that humans had begun to resemble cockroaches in their habits,” the dubious businesswoman Maho muses, given their propensity to
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“gather to ’eat’ a deceased one of their number.” Still, upon the unexpected death of a close co-worker, she’s taken aback by the otherworldly beauty of a final encounter with her friend. Murata’s stories are tightly woven and endlessly surprising, with far more going on beneath the surface than is initially evident and surprising moments of unexpected beauty. If there’s a drawback, it’s that sometimes the characters seem less like three-dimensional people than vehicles for ideas, rendering the collection almost too thematically cohesive. Nonetheless, Murata’s writing remains essential and captivating, expertly capturing the fragility of social norms and calling into question what remains of human nature once they’re stripped away.

Beautiful, disturbing, and thought-provoking.

**BRONZE DRUM**

Nguyen, Phong

Grand Central Publishing (400 pp.)

$17.99 paper | Aug. 9, 2022

978-1-5387-5370-5

When Beyoncé asked, “Who run the world?” was she thinking about the legendary Trưng sisters?

During the early years of the Common Era, Trưng Trắc and Trưng Nhi, two daughters of a Viêt lord, grew up within palace walls. Their northern homeland was under the increasingly tyrannical rule of the Hán from neighboring China. Trưng Trắc, the older sister, was studious and steadfast; Trưng Nhi was rebellious and resistant to the constraints of royal life. When the uneasy peace their father had maintained with the Hán was disrupted and terrible injury was inflicted upon their family and loved ones, the young women (eventually referred to as the She-Kings of the Viêts) call upon their inner strengths, upon their classical education in the art and philosophy of war, and, most importantly, upon other Viêt women to defend their homeland. Marshalling an army of 80,000 women, the sisters waged a spectacular war—complete with drums, arrows, and elephants—on the Hán, and, for a short time, the postwar kingdom was ruled by Trưng Trắc. When her rule was disrupted, the conquerors attempted to confiscate all the bronze drums that had become the means of battle communication for the women warriors in an effort to build a towering symbol of Hán superiority. Some drums, hidden and buried by the vanquished women, are still unearthed today, providing continued support for the legacy of the fierce duo. The sisters have long been revered as national icons in Vietnam, and this fictionalized account of their rise to military greatness includes extensive, cinematic descriptions of battlefield tactics and imagined scenes of heartache and horror while not avoiding references to mistakes in judgment (diplomatic and otherwise) they may have made.

Nguyen reminds us that the power of women is nothing new.

**THE RETREAT**

Pearse, Sarah

Viking (368 pp.)

$14.99 paper | July 19, 2022

978-0-59-348942-0

A woman’s death at a luxury resort off the coast of England leads to fears a serial killer has returned.

This is the second installment of Pearse’s Det. Elin Warner series, and while you can read the novel as a stand-alone, familiarity with Elin’s background would be helpful to understanding her character’s emotional arc. The case into which Elin is drawn this time takes place at a luxury resort on an island off the coast of England, an idyllic setting with a dark past and the foreboding nickname Reaper’s Rock. Despite the fine dining, upscale accommodations, and amenities like yoga and kayaking, an old series of murders haunts the island, now rumored to be cursed. When a woman dies falling from a balcony, Elin and her partner, DC Steed, set out to investigate what they think is an accident. But then another guest linked to the first victim drowns, and Elin begins to believe the deaths are connected and that someone is targeting a family gathered at the resort for a vacation. Gradually, secrets and ties to the island’s past are revealed. The plot is solidly grounded in thriller tradition, but at times Elin doesn’t seem to act like a real detective. She’s still shaken by previous events in her life, but would she really be so quick to invite her boyfriend, who designed the resort, to join her on the island while she’s working the investigation? And why is she so quick to fall prey to the foreboding atmosphere? Pearse sets up a classic premise but too often relies on coincidence to push the plot forward, and the threat of a storm brewing as the case draws to a close feels like a cliché.

Coincidence and cliché mar this traditional detective thriller.

**MOTH**

Razak, Melody

Harper/HarperCollins (368 pp.)

$26.99 | Aug. 9, 2022

978-0-06-314-006-6

British Iranian author Razak’s shattering debut depicts the trauma of the Indian Partition through the experiences of one family of Delhi Brahmins.

In Pushp Vihar, the House of Flowers, 14-year-old Alma is too excited to sleep. She is to be married in five weeks in a match quickly arranged by her grandmother Daadee Ma. Her 5-year-old sister, the rambunctious, death-obsessed Roop, is not impressed. She’s more interested in catching the mouse that lives in the courtyard. Their parents, Bappu and Ma, who are both teachers at Delhi University, believe Alma is too young to marry but think she might be safer with a husband. It’s February 1947, only six months before
the partition that will create the nations of India and Pakistan, and already there are intimations of the brutal violence that is set to explode between Hindus and Muslims: “Alma had asked Bappu if they would come here, those people that burnt down each other’s homes, he had reassured her they would not.” As the countdown winds down to Aug. 15, Independence Day, this liberal-minded, middle-class family discovers to its anguish that its high caste status will not protect its most vulnerable members from the erupting chaos. Razak’s carefully structured narrative skillfully builds the growing sense of dread that has anxious readers fearing for her richly drawn characters. The author, who was inspired by a BBC audio series called “Partition Voices” and who traveled extensively across India, writes with sensitivity and empathy, vividly capturing the rhythms of daily Indian life as well as the harrowing sectarian and ethnic upheavals that upended so many lives.

An exceptional novel that is historical fiction at its finest.

**COLD, COLD BONES**

Reichs, Kathy
Scribner (352 pp.)
$27.99 | July 5, 2022
978-1-982190-02-6

Forensic anthropologist Temperance Brennan is nearly buried under a series of varied homicides that play like a mix tape of her own greatest hits.

Veronica Kwalwasser is found decapitated inside a plastic bag labeled “Here’s Johnny!” in a deserted privy, her severed eyeball thoughtfully placed there. Gangbanger Miguel Sanchez is missing an ear when he’s discovered. Frank Boldonado has been hanging from a tall tree for a long time. All of them were killed in different ways, but Tempe tells Det. Donna Henry that she’s certain their deaths all have something in common. And she’s right: They’re all copycat versions of otherwise unrelated deaths Tempe investigated years ago. Clearly the killer has a special grudge against Tempe, but in “America in the age of rage,” where everyone reserves the right to unlimited anger against anyone else, how can she begin to look for the motive that drives the killer? And given the wide array of malefactors who have it in for her, how can she narrow the field before her daughter, Katy Petersons, a toughened Army vet attempts to apply thematic cohesion to the preceding events, but it feels brief and shoehorned.

Half a loaf—the first half.

**FANTASTIC FOUR Full Circle**

Ross, Alex
Abrams ComicArts (64 pp.)
$22.49 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-4197-6167-6

Acclaimed artist Ross presents this breathless transdimensional adventure featuring the superhero family the Fantastic Four.

In 1961, *The Fantastic Four* #1 introduced the superpowered quartet of stretchy mega-genius Mr. Fantastic (Reed Richards), elusive force-field wielder Invisible Girl (Sue Storm), her hot-headed and highly flammable brother the Human Torch (Johnny Storm), and lovable stone-skinned curmudgeon the Thing (Ben Grimm). This new graphic novel summarizes their long-ago origin in its first two pages then sets off on a brand-new journey that is nevertheless heavily indebted to events that occurred outside these pages. A mysterious stranger infiltrates the home of the Fantastic Four, who realize the stranger has a complicated history with the team. After the stranger unleashes a swarm of shadowy creepy-crawlies, Reed deduces Earth faces an incursion from the antimatter dimension known as the Negative Zone. The team takes the fight to the enemy, entering the Negative Zone through a portal of Reed’s design. From there, they face a series of threats connected to past adventures, navigating a psychedelic realm populated by an armored insectoid tyrant, a superorganism of negative energy, and a last bastion of positivity. As ever, Ross’ art is stunning, beautifully marrying the pop-art sensibilities of 1960s comics with photorealism. His depictions of everything from the Human Torch’s walls of flame to the epic releases of interdimensional forces crackle with energy, and his inventive paneling fully engages the reader’s gaze. The story starts quickly and never lets up, which makes for an energetic read, though the reliance on the team’s history might alienate the uninitiated even when put into context through exposition.

A post-adventure chat between Reed and Ben attempts to apply thematic cohesion to the preceding events, but it feels brief and shoehorned.

A vibrant, wild ride that will bring joy to devoted comic book readers.

**MADEMOISELLE REVOLUTION**

Sivak, Zoe
Berkley (432 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-0-593-33603-8

A mixed-race young woman attempts to find love, freedom, and her cultural identity amid the revolutionary throes of 18th-century Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) and Paris.

Eighteen-year-old Sylvie de Rosiers was born free, though the shadow of her mother’s enslavement remains an unshakeable part of her life. Her race bars her from...
entering certain echelons of aristocratic society, but as the
daughter of a White coffee-plantation owner, she also enjoys
certain luxuries—a life of leisure on her family’s large estate and
the hope of one day marrying a powerful man who belongs to
the mixed-race affranchi class. After the public execution of
the rebel Vincent Ogé, however, a slave uprising forces her to
question the privileges her upbringing has afforded her. She and
her brother, Gaspard, flee to Paris to seek refuge with an aunt,
and Sylvie soon befriends Cornélie Duplay, a painter and the
mistress of the famous revolutionary leader Maximilien Robes-
pierre. Although Sylvie appreciates new freedoms in France,
she still finds herself on the margins of society. The royalists
disdain her because of her mixed-race heritage, and the lower-
class republicans, the sans-culottes, revile her bourgeois status.
Amid Sivak’s vividly drawn portrait of the bloody political and
civil unrest in Paris during the last years of the Revolution, Syl-
vie finds her romantic passions in turmoil as well. While her
admiration for Robespierre grows, she also finds herself increas-
ingly attracted to Cornélie. As an ascending faction within
the National Convention intensifies the call to purge anyone
deemed a traitor to the Republic, Sylvie finds her heart increas-
ingly torn between love and duty as she painstakingly comes to
terms with the steep costs of both.

An incandescent tale of the French Revolution from the
perspective of those history often renders invisible.

**THE BARTENDER’S CURE**
Straton, Wesley
Flatiron Books (372 pp.)
$27.99 | June 28, 2022
978-1-250-80907-0

A 24-year-old California girl on her
way to Harvard Law stops off behind a
bar in Brooklyn.

Straton’s debut is two books in
one—a thoroughly researched and mostly
charming compendium of information
about bartending and recipes for cocktails and a rather lugubri-
ous account of her narrator Samantha “Sam” Fisher’s gap year
employment at a drinking establishment called Joe’s Apo-
thecary. Sam is at a low point emotionally and financially as she
heads in for her interview; a long shot since women are rarely
seen behind a bar. Sure enough, the place is staffed by three
men, all named Dan, one of whom she had a messy encounter
with a while back, but they decide to give her a chance. This
Columbia graduate is nothing if not a dedicated student, and
if her boring love life and slowly revealed traumatic backstory
aren’t sufficient to shake together a compelling plot, she will
certainly find out what goes in a Negroni and a sidecar, and how
and why and where and when as well. Each chapter opens with a
cocktail recipe and is stuffed with trivia and lore—the purpose
of the Snaïquiri (a mimadcaquiri shared at the beginning of a bar
shift), the possible origins of the word cocktail (ginger stuffed
up a horse’s behind?), backstory on the original Trader Vic’s tiki
bar (shut down due to tackiness by Donald Trump), and much

more. Sometimes she goes further than strictly necessary—dic-
tionary definition of mocktail, anyone?—but her tips on effective
Instagram posts are worth bookmarking. This novel is a
close cousin of Stephanie Danler’s bestselling Sweetbitter, but
the characters don’t have as much star power, and the will to
disdain her because of her mixed-race heritage, and the lower-
class republicans, the sans-culottes, revile her bourgeois status.

This illuminating paean to mixology is best read at your
favorite bar or with ingredients nearby.

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**A MAP FOR THE MISSING**
Tang, Belinda Huijuan
Penguin Press (400 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-0-593-30066-4

This ambitious debut novel finds
a math professor returning from the
United States to his native China on a pil-
grimage of multigenerational discovery.

Themes of family and forgiveness
against the sweep of political foment
inform this epic, which opens in the U.S. but spends the rest
of its pages in China, hopping between the mid-1970s and
1993. The earlier period represents the formative years of Tang
Yitian, a bookish boy from a rural farm family who frequently
finds himself at odds with his brusque father. The later marks
Yitian’s belated return to his homeland following a frantic call
from his mother informing him that his father has disappeared
after having walked away from home without explanation more
than a decade earlier. In between, there is much for Yitian to
discover, and the reader as well, as the novel seems to under-
score the adage that to understand all is to forgive all. What
requires understanding is the death of Yitian’s older brother, as
well as their grandfather, over the course of a year; the tension
between that grandfather and Yitian’s father; and the transition
for Yitian from toiling in the fields to studying at an urban uni-
versity, falling in love in the process. All this occurs within the
turmoil in China during the Cultural Revolution and its after-
math. Having left all this behind when he immigrated to Amer-
ic for graduate studies, married to a woman who provides some
stability, Yitian must balance the identity he has forged and life
he has found with the one he left behind. Through returning to
China and searching for his father, he discovers so much more.

There’s a lot to absorb, but the narrative momentum keeps
the reader engaged.
INVASION OF THE SPIRIT PEOPLE
Villalobos, Juan Pablo
Trans. by Rosalind Harvey
And Other Stories (224 pp.)
$18.00 paper | July 12, 2022
978-1-91350-536-3

In an unnamed city, a man walks his dog—also, it’s possible that aliens have landed.

At the center of Villalobos’ wry, luminous, and witty new novel is Gastón, a man getting on in years who makes a living (more or less) from his vegetable garden and whose dog, Kitten (that’s right), is rapidly deteriorating—terminal cancer—and needs to be put down. Meanwhile, Gastón’s closest friend, Max, is deeply in debt and must close his restaurant; he’s so depressed, though, that he spends his days playing games on his phone rather than clearing out his business. Then there’s Max’s son, Pol, whom Gastón helped raise. Pol, a scientist, is either dangerously close to a psychotic break or has troubling news to share about the interplanetary aliens who colonized Earth. In previous novels, Villalobos established himself as a spinner of wild, absurd, occasionally experimental tales rooted—somehow—by deadpan narrators who seem to look their readers directly and steadily in the eye while expounding outlandishly. This novel, though it takes a somewhat gentler approach, is no exception. Its third-person narrator uses a calm and quiet tone and, at the same time that it’s unraveling all its various threads, also takes the trouble to make itself explicit.

There are lots of other characters in this story,” the narrator says, “but we’re going to accompany Gastón at all times, as if we were floating just behind him and had access to his feelings….” Then, what seems to be a story about one thing—or another thing—Villalobos slyly inverts. This is a book about xenophobia and racism and the conflicted tug between isolation and community. It makes a fine—and deliciously strange—addition to Villalobos’ already grand personal canon.

Wrought with tenderness, wit, and a wonderful sense of absurdity, Villalobos’ latest novel is a triumph.

MYSTERY

THE GIRL IN THE YELLOW DRESS
Adams, Jane A.
Severn House (224 pp.)
$29.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-0-7278-5096-6

In 1930, DCI Henry Johnstone is flummoxed by a murder whose chief suspect is already dead.

Few tears fell when Brady Brewer was hanged for the murder of Sarah Downham. Although he swore that he truly loved her, his brutal record of crimes against women told otherwise, not least in the opinion of Johnstone, who had seen him in action during the war. But when the body of a second young woman, Penelope Soper, is found dumped on a country road not far from the place where the first body was discovered, the local police must face the possibility that Sarah’s killer is still at large. So as little as he likes getting sent to the border between Leicestershire and Northamptonshire, and sad as he is that this case from the back of beyond will likely be his last with Mickey Hitchens, the faithful sergeant who’s long overdue for promotion, Johnstone decides that the only way to solve Penelope’s murder is to reinvestigate Sarah’s. He faces stiff opposition from Inspector Walker, the copper who built the case against Brady; from Elizabeth, Brady’s long-suffering sister; and from Sarah’s wealthy and powerful family. But the oddest of clues—a handmade yellow dress, which witnesses saw Sarah wearing the night she disappeared and is now missing from the evidence box—persuades him that there’s more to Sarah’s murder than a whirlwind romance gone bad.

A fitting swan song for Adams’ dynamic duo.

GOLDEN CARGOES
Buckley, Fiona
Severn House (256 pp.)
$29.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-4483-0922-1

A wedding invitation plunges Ursula Stannard into one of her oddest adventures. Although 1589 finds Queen Elizabeth’s illegitimate half sister in her 50s, Ursula’s unusual life as a spy has kept her younger than her years. Now she’s traveling to Evergreens, a house she’s rented to Mistress Joan Mercer, accompanied by her manservant, Roger Brockley, and his wife, Fran Dale, who are more than servants, as well as her son, Harry, and her adopted son, Ben. Joan’s daughter, the beautiful Arabella, is betrothed to Master Sylvester Waters, a wealthy neighbor, but refuses to marry him because she’s in love with
Gilbert Gale, a talented local carpenter whose status is nothing compared to Waters’. Arabella refuses to listen to Ursula’s advice; only a severe beating from Joan makes her go through with the wedding. Joan’s sons have done well as captains of ships, though some of the items they own seem much more valuable than their business would account for. Ursula, who never shies away from mysteries, is soon investigating both the sons and a village vendetta against Mother Lee, whose potions help alleviate Joan’s headaches but make her suspect as a witch. Soon after information on piracy is reported at court, Ursula and her friends are looking in earnest for a place where valuables may be hidden. Then Mother Lee is murdered, and Arabella’s marriage gets even unhappier when Waters finds that she’s with child by Gilbert. The mysteries are related and unveiled in an unexpected conclusion.

The charming spy again gives good value as she unearths secrets in an Elizabethan context.

A DISH TO DIE FOR
Burdette, Lucy
Crooked Lane (288 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-1-63910-072-9

Key West food critic Hayley Snow proves once again that she understands crime as well as cuisine.

Now that she’s married to police officer Nathan Bransford, Hayley has to be more circumspect in her sleuthing activities. But when she and a friend take their dogs for a run to Boca Chica Beach, located on Geiger Key north of Key West, and Nathan’s dog, Ziggy, digs up a body, she can’t resist getting involved. Bird-watcher Davis Jager identifies the corpse as Gerald Garcia, better known as GG, a man who had a boatload of enemies. Nathan’s stressed by his dysfunctional family. His parents are divorced, and his sister doesn’t speak to their father, a police officer who’s currently in the Keys vetting the department’s paperwork. Gossip is the lifeblood of Key West, and Hayley soon learns that GG’s suspicious business dealings pale beside his reputation as a predator who targeted younger women and even his wife’s former best friend. Hayley’s mother is hired to cater for the funeral gathering, and while cleaning up, Hayley makes a fascinating discovery at the Woman’s Club, whose cookbook provides a look at life in Key West in the 1940s. Her discovery of an old box containing a diary and sketches for the original cookbook indicates that the apple didn’t fall far from the tree, since GG’s father was also a womanizer. So did GG die because of his business deals or for more personal reasons?

A suitably steamy background for a complex tale of murder and deceit.

A DARK AND STORMY TEA
Childs, Laura
Berkley (320 pp.)
$22.99 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-0-593-20089-6

In her 23rd outing, tea shop owner Theodosia Browning takes on a serial killer.

Theodosia’s heading home on a dark and stormy night when she sees two people struggling in a graveyard. The man vanishes, leaving behind the body of a young woman Theodosia is sorry to recognize as Cara Chamberlain. The women of Charleston are living in fear of a serial killer: It’s either Fogheel Jack, back after a seven-year hiatus, or a copycat. Cara was working as an intern for Channel 8, whose star reporter, Monica Garber, faints when she sees the body. Theodosia and her tea sommelier, Drayton Conneley, have a long history of helping Theodosia’s boyfriend, Pete Riley, and his police colleagues solve crimes. So when Cara’s mother, who owns a bookshop near the Indigo Tea Shop, begs for help, they plunge into the investigation. Theodosia is suspicious of the boyfriend Cara just broke up with and a true-crime writer who’s living next door, but there’s another possibility: a ruthless realtor who’s trying to get Cara’s mother out of the building where her five-year lease is thwarting his plans. Whether the motive is money or mania, her snooping puts Theodosia in mortal danger.

A delight for mystery mavens and foodies, with Charleston providing the suitably spooky background.

THE MAN IN THE SHADOWS
Clare, Alys
Severn House (256 pp.)
$29.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-0-7278-2304-5

In 1881 London, the World’s End Bureau takes on two wildly different cases.

After a slow start, sleuthing partners Lily Raynor and Felix Wilbraham are slowly building a reputation and a clientele that are not always to their liking. Now they’re approached by a minister who’s working with a flood of Jewish refugees fleeing Russia after the assassination of Czar Alexander II; he asks them to help an elderly woman whom she brought with her to London but who seems to have run away when she was taken to the hospital straight off the boat. A second case involves Jared Spokewright, who insists that his brother, Abel, was wrongly hanged for the murder of the sweetheart, Effie Quittenden, he met while hop-picking in Kent. Posing as a journalist, Felix heads for Crooked Green, where, as it happens, he has a relative, part of the extensive Smith family, while Lily goes to Whitechapel to speak to the
“A deep dive that manages to be both grueling and masterful.”

WHAT SHE FOUND

Robert Dugoni

Seattle Detective Tracy Crosswhite, bounced from Violent Crimes to the Cold Case Unit, is presented with a case that ticks both boxes and then some. Anita Childress comes to Tracy with what might seem a perfectly reasonable request to find her mother. The complication is that Lisa Childress, an investigative reporter for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, vanished 24 years ago, when Anita was two years old, and has long been presumed as dead as the paper she worked for. But Anita is convinced the cops never treated her mother’s disappearance as seriously as they should have, and Tracy soon comes to agree with her. Moss Gunderson, the lead detective on the case, was so determined to pin Lisa’s murder on her husband, Larry Childress, who came into a fat life insurance settlement he badly needed, that he never looked at any of the stories Lisa had been working on: There was a former Seattle mayor who seemed to have been running a pay to play scheme, a city councilman alleged to have molested minors, a police task force accused of skimming money from drug busts. One of these stories leads Tracy down a rabbit hole that’s grown even murkier since Lisa fell off the face of the earth. As Tracy’s frustration with often literal dead ends concerning crimes committed a quarter-century ago mounts, she gets a wholly unexpected break: A Facebook tip page she’s set up produces a report that suggests that Lisa is still alive, living with amnesia a thousand miles away. The prospect of returning her to the family she’s professional implications for Tracy herself.

A deep dive that manages to be both grueling and masterful.

WHAT SHE FOUND

Dugoni, Robert

Thomas & Mercer (367 pp.)

$11.99 paper | Aug. 23, 2022
978-1-5420-0852-7

MAKING IT WRITE

Betty Hechtman

Severn House (224 pp.)

$29.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-0-7278-5093-5

A professional writer has an unfortunate propensity to get involved in murder. Veronica Blackstone has just finished her second detective novel following the modest success of her first, but she can’t live on the proceeds. To supplement her income, she runs a weekly writers group and also hires herself out to write everything from love notes to descriptions of ice cream flavors. She hopes that an upcoming interview with Maeve Winslow, who’s looking for help writing her memoir, may lead to a rewarding partnership. When she shows up at Maeve’s house for her first appointment, though, the door is opened by a rude woman who tells her Maeve isn’t home. Meanwhile,
Veronica continues her low-key romance with Ben, her downstairs neighbor’s police officer brother and a member of the writers group. But when Ben leaves a meeting without having read his work and then tells Veronica he “can’t do this anymore,” with no explanation, she’s crushed. When she finally meets Maeve, she learns that her client is an art teacher who’s married to a painter whose pictures of his childhood Scottie have become wildly popular, having been touted by an influencer who’s selling T-shirts and posters of the artworks. Maeve eventually hands Veronica a pile of papers and a diary and explains that she’s been secretive so far in order to keep the book a surprise from her nosy neighbors. By now, Veronica has everything she needs to complete the memoir except the ending, which Maeve tells her she may figure out for herself. When she finds Maeve dead after a supposedly accidental fall, she suspects that Maeve may have been marked for murder.

Plenty of interesting characters add zest to a tale of murder and romantic pitfalls.

THE FRAGRANCE OF DEATH
Karst, Leslie
Severn House (224 pp.)
$29.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-4483-0903-0

What could be worse for a chef than to lose her sense of smell and taste? Wait and see.

Sally Solari is stricken with a head cold just as she’s competing in the annual Artichoke Cook-Off in her hometown of Santa Cruz. Among the competitors are her father and Neil Lericci, the brother of her high school bestie, Grace, who’s running his parents’ artichoke farm. Neil once again wins the People’s Choice award, but any enjoyment he might take in his honor ends when his body is discovered with a gash in the head and an artichoke stuffed in his mouth. Since breaking off a romantic relationship with Eric, her closest friend, Sally’s been dating Det. Martin Vargas, who, knowing that she’s had a hand in solving other murders, asks her to keep her eyes open. All right, maybe Sally gets a little carried away when she renews her friendship with Grace and becomes involved in the family’s problems. Their father, who seems to be having memory issues, had been thinking about dividing the farm among Neil, Grace, and their older brother, Ryan, a real estate agent, but their mother’s and Neil’s opposition to the idea had stirred up bitter feelings within Ryan, who already had a buyer in mind.

Mrs. Lericci used to date Sally’s dad in high school, and she gets a funny feeling about their relationship after Mr. Lericci makes a vague reference to someone not being his son. Juggling all these problems with her attempts to cook without any sense of smell, Sally learns enough to alienate Vargas, who thinks she’s gone too far.

Lots of suspects and even more food.

IN TOO STEEP
Kingsbury, Kate
Crooked Lane (288 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-1-63910-074-3

Love and murder are in the air in a coastal Oregon town.

In the time since widowed Vivian Wainwright, owner of the Willow Pattern Tearoom, along with her assistants, Jenna Ramsey and Gracie Jackson, solved a murder but almost died for their pains, they’ve grown more interested in love, but they can’t resist a little sleuthing when beachcomber Lewis Trenton is murdered. A newspaper photograph of the interior of the late recluse’s shack informs Vivian—whose English mother provided the recipes for a tearoom featuring all things British—that Lewis had a replica of Big Ben built in his tearoom. Deciding that tracking down the friend who gave it to Lewis and may not know of his death will be a harmless occupation, she pursues the trail of the statue, which turns out to be hiding a valuable diamond. All the while, Vivian is concerned about her memory because things keep turning up in the wrong places. As her friendship with pet store owner Hal Douglass turns romantic, like Jenna’s with Det. Lt. Tony Messina, she worries that she’s not spending enough time with her dog, Felix. Once Vivian turns the diamond over to Messina, the Portland police, who are hunting for a gang of robbers, suspect that Lewis was fencing their hauls. But Vivian’s certain that he was not and sets out to prove it. Unwilling to involve Messina until she finds more proof, she once again finds herself in danger.

A charming group of sleuths spices up a middling mystery.
the captive of Rasputin, a pimp with a posse of gangbangers. Jake’s inherent rectitude and his undeniable chemistry with Lauren compel him to pursue the case further while Deborah clings to life in the hospital. Mrazek’s rhythmic, muscular prose and vivid character portraits make every chapter land like a short story. The complex road to the solution links the opioid crisis plaguing St. Andrews, murdered orphan Cheryl Larsen, and ultrahandsome contract killer George Washington. Many answers are found at the Stoneberry, the aforementioned casino.

A brisk and bracing second case that slakes the thirst for a classic gumshoe.

**DIE AROUND SUNDOWN**

*Pryor, Mark*

Minotaur (320 pp.)

$27.99 | Aug. 16, 2022

978-1-2508-2482-0

A French detective helps the Nazis find a killer.

Even under the heel of the German occupiers, there’s plenty of crime in Paris, as Princess Marie Bonaparte, great-grandniece of the emperor himself, learns when she finds her fashionable home ransacked and her servants dead. Police detective Henri Lefort impresses her with his quick wit, which saves her from immediate danger. But much as Henri wants to stay and solve the case for the princess, Roger Langeron, chief of all the police in Paris, has other priorities. Sturmbannführer Jung has asked Lefort and no one else to investigate the death of Hauptman Walter Fischer, the German officer charged with cataloging the Louvre’s vast treasures and reassigning them to new homes in Axis-friendly countries. Jung gives Lefort a list of suspects and one week to crack the case, promising that he’ll repay failure with unspecified penalties Lefort can only imagine. From this edgy premise, Pryor spins a tale increasingly complex. Nicola, Lefort’s assistant, finds a Picasso drawing hidden in the dead man’s clothing. Marie Bonaparte, a trained psychoanalyst, bribes Lefort to engage in sessions with her in order to probe his pathological aversion to noise. A reporter shadows Lefort, revealing unexpected news. Suspects produce alibis provided by Picasso himself. The identity of Fischer’s murderer is perhaps the least surprising of the many twists and turns this tale of love, hate, and misophonia has on offer.

Wheels within wheels power this homage to battles waged without and within.

**DEATH AT THE MANOR**

*Schellman, Katharine*

Crooked Lane (352 pp.)

$26.99 | Aug. 9, 2022

978-1-63910-078-1

Fledgling Regency sleuth Lady Lily Adler solves another baffling murder, this time battling...a ghost!

Now that he’s supported Lily in her widow’s grief and abetted her in unraveling two perplexing murder mysteries, Capt. Jack Hartley, the stalwart friend of Lily’s late husband, Freddy, has decided to return to his first love, the sea. After Lily and friends Ned and Ofelia Carroway bid him a fond farewell, they stop at the home of Lily’s Aunt Eliza in Hampshire before a planned return to London. Eliza and her close friend Susan Clarke can’t resist suggesting that Lily would be a perfect match for Matthew Spencer, owner of nearby Morestead Park, before the discussion turns to accounts of a terrifying local ghost. Spencer is indeed courtly and attentive to Lily, but their initial meeting is interrupted by the unctuous Mr. Wright. Scarcely has he introduced himself when his distraught daughter, Selina, bursts in with the news that Mrs. Wright has been murdered by “the lady in gray,” the aforementioned ghost. The intrepid, methodical Lily immediately sets about unraveling the mystery, abetted in Jack’s absence by Ofelia and Ned. Confounding the case is the fact that the victim’s door was locked from the inside. Could the clandestine affair between Selina’s brother, Thomas, and one of the maids be an important piece of the puzzle? The plotline of Lily’s continued self-discovery and empowerment continues in this third adventure, stitched into the period tapestry in ways that never overshadow the murder mystery.

Schellman transports readers to Regency-era England and tantalizes them with a traditional whodunit.

**A HALF-BUILT GARDEN**

*Emrys, Ruthanna*

Tordotcom (352 pp.)

$26.99 | July 26, 2022

978-1-250-21098-2

Aliens arrive on a near-future Earth bringing a dire warning: Leave the planet or die.

One spring night in 2083, Judy Wallach-Stevens is voluntarily on call to monitor water quality detectors
near Chesapeake Bay. After a global revolution, Earth is now divided among collective networks known as watersheds as well as mega-corporations with strictly limited powers and some remaining nation-states. When Judy arrives at the sensors with her wife, Carol, and their infant, Dori, they find a craft carrying multilimbed, pill bug–like aliens as well as another species resembling a large furry spider. They all speak near-perfect English thanks to years of listening to old transmissions from Earth, and they come with a startling message: “All species must leave their birth worlds, or give up their technological development, or die. You are very close.” The aliens offer all their knowledge to the human race but only if it leaves Earth permanently. First contact with aliens obviously isn’t a new premise, but this story tries to offer its own spin by leaning heavily on the ideals of cooperation and mutual agreement. Although this is a refreshing change from the variously grim dystopias of a lot of SF, its execution here almost completely lacks tension; any conflict that arises is swiftly solved, with all parties coming to an understanding. The author burdens the worldbuilding with unneeded details about how infotech collaboration works but skimps on specifics of how the societal structure of the planet changed so completely in just 61 years. At the same time, there’s an odd mix of high and low technology use among characters; for instance, people carry babies in slings and nurse them on demand, but the same infants wear “smarthemp” diapers that notify parents on network-linked “mesh” devices when they’re wet. There are also multiple lengthy discussions of genders and pronouns and what they mean to humans and aliens alike, but it’s all handled in an uninspired and sometimes chunky way.

A well-meaning story kept earthbound by flawed execution.

 Dispatches from the hyperconnected, hypersurveilled future.

The editors of this SF anthology bill it as a “full, visceral, and vital portrait of a world in rapid evolution,” and in many ways the collection delivers on that promise. Like all the best science fiction, these stories look at our present through the lens of some possible futures. Key themes emerge, including surveillance capitalism, artificial intelligence, and climate change. The world we see here is hyperconnected and yet uber-alienating, full of potential for ever shinier tech but lacking much opportunity for genuine, joyful humanity to thrive. There are some brilliant, haunting stories—a gonzo sendup of corporate culture (“Earth’s Most Customer-Centric Company” by Kevin Nguyen), a minithriller about a smart-home assistant with a mind of its own (“Warning Signs” by Emily J. Smith), a time-travel tale about the gentrification of the past (“Trojan Horses” by Jess Zimmerman), a too-close-to-home parable about aliens who arrive on Earth as refugees (“The Wretched and the Beautiful” by E. Lily Yü). There’s also some invigorating experimentation with form, including fiction in the form of operating instructions (“Hystera” by Meg Elison), school paperwork (“Exemption Packet” by Rose Eveleth), text messages (“U Wont Remember Dying” by Russell Nichols), and a simple list (“An Incomplete Timeline of What We Tried” by Debbie Urbanski). The dystopian realities of social media and late-stage capitalism are everywhere, with a ghost becoming a backdrop for selfies (“Ernest” by Geoff Manaugh), soldiers livestreaming from the front lines (“Headshot” by Julian Mortimer Smith), thousands of people lining up to toil meaninglessly in “entropy mills” (“Busy” by Omar El Akkad), and financial advisers pitching the zombie apocalypse as an investing opportunity (“Zombie Capitalism” by Tobias Buckell). Overall, this collection presents a sort of paranoid/defiant vision of the future in which everything and everyone is for sale but almost everything of value has been lost. Don’t look here for (much) hope, but do read these short, biting, vibrant stories for their wit, inventiveness, and verve.

These dark, witty, and occasionally mournful stories will thoroughly satisfy readers looking for creative new dystopias.

**TERRAFORM**

*Ed. by Merchant, Brian & Claire L. Evans*

MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux (496 pp.)

$17.99 paper | Aug. 16, 2022

978-0-3746-0266-6

The well-meaning story kept earthbound by flawed execution.

**LAMBDA**

*Musgrave, David*

Europa Editions (372 pp.)

$18.00 paper | July 12, 2022

978-1-60945-764-8

A police officer connects with a mysterious race of aquatic humans in this inventive debut.

Cara Gray, the protagonist of visual artist Musgrave’s debut novel, took an unlikely route to becoming a cop. She joined an activist camp after school but soon ditched it to join the police force, where she’s initially assigned to work in data surveillance. While she’s good at her job, she fails to prevent a school bombing that kills more than 1,400 people and is demoted, becoming a police liaison to the community of lambdas, a race of small humans that have adapted to living in water. The lambdas “keep a very low profile,” making their homes in flooded basements and working low-income jobs. They’re also the target of increasing harassment and violence from hateful people who believe that a splinter group of militant lambdas were behind the school bombing; they endure beatings and graffiti saying things like “fuck off fishman scum.” Cara becomes increasingly fascinated with the lambdas; meanwhile, the police experiment with a mysterious data processing entity; Cara’s mother interacts with an avatar of her missing husband; and Cara finds herself frustrated at the relationship between her boyfriend and her sentient toothbrush. The novel has an inventive structure, with narrative chapters interspersed with various documents; it can be exhausting, but the reader gets the feeling that’s by design. As weird as the novel sounds, it’s even more so, but Musgrave manages to hold all the threads
“A comedic SF adventure that delivers on all three fronts.”

FAULT TOLERANCE

Rowland, Alexandra
Tordotcom (480 pp.)
$27.99 | Aug. 30, 2022
978-1-250-80038-1

An anxious young prince must reconcile his duties to his family and friends with his growing fears of failure.

Second in line to the Araşti throne, Prince Kadou can intuit the contents of metal alloys just by touching them—a skill that leads him to investigate a counterfeiting scheme in the capital city. His investigation leads to a frightening confrontation with his niece’s biological father, a foreign-born noble named Siranos. Kadou takes his concerns about Siranos to his lover, Tadek. Tadek is a kahya—a bodyguard trained in the ways of courtly life—and it is in that capacity that he begins to investigate Siranos. That secondary investigation spirals out of control, leaving three other kahyalar dead, Tadek stripped of his position, and Kadou and Siranos confined to the palace. In the aftermath, the taciturn Evemer, another kahya, arrives to take Tadek’s place. Reeling from the kahyalar’s deaths and Tadek’s dishonorable discharge, Kadou drags Evemer along on a reckless quest to drink and fight his way through the undercity. But when they stumble upon a lead, Kadou and Evemer continue the original investigation, unraveling a conspiracy that leads to the very heart of the Araşti palace. Far more engaging than the court intrigue, however, is the slow burn of Kadou and Evemer’s inevitable romance. In crafting their world, Rowland has drawn inspiration from the Renaissance-era Ottoman Empire, with characters described as having “golden” skin and “glossy black hair,” and much of the Araşti language is derived from Turkish. Other countries appear to be based on Greece and France. The matriarchal defaults and three-gender system present in Araşti society place the novel squarely among the ranks of contemporary queer fantasy. Kadou is gay; Evemer and Tadek are bisexual, and another of the kahyalar, who is third-gender, is openly asexual.

An engaging fantasy/romance set in a large, lush, and inclusive world.

RUBY FEVER

Andrews, Ilona
Avon/HarperCollins (384 pp.)
$9.99 paper | Aug. 23, 2022
978-0-06-287839-7

The magical elite of Houston are under threat from a rogue assassin trained by the Russian imperium.

Catalina Baylor is a woman with many responsibilities: She heads her magical house, runs her family’s investigative
firm, and is the Deputy Warden of Texas. When she’s called to investigate the murder of a local politician, Catalina and her lover, Alessandro Sagredo, realize that Russian assassin Arkan must be responsible for the crime. Arkan is creating hyper-powerful mages by infecting them with a stolen strain of the Osiris serum that introduced magic into the world 150 years ago; unfortunately, the mages are also irrational, paranoid, and unable to control their terrifying new powers. Since Arkan also murdered Alessandro’s father, they are determined to bring him to justice and find the stolen serum before he can do more damage. However, Catalina quickly realizes that she has another problem: A related incident has incapacitated her boss and left him in a coma. Catalina is elevated to Acting Warden, making her the ultimate magical law enforcement officer in the state of Texas. The case quickly becomes an unholy tangle of competing interests, as Catalina weighs her personal needs against those of her job as Warden. She and Alessandro are in a committed relationship, but they face new challenges around trust and family obligations while hunting down the most dangerous killer on the planet. All the beloved characters from earlier in the Hidden Legacy series reappear, which gives the thrilling final showdown with Arkan a gratifying “Avengers Assemble” feeling. Mysteries from previous books are finally wrapped up and explained, and there are a few juicy clues about future potential love interests for the youngest Baylor sister, Arabella.

**SWEETER THAN HONEY**

**Avery, Joy**

Montlake Romance (320 pp.)

$10.99 paper | June 28, 2022

978-1-6625-0084-8

A fake relationship sparks real feelings between a baker and the sheriff in a small town.

Rylee Harris and Canten Barnes, both widowed, are neighbors in Honey Hill, North Carolina. They each lost their spouses to violence and are now more focused on their careers than romance. That doesn’t mean Rylee isn’t aware of how attractive she finds Sheriff Barnes, best friend to her older brother. When her mom tries to set her up on a date with a man Rylee is not at all interested in, Rylee panics and says she’s secretly dating Canten. Luckily, Canten agrees to go along with the ruse for a couple months while Rylee’s parents are visiting. They intend for it to be kept quiet, but news travels fast, so soon they are trying to fool the whole town. Fooling themselves turns out to be the hardest part of all, though, as they each try to ignore their very real emotions. Avery delivers the heart that fans of small-town romances love while also turning up the heat. The Honey Hill residents of all ages are funny, eccentric, and lovable. Rylee and Canten have both faced hardships, and it’s uplifting to see how they are bolstered by their community. The chemistry between the leads is fiery, and they add a sizzling sexual component to their “fake” relationship early on. The conflicts keeping them apart are thin at times, which leads to the plot meandering, but the story still charms.

An emotionally rich story featuring bighearted leads.

**BARBARIAN LOVER**

**Dixon, Ruby**

Berkley (316 pp.)

$15.30 paper | July 12, 2022

978-0-593-54896-7

A hybrid community of aliens and humans faces growing pains and outside threats.

When taken from Earth by aliens, Kira was singled out in a particularly painful manner—a translating device was forcibly implanted into her brain through her ear. After being abandoned on an ice planet by their original kidnappers, Kira and the other human women are rescued by aliens from the sa-khui tribe. Kira, who was always shy and timid on Earth, now has a demanding new role as translator. She captures the attention of Aehako, a charming and charismatic alien who calls her Sad Eyes. Kira was an orphan on Earth, and she fears she will never have a family on her new planet. A symbiotic implant called the khui senses when an alien and human are the best match for producing children, an urgent need since the sa-khui have less than 40 remaining members. A childhood illness has left Kira infertile, and she is afraid to tell Aehako, terrified that her inability to have children will prevent them from being true mates. One day she hears the voices of the kidnapper aliens in her earpiece and realizes that she and the other humans are in danger of being retaken. Fearing they will use her earpiece as a homing beacon, she confides in Aehako, and they travel to the elders’ cave, where they hope to find technology that can save them. The romance between Kira and Aehako is sweet and satisfying. Frustrated with the overcrowding, they become leaders of an effort to open a second settlement. But most rewarding is Kira’s realization that she has intrinsic value simply for being who she is and not because of an earpiece or an ability to bear children.

Another triumphant story of a woman finding love among the sexiest aliens in the romance galaxy.
It’s the last spring break for the Harvard Class of 2017, and sworn enemies Ben Montgomery and Beatriz Herrera are spending their vacation at Ben’s family’s mansion on Cape Cod. Accompanied by Ben’s roommate, Claudio, and Beatriz’s cousin, Hero, who’ve just started dating, the two try to put aside their dislike of each other on behalf of their friends. Appalled by Ben’s family’s ostentatious wealth and his obvious White privilege, Beatriz, a queer Latinx woman distraught over the 2016 election, grapples with her mysterious attraction to this person who symbolizes everything she despises. Ben, at odds with his brusque older brother, John, and increasingly worried about his hometown and Oliver's relationship. While a happily-ever-after doesn't stop when a couple realizes their feelings for one another, this book feels more like an excuse to put the pair into a variety of loosely connected one-off situations than a fully fledged novel.

A fine but unnecessary sequel.

A London couple navigates the highs and lows of weddings and even a funeral in this sequel to Boyfriend Material (2020). Two years after the events of that book, reformed bad boy Luc O’Donnell and Oliver Blackwood, his buttoned-up barrister boyfriend, have settled into something resembling domestic bliss. There’s still an opposites-attract push and pull between them, but they’ve found a way to balance each other out. Now, with several wedding celebrations on their social calendar and an unexpected funeral to contend with, the couple is put into a pressure cooker of stressful situations. From running into old exes to dealing with their sneaky feelings of grief, Luc and Oliver will have their work cut out for them if they’re going to make it through with their relationship intact. Luc and his issues take more of the focus, as he hems and haws over proposing to Oliver—even after a terrible ex-boyfriend announces his own engagement. It never feels like the couple is in any real danger of splitting up, though, which raises the question of why they needed a sequel at all. While revisiting much-loved characters can leave fans feeling warm and fuzzy, this material would have been better off as a series of bonus stories rather than a full-length continuation of Luc and Oliver’s relationship. While a happily-ever-after doesn't stop when a couple realizes their feelings for one another, this book feels more like an excuse to put the pair into a variety of loosely connected one-off situations than a fully fledged novel.

A fine but unnecessary sequel.

HUSBAND MATERIAL

Hall, Alexis

Sourcebooks Casablanca (432 pp.)

$13.99 paper | Aug. 2, 2022

978-1-72825-092-2

A London couple navigates the highs and lows of weddings and even a funeral in this sequel to Boyfriend Material (2020).

Two years after the events of that book, reformed bad boy Luc O’Donnell and Oliver Blackwood, his buttoned-up barrister boyfriend, have settled into something resembling domestic bliss. There’s still an opposites-attract push and pull between them, but they’ve found a way to balance each other out. Now, with several wedding celebrations on their social calendar and an unexpected funeral to contend with, the couple is put into a pressure cooker of stressful situations. From running into old exes to dealing with their sneaky feelings of grief, Luc and Oliver will have their work cut out for them if they’re going to make it through with their relationship intact. Luc and his issues take more of the focus, as he hems and haws over proposing to Oliver—even after a terrible ex-boyfriend announces his own engagement. It never feels like the couple is in any real danger of splitting up, though, which raises the question of why they needed a sequel at all. While revisiting much-loved characters can leave fans feeling warm and fuzzy, this material would have been better off as a series of bonus stories rather than a full-length continuation of Luc and Oliver’s relationship. While a happily-ever-after doesn't stop when a couple realizes their feelings for one another, this book feels more like an excuse to put the pair into a variety of loosely connected one-off situations than a fully fledged novel.

A fine but unnecessary sequel.

THE RETURN OF THE DUKE

Heath, Lorraine

Avon/HarperCollins (384 pp.)

$8.99 paper | July 26, 2022

978-0-06-311459-3

A man tries to exonerate his father and reclaim his title.

Marcus Stanwick was next in line to the Dukedom of Wolfdorf when his father was arrested and executed for plotting to kill Queen Victoria. The family is stripped of their land, wealth, and titles, leaving Marcus and his siblings disgraced and penniless. A year later, Marcus begins to investigate his father’s crimes, determined to restore the family’s name. He contacts his father’s mistress, Esme Lancaster, certain she has information about the extent of his father’s involvement in the conspiracy. Marcus cannot trust this independent, strong-willed woman who is definitely keeping secrets, and he’s horrified by his attraction toward the woman who was his father’s lover. When Marcus follows her one night, they have a dangerous altercation with criminals that injures them both. Esme has no choice but to tell Marcus the truth: She’s a spy for the Crown, and she believes that Victoria’s life is still in danger. Heath has always been a master of the romance genre, and in this novel, she provides the added bonus of a Victorian-era James Bond plot. Marcus and Esme’s adventures are full of danger and intrigue—not to mention spy gadgets, mysterious operatives, and political intrigue. Their affair is full of angst and longing, their different places in the social stratosphere making a future together seem impossible.

An impressive end to a series that explores the ways women subvert societal norms and expectations in Victorian London.

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An impressive end to a series that explores the ways women subvert societal norms and expectations in Victorian London.
KNOT AGAIN
Jackson, Kwana
Berkley (336 pp.)
$16.00 paper | July 26, 2022
978-1-984806-52-9

A firefighter with a tragic past rekindles a 15-year-old romance when his newly divorced crush moves back to town.

After having been crowned Mr. November for this year’s upcoming FDNY calendar, firefighter Lucas Strong is plenty exhausted keeping his Harlem neighborhood safe and dodging passes from CPR patients. Since his foster mother, Mama Joy, died almost a year ago, he works extra hours helping his three brothers at their yarn shop, Strong Knits, on top of his shifts at the firehouse. He can barely sleep, and when he does, he’s plagued by nightmares about the deaths of Mama Joy and his birth mother.

The only place Lucas truly finds comfort is Scrubs, the laundromat, and since Sewanee’s accident, everything about her life is hard to achieve perfection for her family, acing her way through college and law school. She even had the trophy high school sweetheart, but after more than 13 years of ignoring Brandon’s red flags, Nadia realized that while she was always chasing success, she never once stopped to celebrate her victories. The only time Nadia ever came close to living spontaneously was during one uninhibited summer fling in college with a young commitment-phobe named Rocket. Befitting her newfound bravery, Nadia decides to commemorate her accomplishments with a party at Utah’s Enchanting Orchards, where she meets the venue’s temporary host: Marcos Hawkins, aka Rocket. Marcos is filling in for his ailing father, and despite his tendency to run away when the going gets tough, he is adamant about saving the orchard from his greedy uncles, who want to sell it. As Marcos and Nadia work together to plan her big day, they are flooded with strong feelings from their past…but how can Marcos act on them when Nadia is trying to find herself? Méndez’s debut adult novel is a love letter to the “The sky was quickly turning dark purple, and far from the city lights, the first stars were glittering like crystals”—providing a perfect backdrop for a fresh story of family, friendship, and renewed love.

An enchanting novel overflowing with self-love and second chances.

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING
Whelan, Julia
Avon/HarperCollins (432 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Aug. 2, 2022
978-0-06-309556-4

An audiobook narrator and former actress gets more than she bargained for when she performs a book with the audiobook world’s sexiest and most mysterious voice.

Sewanee Chester grew up dreaming of being an actress, and for a short while, she made that dream a reality. But before her career could take off, an accident caused her to lose an eye and derailed her path to stardom. Now Sewanee narrates audiobooks, using all the talent and passion she once showed onscreen to bring the pages of books to life. When Sewanee isn’t working, she visits her former actress grandmother in an assisted living facility. Despite Sewanee’s accident, everything about her life is orderly and planned…until she attends a book convention and ends up spending a romantic night with a stranger. Despite that one-out-of-character night, Sewanee isn’t a romantic—that’s why she now says no to narrating romance novels, despite starting her career with them. After being disappointed by real life one too many times, she doesn’t believe in happily-ever-afters. But when she gets an offer to narrate a posthumous book from...
a romance novelist she once worked with, she agrees—only because she needs the money to help pay for her grandmother’s care. She’ll be performing the book with Brock McNight, a narrator who’s as sexy as he is secretive—people may know his voice, but they’ve never seen the man behind it. As Sewanee begins working with Brock, trading texts and emails, they forge a connection that goes beyond the book. But Sewanee quickly learns that showing vulnerability in real life is harder than performing it. Can she be brave enough to follow her dreams, even if it means risking failure? And do her old dreams even fit into her new life? Whelan, a celebrated audiobook narrator and actress herself (as well as the author of a previous novel, My Oxford Year, 2018), brings an incredible amount of realism to her descriptions of Sewanee’s career. Although there’s plenty of tragedy and angst in Sewanee’s life, there’s also a lot of humor (the story opens with a laugh-out-loud scene involving a particularly racy romance novel being played at full volume to unsuspecting airplane passengers). Sewanee and Brock have crackling chemistry in their innuendo-laden texts, and there are love scenes as steamy as the ones Sewanee narrates. Whelan also shows an awareness and appreciation of romance tropes that lead to a fun and slightly meta reading experience. Although the romance is a standout, Sewanee’s journey of self-acceptance is the real star.

A compulsively readable story about self-discovery with plenty of laughs and spice along the way.

JUST ANOTHER LOVE SONG

Winfrey, Kerry
Berkley (352 pp.)
$16.00 paper | Aug. 2, 2022
978-0-593-33343-3

A small-town gardener with big dreams reunites with her ex-boyfriend, a famous alt-country singer, in this sweet second-chance romance.

Just another love song that’ll get stuck in your head like your favorite love song.

Sandy raise funds for the Baileyville Street Fair, she can’t help but wonder if she could finally allow herself the happiness she deserves. Winfrey’s romance is sweet as honey, and Sandy’s long-awaited journey to living out her dreams is touching and gratifying. Better yet, Hank is the quintessential kindhearted golden boy: “His eyes showed me everything I loved about Baileyville and everything I dreamed about in the outside world.... Those blue-gray irises sparkled with the gently swaying flowers of my present and the skyscrapers of my dreams.” With hilarious best friends like Honey and Shelby and memorable oddities like Hotpants Ed, Sandy and Hank’s quaint country town feels larger than life.

A warm, heartfelt novel that’ll get stuck in your head like your favorite love song.
Making sense of chaos is never easy, but this powerful book does much to explain why America's debacle in Afghanistan ended the way it did.

Ackerman, who spent years in the region as a frontline soldier and later as a CIA paramilitary officer, brings firsthand experience of combat as well as a knowledge of classical literature to the story. He is also the author of multiple acclaimed works of fiction and nonfiction, including *Green on Blue*, *Places and Names*, and *Red Dress in Black & White*. In his latest, Ackerman focuses on the final week of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, when a flood of Afghans clamored to evacuate. The fifth act of the book's title, this period encompassed the climax and denouement of the ordeal—and, much like the events of the previous 20 years, it was a catastrophic mess. The author tried to help old friends and their families escape, working with a network of other veterans and in-country players. Adding a sense of bizarre surrealism, he did most of this by phone while on a family holiday, trying to shield them from the unfolding disaster. The attack at the Kabul airport, which killed more than 180 people, added another layer of mayhem. “If it wasn’t clear already,” Ackerman writes, “after the bombing at Abbey Gate it becomes evident that the Biden administration has handled the evacuation of Afghanistan with an exceptional degree of incompetence.” However, it’s clear the author could not walk away, and he explains why in chapters about his time in the field, fighting a conflict that seemed increasingly futile. While noting that Afghanistan has never really known peace, he hopes that American actions have contributed to the destruction of the country's infrastructure of terrorism. Ackerman should be commended not just for his work helping Afghans escape safely, but also for providing a must-read account of the end of America’s longest war.

Courage and folly, dedication and tragedy: Ackerman deftly captures all dimensions of a protracted foreign policy failure.
“A fascinating, harrowing, unforgettable book about a place few outsiders can comprehend.”

**DUCKS**

STRANGERS TO OURSELVES
Untsettled Minds and the Stories That Make Us

Aviv, Rachel
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (288 pp.)
978-0-374-60084-6
$28.00 | Sept. 13, 2022

A perceptive and intelligent work about mental illness from the New Yorker staff writer.

In her debut, Aviv illuminates the shortcomings of modern psychiatry through four profiles of people whose states of being are ill-defined by current medical practice—particularly by those diagnoses laid out in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Throughout, the author interweaves these vivid profiles with her own experiences. When she was 6, in the wake of her parents’ divorce, Aviv was diagnosed with anorexia despite her abiding sense that that label was inaccurate. Later, the author writes about taking Lexapro. “To some degree, Lexapro had been a social drug, a collective experience,” she writes. “After a sense of uncanny flourishing for several months, my friends and I began wondering if we should quit.” Aviv applies her signature conscientiousness and probing intellect to every section of this eye-opening book. Her profiles are memorable and empathetic: a once-successful American physician who sued the psychiatric hospital where he was treated; Bapu, an Indian woman whose intense devotion to a mystical branch of Hinduism was classified against her will as mental illness; Naomi, a young Black mother whose sense of personal and political oppression cannot be disentangled from her psychosis; and Laura, a privileged Harvard graduate and model patient whose diagnosis shifted over the years from bipolar disorder to borderline personality disorder. Aviv treats her subjects with both scholarly interest and genuine compassion, particularly in the case of Naomi, who was incarcerated for killing one of her twin sons. In the epilogue, the author revisits her childhood hospitalization for anorexia and chronicles the friendship she cultivated with a girl named Hava. They shared some biographical similarities, and the author recalls how she wanted to be just like Hava. However, for Aviv, her childhood disorder was merely a blip; for Hava, her illness became a lifelong “career.”

A moving, meticulously researched, elegantly constructed work of nonfiction.

DUCKS
Two Years in the Oil Sands

Beaton, Kate
Drawn & Quarterly (448 pp.)
$39.95 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-77046-289-2

An ambitiously complex graphic narrative of a Nova Scotian woman’s experience working in the oil sands of Fort McMurray, Alberta.

Known primarily as the creator of the web-based comic series “Hark! A Vagrant,” Beaton moves to memoir with this examination of the two years she spent working in the oil sands to pay off her student loans. The author begins with an introduction to her home in Cape Breton, where the people have “a deep love for home, and the knowledge of how frequently they will have to leave it to find work somewhere else. This push and pull defines us. It’s all over our music, our literature, our art, and our understanding of our place in the world.” On the surface, the book is a chronicle of the three years following the author’s college graduation (she also spent a year working at the Maritime Museum of British Columbia), but Beaton captures much more than her personal story: She delves deep into the milieu of Fort McMurray, highlighting the complex relationships among the work camps, the oil companies, and the people living and working there. As the author recounts her time through several jobs, companies, and locations, she alternates the narration between the personal relationships among a workforce largely disconnected from the truth of your own. An enthralling book about how finding the truth of a city’s story means finding the truth of your own.

Bell, a British American art critic, has lived in Berlin long enough to feel
Welcome to our annual Pride Issue, where we highlight important books from LGBTQ+ authors or those about relevant topics, from gay and trans life experiences to the fluidity of gender and the power of language in a person’s search for identity. As in previous years, it was difficult limiting myself to just six books, but I think the titles listed below reflect the diversity and dynamism of the LGBTQ+ community. All quotes are from the Kirkus reviews.

**Fine: A Comic About Gender** by Rhea Ewing (Liveright/Norton, April 5): “A graphic narrative project on the multifaceted nature of gender.” The author shows “how gender is interconnected with race, culture, and sexuality; how it moves far beyond conventional masculine and feminine designations; and how embracing fluidity can be liberating and transformative regardless of social norms of appearance and behavior, many of which are constricive and damaging....The instructive yet never heavy-handed narrative boldly shows how identity is intimately interpreted and how connections with others can fortify perceptions and perspectives.”

**Abuela in Shadow, Abuela in Light** by Rigoberto González (Univ. of Wisconsin, April 12): “A poignant homage to the author’s Indigenous grandmother as well as an exploration of deep-seated family abuse....Sleeping on floors and sharing small spaces, González became prey to older cousins and uncles who sexually abused him. Only later in life, now a successful, independent gay man, did he hear from his female cousins that the abuse he suffered also happened to them....An alternately touching and shocking narrative of a dysfunctional yet resilient Mexican American family.”

**Gender Euphoria: Stories of Joy From Trans, Non-Binary, and Intersex Writers**, edited by Laura Kate Dale (Unbound, April 19): “Editor Dale collects pieces from noncisgender writers who describe only their joyful trans or nonbinary experiences. None of the essays feature the psychological trauma that can accompany gender dysphoria....The contributors also demonstrate the importance of other subcultures and practices, including the punk scene, erotic role-playing in online gaming, cosplay at anime conventions, and BDSM sex work for trans and gender-nonconforming clients. A welcome text in which trans, nonbinary, and intersex writers can reveal their true selves.”

**The Third Person** by Emma Grove (Drawn & Quarterly, May 3): “Writer and animator Grove’s debut graphic memoir portrays her youth coming to terms with her sexuality and gender dysphoria....At nearly 900 pages, the book is a surprisingly brisk reading experience rendered effectively through the minimalist illustrations and powerful dialogue exchanges. Grove’s artistry also embellishes the journey with palpable character movement and facial expressions and mood representation. While untangling the complexities and often sobering dynamics of vulnerability and identity, Grove’s impressive comic journal illuminates, inspires, and educates.”

**Voice of the Fish: A Lyric Essay** by Lars Horn (Graywolf, June 7): “In Horn’s first book, winner of the Graywolf Press Nonfiction Prize...[they interweave] erudite and personal essays to create a shimmering, watery mosaic of trans autobiography richly infused with literature, science, history, and myth....In the first piece...the author grapples with the pronoun I and their sense of gender in physical and linguistic terms....They also recount in searing detail being attacked and nearly raped as well as an ‘aborted suicide.’...A promising literary debut.”

**Asylum: A Memoir & Manifesto** by Edafe Okporo (Simon & Schuster, June 7): “Okporo chronicles his experience seeking asylum in the U.S. after being persecuted in his home country of Nigeria for being gay...Okporo’s voice vibrates with passion and hope, and his detailed descriptions of his experiences are the most riveting parts of the book. He expertly interweaves his story with statistical and historical details about the perils of the U.S. immigration system.”

Eric Liebetrau is the nonfiction and managing editor.
“Melding science, natural history, memoir, and travelogue, ornithologist Birkhead offers a commodious history of humans’ connection to birds.”

BIRDS AND US

“A 12,000-Year History From Cave Art to Conservation
Birkhead, Tim
Princeton Univ. (496 pp.)
$35.00 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-0-691-23992-7

A study of birds as inspiration, enlightenment, and food.
Melding science, natural history, memoir, and travelogue, ornithologist Birkhead offers a commodious history of humans’ connection to birds, from prehistoric times to the current burgeoning interest in bird-watching. He begins in southern Spain, where depictions of more than 200 birds were discovered in Neolithic caves. This “birthplace of bird study” raises the question of the artists’ motivation: Do the images represent totemism, suggesting that birds were worshipped? Did the artists pay homage to birds prized for food? Did the images serve as a kind of field guide? In ancient Egypt, mummified birds were found in catacombs, preserved as food, pets for the deceased, or votive offerings. Birkhead examines early interest in investigating birds (by Aristotle and Pliny the Elder, for example); falconry as pastime, an “expensive, time-consuming” indulgence of aristocrats, and the medieval veneration of birds as “hovering midway between heaven and earth, half angels, half animals,” which can be deduced from the appearance of birds in religious paintings. As prey—sometimes for food, sometimes for sport—bird populations often have been decimated. Tudor England fostered an “unthinking persecution of wildlife” that included birds seen as “vermin.” In the late 1950s, Mao Zedong set off mass killings of sparrows, blamed for stealing grain. The 17th century saw a marked interest in scientific investigation, resulting in a proliferation of description, collection, and illustration of birds. Victorians paradoxically cherished birds, enjoying a vogue for caged songbirds but also for amassing specimens of birds, skins, and eggs. From acorn woodpeckers to zebra finches, Birkhead examines bird habitat, behavior, cultural meaning, and physiology in species around the world. He creates engaging portraits of the often eccentric individuals involved in bird investigations and reports on some exotic uses of birds for food—flamingos’ fatty tongues, for example, roast peacock, and fattened herons. This beautifully produced

“An impressively thorough survey of the development of biotechnology and the potential dangers it poses.”
—Kirkus Reviews

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MEAN BABY
A Memoir of Growing Up
Blair, Selma
Knopf (336 pp.)
$28.00 | May 17, 2022
978-0-525-65949-5


Born outside of Detroit in 1972, Blair earned the nickname “mean baby” for the “judgmental, scrutinizing” expression she wore on her face from the day she was born. In fact, she was a “sensitive soul” who felt judged by others—in particular, her demanding, sometimes-cruel mother. At 7, Blair developed a taste for alcohol at a family Passover celebration and drank in secret after that, reveling in the feeling of “safety” alcohol gave her. She also suffered awful abuse. “I have been raped, multiple times,” she writes, “because I was too drunk to say the words ‘Please Stop.’ ” A troubled teen, she continued to take refuge in drinking but also discovered a passion for literature and drama. After a suicide attempt in college, Blair found her footing in acting. She moved to New York City, where, after a year of struggle, she found an agent and landed her first movie role. Drinking and toxic relationships took their tolls, and she entered rehab in Michigan before moving to Los Angeles. An unexpected invitation to play a role in the 1999 film Cruel Intentions brought her fame. However, the binge-drinking continued, as did a series of unhealthy relationships (one of which turned into a short-lived marriage) and mysterious pains that racked her body. “I could feel it growing and spreading,” she writes, “but I had no idea what it was.” Single motherhood helped her curb drinking, but her fatigue and neuralgia intensified. A lifelong spiritual seeker who sought out psychics to help her make sense of her life, Blair finally received an answer to explain the physical roots of her pain: multiple sclerosis. Though the narrative occasionally meanders, the author offers a sharp, memorable account of her roles as celebrity and MS advocate that will have wide appeal to both fans and general readers alike.

A moving and eloquent memoir.

DEMOCRACY’S DATA
The Hidden Stories in the U.S. Census and How to Read Them
Bouk, Dan
MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux (384 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 23, 2022
978-0-374-60254-3

A deep dive into the 1940 U.S. census: how it was created, completed, deployed, and even weaponized and what it can teach us about American democracy.

“I hope that this book will help people hear data speak in new ways,” writes Bouk, a professor of history at Colgate. “I hope readers will develop an admiration for data’s depths, for the ways that sweat and blood suffuse a data set. Some people fall in love with the appearance of data as a thing more or less certain, simple, and precise. I think there is more beauty and also more truth in acknowledging and even appreciating the roots of data in the uncertain, complicated, and often hazy spaces of life.” The author provides a meticulous examination of the mechanics of the census, a complex topic that includes the design of the questions, training of the enumerators, public promotion across the country, and how it affects political representation and opposition. Bouk’s study of the 1940 census shows how data can be manipulated, leading to such lamentable actions as the internment of Japanese Americans during and after World War II.
“The author’s probing investigation includes animated profiles of a large cast of characters, creating a palpable sense of trauma, pain, and vulnerability in what one cardiologist characterized as nothing less than war.”

THE DESPERATE HOURS

War II. Using photographed examples, including the census data on a variety of significant historical figures, Bouk shines a bright light on the power of the data to be used as a tool to promote or silence the voices of certain demographics. Throughout the text, the author clearly demonstrates the importance of understanding the context of census development: what it can tell us about what was important at the time a particular census was executed as well as the often far-reaching effects on all elements of society. As Bouk argues convincingly, “looking squarely at complicated data-making processes is becoming an essential activity for all those who wish to have a say in shaping our world, from activists to policy makers, and for every person striving to remain an informed citizen.”

A page-turning examination of why we need to understand the census and its wide-ranging effects.

DANGER ZONE
The Coming Conflict With China
Brands, Hal & Michael Beckley
Norton (288 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-1-324-02130-8

A study of the growing urgency of the geopolitical competition between China and the U.S.

Many readers are aware of America’s ongoing competition with China, but Brands and Beckley, specialists in geopolitical history and strategy, express the full gravity of the situation. Their thesis is that China’s growth recently peaked and has begun to decline, but the ambition of its leaders to become the preeminent global power has not lessened. “The greatest geopolitical catastrophes occur at the intersection of ambition and desperation,” they write. “Xi Jinping’s China will soon be driven by plenty of both.” The internal difficulties of the country are escalating, with staggering demographic problems, a stagnating economy, and depletion of resources. By 2030, these issues will dramatically undermine China’s capacity to assert itself on the global stage. As such, write the authors, if China wants to make its big move, it will have to do so very soon. This was the case, they argue, with Germany in the period between the turn of the century and World War II as well as with Japan in the 1930s. In the current situation, the most obvious flashpoint is Taiwan, both to unify China (as Beijing sees it) and as a geopolitical statement of assertion. Therefore, the U.S. must actively manage the short-term crisis and emerge well placed for the long game. Such a strategy might include a treatylike agreement with Taiwan to station U.S. forces there while strengthening other partnerships, including with international organizations. China has a pattern of making threatening statements to anyone who disagrees with its plans, providing an opening for the U.S. to show what a China-dominated world would look like. Brands and Beckley are spot-on in the majority of their analysis, but one wonders if American leaders have the political will and diplomatic competence to implement their recommendations. Nevertheless, the authors have given us much to think about, and much of it is frightening.

An authoritative, worrying analysis about the prospects for open conflict within the next few years.
tense, stirring picture of the impact of Covid-19 on New York- Presbyterian Hospital’s campuses in New York City, Westchester County, and the Hudson Valley. In the first months of the pandemic, the city’s “most elite hospital system” faced frustration and uncertainty. Little was known about the disease’s cause, treatment, and prognosis; hospitals faced a stunning lack of supplies; doctors and nurses were overwhelmed and grief-stricken by deaths they could not prevent; and they were constantly undermined by decisions at the federal, state, and city levels. The CDC’s “antediluvian” structures made the agency unable “to quickly gather, process, and interpret data,” and states were forced to compete for supplies. When FEMA sent ventilators, they turned out to be old and broken. By mid-March, the hospital had 90,000 masks on hand, a number it needed each day. In its search for protective gear, the hospital found a “profiteering and counterfeit market” allowed to flourish because of a lack of federal leadership. Tests, when they could be found, were unreliable, but the CDC and the Trump administration refused to authorize the import of reliable tests from outside the U.S. As late as June, with cases in New York City soaring, doctors and nurses were unable to get tests for themselves; even when available, processing them “was chaos.” Brenner reveals, as well, the conflicts between staff and “their corporate masters,” who punished health providers if they spoke out about the hospital’s challenges and failures. The author’s probing investigation includes animated profiles of a large cast of characters, creating a palpable sense of trauma, pain, and vulnerability in what one cardiologist characterized as nothing less than war. The casualties, Brenner shows, encompassed far more than the patients who died.

A potent cautionary tale for pandemic preparedness.

THE RISE AND REIGN OF THE MAMMALS
A New History From the Shadow of the Dinosaurs to Us
Brusatte, Steve
Mariner Books (528 pp.)
$29.99 | June 7, 2022
978-0-06-295151-9

Another outstanding work of paleontology from the author of The Rise and Fall of Dinosaurs.

Dinosaurs fascinate everyone, and Brusatte, professor of paleontology and adviser to the Jurassic World film franchise, has named more than 15 new species. However, mammals are his first love, and this delightful account will convert many readers. According to the popular belief, dinosaurs ruled the Earth until they were wiped out by a meteor strike 65 million years ago, whereupon mammals succeeded them. This is correct except that mammals not only succeeded dinosaurs; they existed alongside them back to their beginning. In fact, both share a common ancestor that appeared perhaps 325 million years ago. This small lizardlike creature evolved into two major lineages, one eventually becoming reptiles (including birds), the other mammals. Readers who remember high school biology know that mammals have warm blood, hair, and mammary glands that produce milk. Such true mammals did not appear for 100 million years, and these features do not fossilize well, but Brusatte excels in explaining how paleontologists figured matters out. Only mammals chew; most have complex teeth. Birds and reptiles swallow food whole; their teeth, when present, look alike. Mammals have three tiny bones in their ears, which allow them to hear better than other vertebrates, which have only one. Ancient mammals and pre-mammals were small. Their surviving bones were fragmentary and their teeth nearly microscopic, so early paleontologists sifted tons of dirt to detect minuscule fossils until the present century, when new sites, especially in China, have revealed spectacularly complete skeletons, often including hair, feathers, and embryos. Many readers consider humans the most interesting mammal, closely followed by extinct behemoths such as mammoths and saber-toothed tigers. Brusatte, however, gives humans “about the same attention as horses and whales and elephants. After all,
we are but one of many amazing feats of mammalian evolution.” Throughout, the author employs lucid prose and generous illustrations to describe the explosion of mammal species that followed the disappearance of dinosaurs.

A must for any list of the best popular science books of the year.

SHOULD ALL DRUGS BE LEGALIZED?
Busby, Mattha
Thames & Hudson (144 pp.)
$18.95 paper | July 12, 2022
978-0-500-29568-7

A graphic-rich book whose title thesis is asked and answered in a cogent narrative.

Part of the publisher’s Big Idea series, this volume is billed as “a primer for the 21st century.” The idea is big but not, of course, new: Most drugs were largely legal in most parts of the world until relatively recently. As British freelance journalist Busby writes, for instance, opium was widely used in Britain until 1868, popular among the poor “because it was cheaper than gin or wine.” Prohibition and suppression paralleled the rise of the bureaucratic, command-economy state. For example, marijuana was legal in Madagascar until the authorities observed that a ganja-fueled populace wasn’t inclined to work efficiently in the fields. As Busby shows, there’s a racist element to the historic interdiction effort. “Many of the initial prohibitions were at least partly fueled by bigotry,” he writes, “underpinned by fears of foreigners and minority groups, and perceived threats to labor markets.” The war on drugs in the U.S., instituted by the Nixon administration, has been no different: Most consumers are White, but most police actions target non-White people. That war, Busby relates, has chalked up roughly $1 trillion in costs, with an annual expenditure today of about $50 billion. Meanwhile, cartels and their enablers—one of them the HSBC Bank, which “allowed at least $881 billion of Sinaloa cartel drug trafficking money to be...
In his 2019 debut, *When Brooklyn Was Queer*, Hugh Ryan crafted vibrant scenes using details unearthed from quotidian sources like census records and police reports. In his new book, *The Women’s House of Detention: A Queer History of a Forgotten Prison* (Bold Type Books, May 10), he uses this talent to cement one building into the history of queer America. The prison, built in 1932 and demolished in 1974, loomed in the heart of Manhattan’s Greenwich Village, next to the red brick courthouse that is now Jefferson Market Library, a few blocks from the Stonewall Inn. Ryan describes the institution’s impact on the queer women and transmasculine people of New York and also surveys the longer history of women’s incarceration, which “is not simply a small mirror held up to the incarceration of men; rather, it is about the development of a distinctly unjust system of justice, violently dedicated to the maintenance and propagation of ‘proper’ femininity.”

When we discuss the book over Zoom, Ryan, a Brooklyn-based historian and educator, describes the House of D’s influence on Greenwich Village—and queer history writ large—as “an absence that was so present I was shocked.” When asked how he researched, he explains, “Ending up in the historical record is a question of power. You either have power, in which case you can give your objects away to a museum or your house remains and you get a plaque on it…. Or people have power over you, and you enter the historical record as the raw material for their revelations. You enter the historical record because a doctor has studied you, because a social worker has written about you, because a prison needs to keep track of its inmates. The archive is always about power.”

The Women’s Prison Association, an organization for women impacted by incarceration that is featured prominently in the book, allowed Ryan to explore their archives. They were supportive but doubtful that he would find anything relevant, explaining that they didn’t work specifically with queer women, especially not back then. “I opened the files, and within the first day—I think it was in the first two hours of looking—I found one of the most essential stories that I tell in the book,” Ryan says. “And I knew, if I found this file in two hours of looking at 150 boxes, there’s more. And there was.”

Each chapter of *The Women’s House of Detention* brings to life those who entered the historical record under duress. We meet people erased from history as well as figures who feature prominently in it, including former inmates Andrea Dworkin, Afeni Shakur, and Angela Davis. Toward the end of the book, Ryan writes, “For every story told in this book, there are fifty I didn’t tell—and a hundred I never found.” I ask him to share one of those stories and am gifted with a yarn about a 6-foot-tall woman from the Midwest whose only childhood friend was an eccentric millionaire. She moved to New York City and had an affair with an opera diva, ending up in jail after their breakup sparked a breakdown. She later killed a man while serving as a playground guard.
laundered through its accounts”—cashed in big. Busby argues that prohibition is a lost cause, an opportunity for politicians to blorate and gangsters to flourish, and that “it is time for a new, compassionate and pragmatic approach.” Backed by a careful graphic presentation in charts and photographs, that argument calls for legalization, regulation, treatment of the addicted, and other more humane and less costly measures that would have the effect of dismantling the illegal economy.

The answer is yes in an argument tinged with plenty of nuance.

GOING PUBLIC
How a Small Group of Silicon Valley Rebels Loosened Wall Street’s Grip on the IPO and Sparked a Revolution
Campbell, Dakin
Twelve (304 pp.)
$30.00 | July 26, 2022
978-1-5387-0788-3

The chief finance correspondent for Business Insider explores the ways in which Silicon Valley venture capitalism altered the game of corporate stock sales.

Selling stock to raise money for operations or expansion has been a common corporate strategy for centuries. In 1980, writes Campbell, the strategy boiled down to a formula: An investment bank brokered a stock-offering deal, serving both the company and its new investors and shoveling in money from both sides, whether the deal was successful or not. The bank set the price. Steve Jobs broke that mold, asking when negotiating Apple’s IPO on behalf of the shareholders, “Won’t they be terribly happy that they bought stock at eighteen that’s now selling at twenty-eight? And won’t they give you a lot more brokerage business?” As Campbell writes, it was the first crack in the dam. After that moment, many other innovations followed, including IPO deals brokered by venture capitalist funds that both engineered the sale and backed client companies with their own money, putting skin in the game and greater concern for outcomes. An early experimenter was Google, offered through a firm of seasoned tech investors; other case studies include Netflix, Spotify, and Airbnb. “IPOs are risky,” Campbell writes meaningfully. “They are stock issues from companies that haven’t faced the rigor of the public markets or are less proven than established firms. Many technology firms are trying to create entirely new industries. Most aren’t making money when they come to market.” It doesn’t take a business degree to follow along, but Campbell’s narrative sometimes journeys into the weeds of finance. Regardless, he ably outlines how current practices and players (including the “blank check” firms recently in the news for floating Donald Trump) became part of the game.

Tech and business geeks alike will enjoy Campbell’s deep dive into the murky waters of corporate finance.

Campbell has been fascinated by death since she watched her father, acclaimed comic book artist Eddie Campbell, create illustrations for Alan Moore’s *From Hell*. In her debut, Campbell works her way through the machinery of the death industry, interviewing morticians, embalmers, crime scene cleaners, executioners, and others. Clearly unafraid of getting her hands dirty, she chronicles how she held a brain during an autopsy and learned to dig a perfect hole from two cheery gravediggers. At a crematorium, she finds that “cancer is the last thing to burn.” This sounds bizarre and even a little ghoulish, but the author’s quest reveals a wealth of surprising grace and impressive courage. Most of the people she interviewed and shadowed are content in their roles, viewing their work as inherently important. “They are trying to do what they believe is right,” she writes. “They cannot reverse the situation and make people live again, but they can change how it is dealt with and give them dignity in death.” There are many touching moments and characters—e.g., a funeral home director who, in the early days of the AIDS epidemic, would secretly allow lovers and friends into the mortuary to say their goodbyes. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child. Campbell’s encounter with a bereavement midwife, who specializes in stillbirths and deliveries of babies who will soon pass away, is strikingly poignant, as is the author’s admission that she will be haunted by the image of a dead child.
who have not done anything wrong but might think about it in the future. “China’s leaders,” write the authors, “wanted to redefine government using the same tools that Google, Facebook and Amazon had used to remake capitalism…They could engineer away dissent. China would have optimization.” Party officials understand that most citizens will trade privacy for order. Worryingly, the system is now being exported around the world, with aspects of it appearing in India, Uganda, and Singapore. Occasionally, the authors wander away from their main theme, but they paint a grim, disturbing portrait that deserves close scrutiny, especially as the technology becomes more precise and easier to deploy. While tech giants in the U.S. “exploit this technology for profit…the Communist Party has adopted it as a means to maintain power.”

The underside of digital technology on full, frightening display.

Two prominent intellectuals rehash familiar discussions about the myriad failures of American foreign policy.

In the foreword to this back-and-forth between Chomsky and Prashad, Angela Y. Davis calls Chomsky “the conscience of a country,” an unbending critic of the flawed concept of American exceptionalism. In addition to examining America’s disastrous, 20-year war in Afghanistan and the recent hasty withdrawal, the authors journey back to the Vietnam era, showing how the U.S. “has failed to accomplish any of the objectives of its wars.” American bombing, they clearly demonstrate, has
created only needless suffering, and they are perplexed that government officials wonder why there is often hatred and violence directed toward the U.S. Due to its relentless military bullying, the authors characterize America as a kind of godfather. “There is a mafia quality to the way the United States has exercised its power,” they write in the introduction, “something that goes back to the days of the genocide against the indigenous peoples of North America....The idea that the United States had a right to define the destiny of the Americas and to export this attitude to other lands, especially in parts of Africa and Asia, derives from its settler-colonial history.” Using a mixture of dialogue and insertions of Chomsky’s previous public pronouncements, the collaborators circle back continuously to the myth of American exceptionalism and how American attempts to govern with intimidation and military aggression have failed many times over. In a concluding section that feels tacked-on, the authors turn to the war in Ukraine, which they agree is a disaster for the planet: “The most significant effect of this war, barely discussed, is that it sets back—maybe permanently—the meager hopes for escaping the total catastrophe of climate destruction, the end of organized human life (and innumerable other species we are wantonly destroying).”

A collection of insightful geopolitical analyses that offers little new for Chomsky devotees.

THE LIAR
How a Double Agent in the CIA Became the Cold War’s Last Honest Man
Cunningham, Benjamin
PublicAffairs (288 pp.)
$29.00 | Aug. 23, 2022
978-1-5417-0079-6

Double-agent spies navigate geopolitical tumult from the 1960s to the 1980s. In a vivid, sprawling tale, Economist correspondent Cunningham focuses on the conflicted loyalties of a disaffected, intellectual Czech couple whose misadventures reflect the institutional decline of espionage as the Cold War wound down. The charismatic Karel Koecher (b. 1934) typified an Eastern Bloc lost generation, pursuing his education even as the Soviets tightened control over Czechoslovakia and daily life became “a grotesque amalgamation of rigidity and absurdity.” Following bouts of youthful intransigence, Koecher positioned himself to be recruited by state security, the StB. “In those days and during the decades to come,” writes the author, “the Czechoslovak state had no recognizable moral center. Everything was contingent. Nothing was clear.” In 1965, Koecher and his wife, Hana, moved to the U.S. under academic cover, leveraging contacts like a Columbia University professor who may have been working for the Defense Intelligence Agency. The young spies made progress in America, yet the global tumult of 1968, including the invasion of Czechoslovakia by other Warsaw Pact nations, increased pressure on them. “The StB did not trust Karel, and he did not trust them,” writes Cunningham. As Hana proved adept in the diamond trade, Koecher was recruited by the CIA to translate wiretaps from Soviet embassies and diplomats’ homes, looking for more potential assets to flip. Even the KGB was impressed that Karel, “with no diplomatic cover, penetrated the American government, and found a secure spot within the CIA itself.” Yet he was denounced by a rival who “accused Karel of working for the CIA against the Communist Bloc.” Later, the couple was reactivated, as the Soviets “hoped to belatedly catch up to the changes in American politics,” only to be apprehended by the FBI in 1984, charged with espionage, and traded for the dissident Natan Sharansky. Though the narrative pace occasionally lags, Cunningham delivers a capable spy story.

An often engrossing, well-written tale from the waning days of Cold War espionage.
THE END OF SOLITUDE
Selected Essays on Culture and Society
Deresiewicz, William
Henry Holt (320 pp.)
$29.99 | Aug. 23, 2022
978-1-250-85864-1

Sharp commentaries on the arts and academia and the forces the author believes threaten them.

This selection of essays by veteran critic Deresiewicz, which follows The Death of the Artist, reveals an open-mindedness when it comes to subject matter. The author writes enthusiastically about fiction, dance, TV, and more. He admires heterodox intellectuals like Harold Rosenberg and polymaths like Clive James. But he also writes with a conservative cantankerousness about what he sees as higher education’s descent into groupthink and younger generations’ rush to embrace it. In multiple essays, he decries colleges’ dismantling of the humanities in favor of STEM departments more obviously capable of minting interchangeable employees, and he calls out the dogmatic thinking that consumes elite institutions. He gripes about political correctness, partly in exasperation with its knee-jerk tendencies (“If you are a white man, you are routinely regarded as guilty until proven innocent”), but he’s also upset at its broader cynicism, the way it’s a “fig leaf for the competitive individualism of meritocratic neoliberalism, with its worship of success above all.” When Deresiewicz, the winner of a National Book Critics Circle award for excellence in reviewing, has a juicy target, it can be surprisingly good fun: His assault on Harold Bloom’s late-era wooliness is a classic takedown, and his jeremiad about the folly of elevating food to an art form is debatable in the right way: a provocation with enough facts behind it to be worth discussing. A stronger sense of humor might help some of his assertions go down easier, and he’s capable of it, as in a wry piece about Bernard Malamud, a fellow fish-out-of-water Jew in Oregon. Deresiewicz’s soberness speaks to the intensity of his concern: The humanities are under threat by
legislators, technology, and its own practitioners, and he’s a passionate advocate for their dignity.

Sometimes cranky but consistently engaging takes on cultural corrosion and collapse.

**A SACRED OATH**

*Memoirs of a Secretary of Defense During Extraordinary Times*

*Esper, Mark T.*

Morrow/HarperCollins (752 pp.)

$35.00 | May 10, 2022

978-0-06-314431-6

Donald Trump’s secretary of defense dishes on his dimwitted boss and an army of enablers.

“Can’t you just shoot them? Just shoot them in the legs or something?” As Esper, a West Point graduate and combat veteran, recounts at the opening of this overlong memoir, those were Trump’s words when protestors surrounded the White House in June 2020. It wouldn’t be the only absurd question from Trump, who also asked Esper why they couldn’t launch missiles into Mexico to destroy cartel drug labs. Much of Esper’s work as secretary of the Army and then secretary of defense, to judge by his account, was devoted to trying to explain to Trump and his cronies why they couldn’t do such things thanks to inconvenient obstacles such as the Constitution and international law. Indeed, Esper and Joint Chiefs of Staff chair Mark Milley developed what they called the “Four Nos”: “no unnecessary wars; no strategic retreats; no politicization of the DoD; and no misuse of the military.” The White House seemed bent on breaking each of those rules, as when it demanded politicizing the military by means of a North Korea–worthy triumphal parade and misusing it with plans for martial law and seizing voting machines. Esper’s account could have used some trimming, but he’s rigorously methodical and a capable writer. His explanation of the Alexander Vindman scandal, when Trump pressured Esper to illegally expel a whistleblower from the ranks, is the most thorough in the literature (outside of Vindman’s own memoir). The author takes special pains to show how, over the course of Trump’s four years, competent civil and military servants were forced out and replaced by loyalists; in Trump’s desperate last year, it was nothing short of a purge. Esper ventures that Trump’s instincts were not always wrong, but, as he explains, “the ends he often sought rarely survived the ways and means he typically pursued to accomplish them.”

A damning portrait of a chaotic, inept administration that posed countless dangers to the nation and the world.

**THE INHERITORS**

*An Intimate Portrait of South Africa’s Racial Reckoning*

*Fairbanks, Eve*

Simon & Schuster (400 pp.)

$27.99 | July 19, 2022

978-1-476-72524-6

A contemporary look at South Africa’s White supremacy in action.

Pulling together more than a dozen stories of South Africans from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, Fairbanks—a former political writer for the *New Republic* who has contributed pieces for the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other outlets—paints a sensitive, often engrossing portrait of the nation during and after apartheid. “I sometimes like to tell people recent South African history loosely collapses two hundred and fifty years of American history into about thirty—from our antebellum era into our future,” she writes. While the author focuses on three people—anti-apartheid activist Dipuo, her daughter Malaka, and former army recruit and proud Afrikaans lawyer Christo—the many other narrative strands sometimes trail into tangents, not all of which are relevant. The beginning of the book is somewhat disorienting, as the author does little to
"Soldiers and military families will get the most out of this, but general readers looking for an introduction to financial planning can also benefit from his advice. Ultimately a unique take on personal finance, with practical steps geared towards military professionals, Financial Dominance will give money-minded readers much to consider."

—Booklife Reviews
ground readers in the overall context. Some of the sections of the text are engaging, while others are dry and detached despite the moving nature of the topic. The most memorable parts of the book involve Dipuo and Malaika, both of whom emerge as incredibly strong, even heroic characters. While the author’s depth of detail into their lives is important when considering the tumultuous atmosphere in which they live, some readers may be startled by the candid discussions of assault and rape. Though these passages are necessary to convey the gravity of the situations, they will likely distress unguarded readers suffering from their own trauma. The scope of the author’s research is impressive, and she is to be commended for taking care to thoroughly and compassionately expose apartheid and the many complex effects that ripple out to everyday people, demonstrating appropriate nuance while allowing no space for the tolerance of oppression. Though the narrative is disjointed in places, readers won’t soon forget Dipuo and Malaika.

A thoughtful and informative work that could have benefited from a more cohesive structure.

TO FALL IN LOVE, DRINK THIS
A Wine Writer’s Memoir
Feiring, Alice
Scribner (256 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Aug. 9, 2022
978-1-982176-76-1

A wine writer’s happy discoveries.
In 2001, Feiring published a piece in the New York Times business section that launched her on an unexpected career as a wine writer. The article, exposing technology in the wine industry, led her to become an advocate of natural wines, grown organically, with none of more than 72 legally allowed additives. In her zesty memoir recounting her transformation into a wine expert, the author writes about growing up in an observant Jewish family on Long Island, with little experience drinking anything but kosher wines. Her adventurous course of self-education involved journeys around the world and has resulted in a plethora of detailed wine recommendations. “I spent time in vineyards,” she recalls, “I learned about viticulture and chemistry. My world exploded with travel and discovery. It was wild, energetic, and idealistic.” Feiring creates warm portraits of wine growers and producers, steeps readers in the terroir of different regions, and, with great delight, sings the praises of natural wines from Chile and Vermont, Czechoslovakia and California, Italy and the republic of Georgia. “No matter where I am,” she writes, “when I taste a wine that moves me, I feel the imperative to follow the thread to its origin, and that’s when I know I’ve got something special.” Her descriptions swirl rapturously: A French Syrah evoked the sinew and muscle of “a sleek racehorse” combined with “classic blueberry”; the “modestly amber-colored wine” she drank in Georgia, made from mtsvane grapes, imparted the flavor of “preserved lemon with its salted rind, textural for sure, and thirst quenching.” Besides wine, Feiring reflects on family—her stubborn mother, philandering father, and beloved brother and confidant—and various boyfriends, one of whom, unfortunately, did not drink at all. “Wine is the place where history, science, and civilization meet,” she writes, “and drinking the right glass of wine does have the power to nourish love.”

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An enjoyable quaff for wine lovers.

THE CHAOS MACHINE
The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World
Fisher, Max
Little, Brown (400 pp.)
$29.00 | Sept. 6, 2022
978-0-316-70332-1

A veteran journalist examines the rise of the social media giants and the dangers they have created for our society.

Fisher, a columnist and international reporter for the New York Times, dives into the chaotic social media landscape,
Focusing primarily on Facebook, the author walks through the key steps in the progress of the technology, seeing the advent of algorithms as a turning point. By tracking the sites that consumers visit, algorithms allowed for precise targeting for future contact. The best-performing sites gave users a sense of belonging, usually by denigrating “outsiders.” Over time, the result was increasing social and political polarization, with debate and discourse replaced by attacks that could easily spill into the offline world. Fisher is spot-on when he describes how the promotion and manufacture of moral outrage were not glitches in the system but inherent features. Senior leaders at Facebook received countless warnings about potential problem areas; claiming that they would address them, they never did. The company had rules to exclude certain posts, but they were inconsistent, vague, and overly complex (more than 1,400 pages). The author capably explains the many complex elements involved, but his liberal perspective is occasionally too evident. The mere mention of Donald Trump often makes him splutter with indignation. He has much to say about right-wing groups but little about those on the left. Nonetheless, Fisher is a diligent reporter, and when he maintains his focus on the mechanics of social media, he makes numerous important points. He even suggests that social media has become so counterproductive that we should consider shutting down the big firms—he aptly cites the murderous computer HAL in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey—or at least forcing a thorough restructuring process. It’s a sensible idea worth discussing, but given the power of big tech, it’s unlikely to happen.

An often riveting, disturbing examination of the social media labyrinth and the companies that created it.

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**FORMIDABLE**

*American Women and the Fight for Equality: 1920-2020*

Griffith, Elisabeth

Pegasus (416 pp.)

$35.00 | Aug. 9, 2022

978-1-63936-189-2

A history of a century of change for American women.

Griffith, the author of a biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, offers an encyclopedic overview of women’s advocacy for issues they believed crucial to their lives. Beginning with the suffrage movement, different constituencies often saw those issues differently: Black and Jewish women, for example, feeling excluded by White, Protestant suffragists, formed their own organizations. Jewish women focused on ending immigration quotas; Black women, on anti-lynching laws. Passage of the 19th Amendment gave White women hope that by voting, they would gain power to achieve reforms such as workplace safety and child labor laws. Although Black women were enfranchised, too, their right to vote was not protected, leading to “panic” at the polls. Ending racial violence and discrimination became, for Black women, the most significant issue. Griffith follows women’s lives decade by decade, identifying important figures in politics, social movements, popular culture, and the arts who inspired or incited change, from Ida Wells-Barnett to Hilary Clinton, Carrie Chapman Catt to Stacey Abrams. Throughout the century, Griffith notes a fragmentation of alliances. By the 1990s, she reveals, myriad organizations formed “around causes like childcare, domestic violence, economic inequality, environmental toxins, food deserts, health care, incarceration, labor conditions, maternal mortality, police accountability, and women with disabilities, among many other concerns. Groups formed around shared identities—lesbians, Latinas, librarians, women on welfare, women in physics, Native Americans, and so many others.” Conservative women have supported the tea party, anti-abortion activism, and candidates such as Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachmann. From the 1913 suffrage parade to the #MeToo movement, divisiveness persists. Women’s optimism about the power of the vote has been tempered by reality: “When you start at barely any and advance to more, the line on a graph tracking women’s progress might suggest dramatic...
improvement,” writes Griffith. “If you amortize those changes over a century, the pace is slower and the line is flatter.”

A hefty, thoroughly researched contribution to women’s history.

THE THIRD PERSON

Grove, Emma
Drawn & Quarterly (920 pp.)
$39.95 paper | May 3, 2022
978-1-77046-615-9

Writer and animator Grove’s debut graphic memoir portrays her youth coming to terms with her sexuality and gender dysphoria. Closets at 13, the author struggled with her gender identity; years later, she encountered several social and psychological roadblocks early on in her transition. She attempted to remedy them with Toby, a gender therapist who could approve her for hormonal treatments, but the road was arduous and studded with hazards. The author and illustrator chronicles her personal story via flashbacks, detailing schoolyard bullying and physical abuse at the hands of her grandfather, extreme trauma that manifested in dissociative identity disorder. In an effort to cope with the psychological pain of her past, Grove embodied several “alter” identities that were stronger and more resilient. Two examples were Ed, a male-identifying persona, and Katina, a sunny, uninhibited “party girl.” Katina was the opposite of timid Emma and emerged as the more dominant personality during sessions with the shortsighted Toby, who harshly considered Katina as the “third person in the room who isn’t here.”

A relevant true-crime cautionary tale as well as an urgent plea for mental health awareness.
An Iraqi poet depicts her wrenching childhood and coming-of-age under her country’s series of debilitating wars.

Growing up in the small town of Najaf, Hassan was the eldest in a growing middle-class family—her father had to work two jobs as a clerk and a cook—that moved often to find better housing and educational opportunities for her and her siblings. School was her refuge, and despite the increasingly tumultuous political events in Iraq, she excelled. By 1980, however, everything changed with Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran. “This year and the following ones tattooed all Iraqis with loss and death,” writes Hassan. Though Hussein and his advisers boasted that it would be a quick conquest, it became an eight-year slog that destroyed the country’s economy and caused the senseless deaths of countless Iraqis—all while Hussein ordered the construction of more than 100 lavish palaces. “Ordinary people,” writes the author, “experienced brutal lives as they endured the scourge of abject, relentless, crushing poverty, having been deserted by their government, which had inflicted these woes upon them.” In a vividly detailed narrative, the author is always candid, unafraid to express her feelings. From 1980, she writes, “I was obsessed by a feeling of revulsion—as if a large snake had swallowed me.” School disruptions, food scarcity, the sudden disappearance of friends and family, air sirens, explosions, and government surveillance—all marked her formative years. Fortunately, her father supported her education, and she became an accomplished teacher and then a published poet, the first woman in her town to achieve such a feat. She reluctantly gave in to her family’s wishes and married a man she did not know. The union was disastrous, and Hassan endured death threats by a virulently chauvinistic society that pursued her relentlessly into exile. Throughout, Hassan renders her harrowing experiences in an authentic, heartfelt manner, offering important testimony of personal and national courage.

A beautifully wrought memoir from a pioneering Iraqi author.
deal of investigative acumen to his latest. He follows the stories of several “nisei”—first-generation American citizens born in the United States whose parents were immigrants from Japan—to give personal depth to the bigger picture. At the end of the book, the author includes a 50-page list of the names of those nisei who served and those who were killed in action. Many of them fought in combat roles while doubling as translators and prisoner interrogators—in one case, a soldier shouted out false orders to the Japanese, resulting in a crucial victory—while others worked as intelligence analysts and codebreakers. “They knew the enemy better than anyone and were highly motivated to defeat them,” writes Henderson. The Japanese had entered the war believing that their language was too complex for others to understand, so they often neglected encryption and left crucial documents where they could be captured. In the combat theaters, the nisei quickly gained respect, and even Gen. Douglas MacArthur made a special acknowledgement of their important contributions. The irony is that their families in America continued to languish in internment camps, and even Japanese soldiers in uniform suffered discrimination when on leave. Many of them felt a strong need to prove themselves and their loyalty but worried about encountering relatives or old friends on the battlefield. There were several nisei present for the Japanese surrender, and even after hostilities ceased, they continued to play critical liaison roles. This book is an important step in providing much-needed recognition for these brave Americans.

A fascinating piece of history with threads of courage and poignancy, brought to life by an accomplished storyteller.

**The Fishermen and the Dragon: Fear, Greed, and a Fight for Justice on the Gulf Coast**

**Johnson, Kirk Wallace**

Viking (368 pp.)

$28.00 | Aug. 2, 2022

A fast-paced though complex account of ethnic collision among the fisheries of Gulf Coast Texas.

“This is a book about a racist backlash against refugees fleeing a ruinous war,” writes Johnson, author of *The Feather Thief*, to open a narrative that pits Vietnamese newcomers to East Texas against an array of enemies, most dangerously the KKK. When the Vietnamese arrived, they found few friends among the White fishermen of Galveston Bay; who were happy to sell those newcomers junk boats and machinery at exorbitant prices, as with one who “grinned at a reporter while describing the time he sold a boat to a Vietnamese shrimpman for $25,000, even though he knew it was decrepit.” Meanwhile, Johnson notes, a Gallup poll soon after the fall of Saigon “showed only 36 percent of Americans believed refugees fleeing the calamitous war of their country’s own making deserved resettlement,” lending weight to the hostility on a homefront suddenly populated by a wave of 130,000 Vietnamese. One Anglo fisherman bought into the widely circulated lie that among the refugees were Viet Cong agents bent on destroying America, and he began terrorizing two young brothers in “Gook City,” one of whom killed their tormentor. Amazingly, he was acquitted by an all-White jury on the grounds of self-defense, which only lent energy to KKK members from far afield who came to chase the Vietnamese out. In another kind of radicalism, a Taiwanese manufacturer that had been dumping toxic chemicals into the bay, poisoning the fishery, met local resistance that included both Anglos and Vietnamese. In the end, the KKK dwindled away, but “the White supremacist movement charged ahead.” Even though most shrimp consumed here is imported, Johnson observes that the domestic crop is largely brought to market by Vietnamese fishermen. His fascinating and disturbing narrative is a winning mix of biography, true crime, and ecological study.

A carefully written investigation full of villains—and the occasional hero.

**The Stone Age: Sixty Years of the Rolling Stones**

**Jones, Leaey-Ann**

Pegasus (368 pp.)

$28.95 | Aug. 2, 2022

978-1-63936-207-3

A career-spanning, largely unflattering portrait of “the greatest rock ‘n’ roll band in the world.”

Veteran rock biographer and broadcaster Jones, the author of *The Search for John Lennon* and other rock bios, is less interested in the history of the Rolling Stones—though she includes a detailed chronology at the end of the book—as in its members’ impacts on those around them, which were often negative. These include original band member Brian Jones, who died of an apparent drowning shortly after Mick Jagger and Keith Richards asked him to resign. Several women closely involved with the band also figure prominently—most notably, Anita Pallenberg and Marianne Faithfull, each of whom gets an entire chapter. Jones also devotes a chapter to bassist Bill Wyman’s long relationship with underage fan Mandy Smith, whom he began dating when she was 13 and married when she was 18. However, as in most accounts of the Stones, the primary focus is on Jagger and Richards, at whom Jones points the finger for a litany of sins. She implies that they bear responsibility for Jones’ death, the murder of a fan during their set at the Altamont festival in 1969, the epidemic of hard drugs beginning in the late 1960s, the rise of “corporate rock”—and much more. At times, the narrative feels like a variation on the Kris Kristofferson song “Blame It on the Stones,” and Jones frequently reminds readers of her rock-insider status and her personal connections to the many names she drops. While the author offers a fair number of interesting details on the band, its milieu, and the scrapes its members got into over the years,
“Jovin’s charm as an explainer of sometimes-esoteric rules and as a defender of common sense and clarity in communication is a major strength of this book.”

REBEL WITH A CLAUSE
Tales and Tips From a Roving Grammarian
Jovin, Ellen
Mariner Books (400 pp.)
$26.99 | July 19, 2022
978-0-358-27815-3

A grammar expert takes on vexing questions and pet peeves. Jovin, the author of several books on writing and grammar, describes her experiences traveling across the country answering the public’s questions about language use. In 49 lively chapters, she recounts her conversations on punctuation, conjugation, spelling, pronunciation, and contentious word choices while offering sage and sensible advice on common areas of confusion. She writes about passersby who air their grievances about the misuse of apostrophes, and she offers jaunty but exceptionally clear illustrations of their appropriate deployment. Individual chapters cover some familiar problem areas—affect and effect, lie and lay, whoever and whomever—along with broader reflections on the evolution of verbal conventions in the digital age and the significance of a respect for language itself. The conversations that unfold on her tour are, she rightly observes, “filled with humor and feeling for the complex linguistic glue that binds us together as human beings and distinguishes us from other living creatures.” Jovin’s charm as an explainer of sometimes-esoteric rules and as a defender of common sense and clarity in communication is a major strength of this book. Another is her lighthearted but incisive commentary on people’s emotional investments in grammar. A large part of the book’s comedy comes from her descriptions of how disagreements about proper expression can pit people against one another, poisoning otherwise successful relationships. Many of the chapters describe people venting about others’ grammatical lapses, and Jovin positions herself, convincingly, as not just a linguistic, but an emotional counselor, fostering healthy communication rather than judgement. The invitation she poses in her introduction—“Now, please lie down on a nice couch with this book and let’s have some grammar therapy”—is well worth accepting.

A delightful, educative journey through some prickly regions of English grammar.

NO MORE POLICE
A Case for Abolition
Kaba, Mariame & Andrea J. Ritchie
The New Press (400 pp.)
$18.99 paper | Aug. 30, 2022
978-1-62097-732-3

Two seasoned activists make a convincing case for defunding the police. As Kaba and Ritchie note, defunding “means investing the billions currently poured into policing and the prison-industrial complex into community-based safety strategies: meeting basic needs that include housing, health care, access to care for disabled people, childcare, elder care, a basic guaranteed income, and accessible, sustainable living-wage jobs.” The authors use three main arguments. First, they show how policing endangers, rather than protects, America’s most vulnerable communities. Second, they claim that calls for reforming the police—rather than abolition—are futile because the inherent violence of policing makes it impossible to reform. Finally, they argue that there are more effective ways to promote safety. “We call for abolition of police because, despite all of the power, resources and legitimacy we pour into them, they cannot and will not deliver safety,” they write. Kaba and Ritchie begin by showing how police manufacture crimes by focusing on making most of their arrests in certain “hot spots”—which, they argue, is code for brown and Black neighborhoods—while ignoring others. This perpetuates a culture of “fearmongering” that politicians use to divert funds to police and away from social services programs that have been proven to prevent violence. The authors urge a shift to an “abundance mindset,” in which the government stops using resources to punish marginalized populations and instead uses them to meet every American’s needs. Furthermore, they urge us to listen to survivors, who often encounter violence in the very systems that are allegedly set up to protect them. Kaba and Ritchie are knowledgeable, passionate, and skilled at elucidating complex concepts clearly, without sacrificing nuance. The book is deeply researched and flawlessly argued, and the plan they lay out is practical, compassionate, and circumspect.

A brilliantly articulated plan to abolish the police.

THE STOLEN YEAR
How COVID Changed Children’s Lives, and Where We Go Now
Kamenetz, Anya
PublicAffairs (352 pp.)
$29.00 | Aug. 23, 2022
978-1-5417-0098-7

An account of the massive educational disruption caused by the pandemic. Though Covid-19 hit everyone hard, Kamenetz, the lead digital education correspondent for NPR,
focuses on its wide-reaching effects on children in this well-researched, enlightening book. The author goes into welcome depth on the consequences of a year without in-person schooling, chronicling her interviews with children who have health issues and compromised immune systems, those with special needs who function better with a regular routine, and those from low-income families who rely on the school lunch program. The parents are also an integral part of the book, and Kamenetz is sympathetic to their plights with lost jobs due to downsizing or the necessity of child care. Throughout, the author shares the small details of quotidian life, creating a crystal-clear picture of the extent to which the pandemic has affected children. During 2020 and 2021, countless children suffered greater hunger, had an indifference to schoolwork, and became fearful, depressed, anxious, and withdrawn. Their trauma equaled—or often exceeded—that of adults, but few received adequate assistance. Unfortunately, the author also shows how the trauma is not over for millions and that what they experienced during the height of the pandemic will haunt them for years. She is careful to note, however, that “not one of them is doomed.” After noting the ways that government, health, and education officials let children down, Kamenetz offers useful ideas on what areas must change, including an overhaul of the system that determines guidelines for special needs, placing more value on the work of caregivers, and revamping the entire welfare system. No one knows the long-term effects the pandemic will have on children, but Kamenetz gives readers areas to watch as time progresses and the pandemic waxes and wanes in the years to come.

An insightful, educative treatise from a seasoned professional.

Kinstler was drawn to the story via a haunting connection: Her long-vanished grandfather, Boris, was also in the Kommando, but he may have been a double agent for the Russians (he “officially” committed suicide following the war). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to the release of reams of Holocaust documentation, including perpetrator and survivor testimonies, Latvian nationalists and revisionists sought to rehabilitate Cukurs in strange ways, including an operatic stage musical that “sought to absolve both him and his nation from any allegations of complicity.” This also led to renewed investigations into both his murder and his activities inside the Riga ghetto and subsequent massacres of Jews, all of which fueled Kinstler’s determined investigation. “I remained bewildered that, so many decades after the Second World War, questions of complicity, culpability, rehabilitation and restitution were still making their way through the courts,” she writes. The author writes with literary flair and ambition, highlighting the important stories of surviving principals and delving into such relevant topics as jurisprudence, post–Cold War Eastern Europe, and cultural efforts to come to terms with, or rationalize, still-obscured aspects of the Holocaust.

A vital addition to the finite canon of Holocaust studies rooted in personal connection.

**THE BIG LIE**

_Election Chaos, Political Opportunism, and the State of American Politics After 2020_

Lemire, Jonathan

Flatiron Books (320 pp.)

$29.99 | July 26, 2022

978-1-250-81962-8

A compendium of Donald Trump’s massive campaign of fraud, grift, and democracy-killing mendacity, in and out of office.

It will come as no surprise that Trump built a tottering empire on lies. Though he doesn’t bring much fresh news, Lemire, White House bureau chief at Politico and host at MSNBC, does a useful service by assembling Trump’s fabrications in one place. The biggest of those lies is the constellation of assertions that the 2020 election was rigged and that Trump won. Of course, Trump, “the unlikeliest major party presidential nominee in more than a century,” was saying the same thing in 2016, preparing his base for what seemed the inevitable loss to Hillary Clinton. When he won, rather than admit that he might have been wrong, Trump continued to claim that the election was rigged, with illegal ballots that conspired to deprive him of winning the popular vote as well as the Electoral College. Even co-conspirator fellow grifter Steve Bannon, writes Lemire, commented, “Trump would say anything, he would lie about anything to win that moment, to win whatever exchange he was having at that moment.” As Lemire consistently and depressingly shows throughout his narrative, Trump blistered and lied about everything, and many of them “were just plain hard to categorize, like Trump’s insistence that...”
With something to ponder on every page, a bracing exhortation to do right by the people of centuries to come.”

WITH WE OWE THE FUTURE

“A WOMAN’S BATTLES AND TRANSFORMATIONS
Louis, Édouard
Trans. by Tashe Aw
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (112 pp.)
$20.00 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-0-374-60674-9

A son bears witness to his mother’s struggles.

In a slim, tender memoir, novelist and editor Louis offers an empathetic portrait of his mother, who for 20 years lived with her abusive husband, “her life deformed and almost destroyed by misery and masculine violence.” A lively young woman who hoped to become a chef, her dream was crushed when she became pregnant at 17 and married the baby's father, who turned out to be a drunk. Soon they had another child, but by the time she was 20, she had left him and married her second husband, Louis’ father. He, too, was an alcoholic, cruel and demanding. “Nothing could happen unless it involved my father,” Louis recalls. Over the years, she could imagine no way to leave her husband and children, but Louis could not understand her passivity. He was resentful and ashamed of her, refusing to confide his pain over being called a “faggot” by boys at school. He saw himself as a “dissident, monstrous child” – a loser, like his mother. “The first pages of this story,” he writes, “could have been called: A Son’s Struggle Not to Become a Son.” As much as he later came to sympathize with her yearning “for the right to exist as a woman,” as a boy, he treated her with condescension and cruelty. His violence, he admits with regret, was a form of “revenge against my childhood.” When his mother was 45, long after Louis had left home to attend a lycée and university, she finally threw his father out. To support herself, she became a home health aide, a satisfying job that made her proud. She met a man and joined him in Paris, where Louis was living. He depicts her transformation into a happy, attractive woman, reveling in pleasure and hard-won freedom, as a gift to them both.

A sensitive meditation on a woman’s difficult life.

WHAT WE OWE THE FUTURE
MacAskill, William
Basic Books (352 pp.)
$32.00 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-1-5416-1862-6

Scottish ethicist and Oxford professor MacAskill urges that those alive today consider the lingering effects of their carbon-footprint–deepening actions.

“Future people count. There could be a lot of them. We can make their lives go better,” writes the author in a combination of thought experiment and reader-friendly white paper. His future is “big,” extending millions of years out, which is perhaps touchingly optimistic given the long-standing habit of mammalian species

windmills cause cancer.” The problem was, as Lemire documents, enough people believed his lies—whether the opening-moment-in-office lie that the inauguration crowd was bigger than Obama’s or the closing one that he had swept the ballot in 2020—that we wound up with Jan. 6. Where fresh news is in short supply, the author’s warnings run long. If anything, the lies will mount, as will the violence, even as a compliant and frightened Republican Party, which had its moment to stand up for democracy on Jan. 7, acquiesces to its lying master.

A potent indictment that, lest anyone forget, underscores the dangers of Trump and Trumpism.

THE MESSENGER
Moderna, the Vaccine, and the Business Gamble That Changed the World
Loftus, Peter
Harvard Business Review Press (320 pp.)
$30.00 | July 26, 2022
978-1-64782-319-1

Fast-paced account of Moderna’s race to be first to market with a Covid-19 vaccine.

Wall Street Journal reporter Loftus opens his narrative, an able blend of science reporting and business history, at a telling moment: Moderna CEO Stéphane Bancel, on vacation in France in January 2020, reads about a mysterious virus in China and, on a dime, pivots the company to use that virus as a proof of concept for a new kind of vaccine. Moderna aimed to use messenger RNA to introduce drugs developed on a constantly adaptable platform into the human body. Though the original “stopwatch drill” that Bancel had been examining centered on a rare disease caused by the Nipah virus, he and some of his board members and executives “thought Moderna should try for a coronavirus vaccine because they suspected the outbreak would get much bigger.” They were right. Coordinating the race for a vaccine that was spreading far faster than SARS, MERS, Zika, and other concerning viruses, Bancel had to take his small company to new levels of production in the face of the Trump administration’s patchwork medical and financial responses. It’s no small irony that a leader of the industry’s rapid-response team was a Moderna board member who was both a Moroccan immigrant and a one-time Marxist who worried that chasing the vaccine could ultimately harm Moderna since other projects would have to halt. Still, as Loftus writes, “Moderna agreed to cooperate with Operation Warp Speed in part because...it needed the money.” In the end, racing past regulatory and bureaucratic hurdles, it secured funding and produced a safe vaccine in record time. It also rose markedly in value, at one time surpassing Starbucks, UPS, and Citigroup. As Loftus writes in closing, Moderna has since been able to return to other quests, including genetically keyed cancer drugs that kick the immune system’s neoepitopes into high gear.

A satisfying look at how a smart business can both identify opportunity and do well by doing good.
to disappear after a million years or so. The bigness of that future is what has prompted MacAskill to propound “longtermism,” with its challenging guiding idea that we owe it to people we will never see and whom we may or may not have propagated (the choice for childlessness figures in the argument) to improve their chances of survival. The author identifies a daunting array of modern threats. One is climate change; another is the ever present threat of nuclear war, heightened after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Optimistic again, MacAskill suggests that there are ways we can choose peace and avert the worst effects of climate change by “decarbonizing,” which he calls a “proof of concept for longtermism...against which other potential actions can be compared.” There are other, less obvious threats that worry the author. For example, what might happen if the artificial intelligence of the present is programmed in such a way that it promotes “bad-value lock-in” and thereby makes inevitable a perpetual fascist world government in the future? Throughout, MacAskill brings expansive ideas. He examines the process of history-shifting “value change” by considering changing attitudes toward human slavery. On a more personal scale, he advocates vegetarianism, and he observes that not having children may mean an absence of kids with good values who “can be change makers who help create a better future.”

With something to ponder on every page, a bracing exhortation to do right by the people of centuries to come.

LIKE WATER
A Cultural History of Bruce Lee
Maeda, Daryl Jaji
New York Univ. (352 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-1-4798-1286-8

How a martial arts master rose to fame and bridged cultural divides.

Maeda, a professor of ethnic studies, adds to the already large body of popular and academic work on Bruce Lee (1940-1973), focusing on his subject’s emergence from, and efforts to harmonize, a multitude of Western and Eastern influences. This accessible study offers astute analyses of Lee’s early training in both martial arts and Cantonese opera, his development of a hybrid fighting style called Jeet Kune Do, his verbal and physical expressions of a distinct philosophy, and his keen navigation of both Chinese and American mass media. Maeda positions Lee’s career as a product of—and significant contributor to—long-evolving transnational exchanges across the Pacific, and he argues forcefully that his subject’s achievements in blending cultural traditions are worthy of celebration: “His peripatetic life and career contributed to the continuing entanglement of China and the United States across great distances, interweaving and unraveling structures involving nationalism, colonialism, race, and gender.” The author provides a clear sense of how Lee’s efforts to establish himself as an entertainer included a profound moral component. Initially cast by American directors in TV and film roles that reinforced Orientalist prejudices, Lee worked tirelessly to expand the identities available to Asian characters onscreen, creating myriad opportunities for other performers. Particularly compelling are Maeda’s discussions of how Lee’s physical dynamism and erotic appeal challenged stereotypes about Asian masculinity and how his political activism on behalf of Asian Americans aligned with the Black Power movement. The author’s use of academic frameworks is sometimes strained and unhelpful in framing Lee’s significance, but for the most part, the book provides lucid analysis of Lee’s lasting significance as the “first global icon to emerge from outside the West.”

A thoughtful, well-informed consideration of the life and legacy of a trailblazing entertainer.

STATUS AND CULTURE
How Our Desire for Social Rank Creates Taste, Identity, Art, Fashion, and Constant Change
Marx, W. David
Viking (368 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 30, 2022
978-0-593-29670-7

A culture writer explains how two critical concepts impact modern life.

Tokyo-based writer Marx, author of Ametora: How Japan Saved American Style, argues that status and culture are so interwoven that we can’t understand how one works without understanding the other, but a major obstacle is that “status itself has...long been a mystery.” Exploring a wealth of research, anecdotal evidence, and observations across a number of disciplines, the author attempts to solve what he calls the “Grand Mystery of Culture,” encompassing questions of why humans gravitate toward some behaviors and not others, how defined sensibilities and conventions emerge, and why behaviors change or persist over time. Every person uses status symbols to communicate, and all conventions also have status value; we understand that not all of them are equal, and some are more desirable than others. The signaling strategies of different classes vary widely, from the vintage antique luxuries and social capital of old money families and the privileged information of professional classes to the flashy luxuries favored by flagship millionaires in the new money class. In a global society where information is increasingly democratized, displays of raw wealth become the most easy-to-read symbols, which is why lower-income individuals and citizens of developing economies often flock to conspicuous consumption. Marx thoroughly explains complex subjects, breaking down the necessary elements and bolstering his points with research and examples that are both plentiful and entertaining, including Larry the Cable Guy designer cupcakes, England’s “teddy boys,” and Lassie, to name just a few. A crucial takeaway from the book is that status isn’t going to get less important anytime soon, so it’s imperative that we are more proactive not only in lessening inequality in legal and economic spheres, but also being more conscientious of how we confer
status in our interactions and what we value. “We all compete for status, whether we like it or not,” writes Marx. “We can at least better explain the rules to make it a fairer fight.”

Hefty but compellingly readable—essential for anyone desiring a deeper understanding of status inequity.

FAREWALL TRANSMISSION
Notes From Hidden Spaces
McGrath, Will
Dzanc (220 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Aug. 9, 2022
978-1-950-53950-5

Following his memoir of life in the African nation of Lesotho, Everything Lost Is Found Again, McGrath delivers this set of essays, several of which return there and to neighboring African countries.

Among the most compelling, if infuriating, is a sketch of imperious White mine operators who, years after the nation’s independence, continue to scorn the intelligence and work ethic of Africans. “Let’s see what happens when we go,” said one contractor. “This country would fall apart without us.” Another essay that exposes White privilege finds McGrath in a scarcely impossibly landed in Yemen, a journey tracked by software. Not all of the pieces quite work—e.g., an essay that intercuts for status, whether we like it or not,” writes Marx. “We can at least better explain the rules to make it a fairer fight.”

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Hefty but compellingly readable—essential for anyone desiring a deeper understanding of status inequity.
At just over two years into this yet-to-end global pandemic, it’s sensible to question if books tackling the experience are a “too soon” item. Nesi, who won the Strega Prize for Story of My People, gracefully handles that exact challenge in this lush work, translated from Italian. Ranging from economics to love and countless stops in between, the author filters his discussions through the lens of what unfolded during 2020 and how it affected business, politics, the arts, and global health. “What types of work, after all, are now to be considered unnecessary, not crucial, and dispensable,” asks Nesi, “if the work in question allows a people to survive?” The author generously synthesizes his personal experiences, taking readers with him as he chronicles his visits to places such as markets and town squares, places of business, and the beach, where he went to rest. Through it all, he laments the changes brought about by unpredictable viruses, giving readers permission to mourn the world that was and reflect on the time when we moved freely, indulged and enjoyed life, and socialized with little understanding of its fragility. Nesi is in a unique position to examine the material things that consumers value in a world that has shuttered. In the new normal, Tuscany, where the author lives, cannot fully stem the worry and constant sense of doom and uncertainty—a situation faced by people across the world. Despite repeated references to the idea that nothing new has come about since the 1970s and that we are instead moving within a “maximum possible point of development,” Nesi sprinkles hope throughout the book. It’s not easy to stitch economics and emotions together on the page, but the author accomplishes it with aplomb.

Haunting and lovely: Readers will eagerly join Nesi in his remembrances.

TEARS OF MY MOTHER
The Legacy of My Nigerian Upbringing
Osefo, Wendy
Gallery Books/Simon & Schuster
(272 pp.)
$27.99 | Sept. 20, 2022
978-1-9821-9450-5

A Nigerian American academic, political commentator, and reality TV star explores how her mother influenced her life.

Osefo was born in Nigeria in 1984, shortly before her parents immigrated to Durham, North Carolina. The author’s father, a conservative Christian pastor, eventually returned to Nigeria, leaving his wife, Susan, to raise her two daughters alone. Susan maintained extremely high expectations for her children. “Using Mom’s rules—no excuses, failure is not an option—has made Nigerians the ‘model minority’ in America,” writes the author, who often felt smothered by her mother’s orders to her and her sister to become a “doctor, lawyer, or maybe an engineer” and to “marry good Igbo men.” She also resented the unwanted emotional distance between her and Susan, which the author believes is cultural. In the end, though, whether filling her role as a liberal commentator for Fox News, a cast member of The Real Housewives of Potomac, or a mother, Osefo almost entirely credits her success to her mother’s high standards and stubborn insistence on achievement. The author writes that she and her Nigerian peers “were brought up always to find a way to succeed, that no matter what circumstances we were put in or what obstacles we faced, success was about the will to succeed.” She believes this mindset made it possible for many Nigerians to transcend the systematic racism Black Americans have faced for generations. Osefo’s voice is earnest and relatable, and the narrative features a series of fascinating twists and turns. However, her insistence on separating Nigerian Americans from the larger Black community and implying that they can overcome structural racism in ways Black Americans can’t, combined with her tendency to define her life solely through a Nigerian, “first gen” lens, flattens an analysis that could have used more nuance.

A compelling but often superficial Nigerian American celebrity memoir.

CHOICES
Patridge, Audrina
Gallery Books/Simon & Schuster
(224 pp.)
$28.99 | July 26, 2022
978-1-982-18381-3

Patridge chronicles her rise to prominence on the reality show circuit, from her time on The Hills to her turn on Dancing With the Stars.

In the mid-2000s, a producer for MTV discovered the author poolside in Los Angeles. From there, she writes, she began to split into two people: her reality TV star persona and the real Audrina. Fans of The Hills and similar shows will appreciate the behind-the-scenes dishing and celebrity gossip, but they will also gain a greater understanding of how “real” reality TV actually is. Patridge shows us the tactics used by producers to pull their stars’ marionette strings, and she writes about having to argue with friends and kiss men to increase drama. The orchestrations necessary for good TV clearly took their toll, and readers see how many of the choices in Patridge’s life were made for her. Afraid to let anyone down and scared to decide for herself, she was a confused young woman who often selected unsuitable partners and eventually married an abusive and controlling Australian BMX star. It’s only when her daughter, Kirra, was born that Patridge committed to taking control of her life. With the love and support of her parents and siblings, she escaped her marriage and started living for her daughter. In raising Kirra to be brave, strong, and unaffected by the thoughts and opinions of those outside her inner circle, the author is also raising her own inner child by the hand and guiding her to a brighter future. Because it’s Hollywood, Patridge’s particular future includes a lifestyle brand, Prey Swim, and the text is often unsurprisingly breezy. Through it all, though, readers will
root for her, as she provides a very real account of reality TV and all its trappings. Hard-earned insights to help those struggling to find a sense of self.

A celebration of chicken by the world-renowned chef.

“Proust had his madeleine, I have chickens,” writes Pépin in this heartfelt, endearing book. “As a chef, I stand in awe of the humble bird’s contributions to world cuisine.” Among the author’s other passions is painting, and throughout this generous book, he includes numerous colorful and quirky images in which he captures a particular emotion or attitude. From an early age, Pépin (b. 1935) wanted to become a chef. At 13, he left home to begin an apprenticeship at a hotel in his hometown of Bourg-en-Bresse, France, located in a region known for its high-quality chicken. Among the countless delightful stories in this entertaining book, the author recounts his first culinary triumph at age 15; preparing meals for various presidents after being drafted into the French Navy; the opportunity that brought him to the U.S., which “I viewed as some sort of El Dorado”; his years at Howard Johnson’s; cooking with Julia Child; and teaching culinary arts at Boston University, where he has been for more than 35 years. As the author notes, he and Child agreed recipes should be simple, but they could never agree on the proper way to roast chicken. Pépin shares both of their recipes as well as his versions of other classics, including basic chicken stock, grilled chicken, eggs Benedict, Southern fried chicken, and coq au vin, and he includes a selection of memory-evoking recipes from his childhood and culinary experiences, which include recipes inspired by a range of international cuisines. Pépin also discusses his early food experiences in the U.S., including differences he noticed in French and American cooking, in addition to changes that have taken place over the years (for the better) in American food and wine culture.

A must for foodies, certain to bring a smile to readers and their dinner guests.

JACQUES PÉPIN ART OF THE CHICKEN
A Master Chef’s Paintings, Stories, and Recipes of the Humble Bird
Pépin, Jacques
Mariner Books (256 pp.)
$25.00 | Sept. 27, 2022
978-0-358-65451-3

How did superheroes and giant robots take over the entertainment business? Phillips tells the story while telling her own.

The author is in the enviable position of making a good living at something she has loved since childhood. She is a critic at large for the New York Times, writing about not just theater and poetry, but also science fiction, comics, animation, and other pop-culture areas that used to be fringe but now dominate the mainstream. In her debut book, she paints a broad canvas, from her early days watching Saturday morning cartoons to the epic complexity of the Marvel universe. Along the way, she looks at the seminal impact of the original Star Wars movies, how TV animation became increasingly bizarre (think Ren & Stimpy), and the influence of Japanese anime such as Sailor Moon and Dragon Ball Z. Phillips was in her teens during the rise of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, which showed her what a young woman could do, and she writes about how the hero of Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse is an awkward teenager. As she demonstrates, this is what fantastic stories can accomplish: They make us braver by revealing possibility. At the same time, fandoms provide a unique sense of community, whether through huge conventions or by sharing a movie with friends. “I’ve been a Sailor Scout, a Pokémon Master, and a Super Saiyan,” writes the author, “but most importantly, I have been and continue to be a Black female fan who has understood herself inside and outside of the spaces my fandoms have built.” Phillips still finds herself touched deeply by special moments, such as Captain America’s beautifully understated rallying cry in Avengers: Endgame. The depth of the author’s knowledge is impressive, but the core of the text is her emotional journey to maturity. It wasn’t always easy, but like the heroes she loves, she ultimately prevailed.

A fascinating book that blends stories of personal and cultural transformation into a thoroughly entertaining package.

NERD
Adventures in Fandom From This Universe to the Multiverse
Phillips, Maya
Atria (288 pp.)
$27.00 | Oct. 11, 2022
978-1-982165-77-2

A Black fashion reporter describes how White supremacy led to her crippling perfectionism and subsequent eating disorder.

TOKEN BLACK GIRL
A Memoir
Prescod, Danielle
Little A (286 pp.)
$24.95 | Oct. 1, 2022
978-1-5420-3516-3

A trenchant, honest, and unique memoir about body image, fashion, and Blackness.”

TOKEN BLACK GIRL
Growing up in Connecticut, from a young age, Prescod assumed the role of the “token Black girl” in her mostly White group of friends. Sometimes she was forced to play the role of Scary Spice, the only Black Spice Girl, during pretend play. Other times she discovered her classmates’ racist attitudes on three-way phone calls. Years of being teased about her alleged tendency to act White made her jumpy around her Black peers, eliminating the possibility of a safe haven away from her school friends. Due to this isolation, she “became manipulative, calculating, and mean. I was desperate to gain some modicum of control, and to do that, I constantly doled out criticisms, gossip, and stirred up petty drama. I developed a haughty affect that I employed for both passing judgment and my own protection.” Her sharpness turned out to be an invaluable weapon not only for hiding her internalized racism from her peers, but also for her professional success in the fashion industry. Eventually, though, her ambition and self-hatred morphed into debilitating depression and an eating disorder. “I was in dogged pursuit of an imagined sense of power,” she writes, “and was very mean in doing so....But I wonder now if I was always meanest to myself.”

Prescod left the fashion industry for a job at the TV network BET, a move she now sees as the first step on her long, slow recovery. Throughout the text, the author exhibits an impeccable clarity of thought, drawing thoughtful and original connections between institutionalized racism and her personal experience. Her voice is frank, vulnerable, and witty, and she has a talent for using humor to poke fun at her past self while simultaneously underscoring the depth of the systemic violence she was forced to endure.

A trenchant, honest, and unique memoir about body image, fashion, and Blackness.

FRANCE
An Adventure History
Robb, Graham
Norton (444 pp.)
$32.50 | July 5, 2022
978-1-324-00256-7

Discovering France with a shrewd, deeply knowledgeable guide.

Melding memoir, travelogue, and history, British biographer and cultural historian Robb offers a sweeping, spirited, and refreshingly unsentimental portrait of France, from the Bronze Age to the present. Traveling by bicycle, train, and on foot, the author and his wife ventured all over the country, searching for the nation’s social, political, and geographical past and alert to intimations of its future. Robb brings to his travels a “taste for apparently futile journeys of discovery,” an impressive command of history, and lively curiosity. Promising a book different from the “express train” narratives that rush through centuries focused on major figures and events, the author takes a slow route. His well-populated narrative includes Julius Caesar, Napoleon, and de Gaulle but also Ermoldus Nigellus, a poet with a “cheeky sense of humour” whose chronicles bore witness to ninth-century Brittany; early medieval polymath Gerbert d’Aurillac, who became Archbishop of Reims and, as Sylvester II, the first French pope; Jacques-Louis Ménétra, a free-spirited glazier from Paris whose autobiography painted a ribald picture of 18th-century France; and Louis-Napoleon’s ambitious mistress Harriet Howard. In present-day France, Robb discovered 150 towns with the status of “Plus Beaux Village,” looking like “habitats created by committees.” A topography dominated by roadways features some 50,000 roundabouts. The author examines changes in France’s social and political life as represented by the 2015 attack on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, burkini bans at the beach, and the 2018 protests of the Gilets Jaunes. Unlike Francophiles who insist that the essence of France will endure forever, Robb sees a future of vast changes—in land, people, language, and spirit. He appends the volume with a detailed chronology as well as acerbic notes for travelers who may want to emulate his explorations without being killed on their bicycles.

Delightful, discerning, and charmingly irreverent.

Rodgers moved in theater circles nearly her entire life (1931-2014). Her remembrances are lively, witty, honest, and “dishy” regarding a host of boldfaced names, both those she loved and those she hated. New York Times chief theater critic Green’s annotations fill out the history and offer helpful fact-checks. Daughter of composer Richard Rodgers and mother of composer Adam Guettel, Mary, also a composer, surrounded herself with talent. As an adolescent girl, she played word games with lifelong friend Stephen Sondheim; as a teenager, she dated Hal Prince. She served as an assistant for 14 years for the New York Philharmonic’s Young People’s Concerts program, and always she found Leonard Bernstein “fascinating.” Carol Burnett found her breakthrough role in Rodgers’ Once Upon a Mattress, while Judy Holliday bombed in Hot Spot. Rodgers was also the author of classic children’s books, including Freaky Friday, and became a leading “philanthropeuse” of New York society, including seven years as chairman of the board of the Juilliard School. She takes us inside the “romance”-like nature of collaborating on a musical. The “erotic part of songwriting,” she writes, is “the way you mate words with music.” She also writes movingly and with “knee-jerk transparency” about parental neglect (“I doubt either of my parents really even wanted to have children”), adultery, rampant alcoholism, and other dark sides of her artistic circles. Her first marriage was a mistake,
fixing the climate
strategies for an uncertain world
sabel, charles f. & david g. victor
princeton univ (256 pp.)
$24.95 | july 5, 2022
978-0-691-22455-8

a blending of top-down and bottom-up approaches to climate change.

when the world is burning, is there time to change fire engines? perhaps, write professors sabel and victor. the outlook may seem bleak, but new models of cooperation and “effective problem-solving” have been emerging in recent years. some of these involve government, federal or state (as with california’s aggressive efforts to reduce carbon emissions); some are at the corporate level, generally driven by self-interest and the possibility that new methods of atmospheric decarbonization will yield new profit centers. among the most effective measures, the authors suggest, are those that leverage local governance and involve the citizens who live on the ground in places where smokestacks are belching emissions or drag chains are deforesting the tropics. the authors deem this blend “experimental governance,” adding that changes and innovations will best come from several directions while requiring some sort of coordination. in a meaningful example, they suggest that battling overgrazing on the part of sheep would demand not only agreements on limits set by the shepherds themselves, but also on the possibility of breeding sheep that eat less grass or engineering new kinds of grass as well. this speaks to the authors’ assertion that battling climate change through, say, pollution reduction depends on “destabilizing innovation,” the kind of creative destruction that turned the world from landlines to cellphones. in sometimes-arid prose, the authors examine numerous case studies, including brazil’s tangled efforts to preserve the amazonian rainforest even as its developing economy considers it to be “unspoiled land to settle and exploit.” throughout, they suggest that local people and “small groups of willing innovators” must pitch in to help further “open plurilateral agreements” at the national and international levels.

of considerable, if specialized, interest to climate activists and policymakers.

roll red roll
rape, power, and football in the american heartland
schwartzman, nancy with nora zelevansky
hachette (288 pp.)
$29.00 | july 12, 2022
978-0-306-92436-1

a scathing examination of american rape culture, promoted and abetted by athletics.

documentary filmmaker schwartzman focuses on an incident that occurred in 2012 in steubenville, a small town in the “football-obsessed state of ohio.” high school football players threw a party in which some of them repeatedly raped an intoxicated young woman—and, moreover, boasted of the event on social media as it was happening. “as a result of their tweets and texts,” writes the author, “in the aftermath they couldn’t deny what had happened.” that didn’t keep their coaches and other school officials from trying to cover up the rape, which later led to grand jury indictments—but, unsurprisingly, only the mildest of punishments for the rapists. therein, schwartzman observes, lies the crux of a toxic culture that explains away crimes against women as the product of youthful exuberance and adrenaline. in the grim industrial town in which the crime occurred, gridiron success affords the possibility of escape via college scholarships, and locals tend to be disinclined to take that possibility away over what is explained away as teenage hijinks. indeed, in a local bar, schwartzman overheard “men [who] grumbled with resentment about trumped-up charges and girls who deserved what they got.” small wonder, given such attitudes, that it’s so difficult to enact effective policies to combat rape culture, including simple sex education. the people schwartzman encountered in town were less concerned with the fact of gang rape than with “negative attention about the football program.” furthermore, the women of steubenville expressed their tacit support by voting for donald trump in 2016. “women’s supposed solidarity around being potential victims of sexual violence was trumped by their allegiance to whiteness, and their own gender bias,” writes schwartzman. meanwhile, the perpetrators earned their scholarships, lauded as “good kids, good football players,” and rape culture rolls on.

a maddening, well-documented account of crime without punishment even as violence against women continues unabated.
The author of authoritative books on Mao and Pol Pot returns with another impressive yet disturbing account of a dangerous world leader.

Events in Ukraine will spur sales of this thick biography, but any praise is well deserved, as Short offers an insightful and often discouraging text on the Russian president. Born in 1952 in Leningrad, he grew up in a tiny, shabby apartment shared with two other families. Entering the KGB in 1975, he left in 1991 to join Leningrad’s city government in the exhilarating aftermath of Gorbachev’s perestroika. Diligent and efficient, Putin rose to prominence and moved to Moscow in 1996, becoming President Boris Yeltsin’s trusted assistant and then successor in 2000. Russia’s constitution (approved under Yeltsin) gives its president far more powers than America’s, but Short shows how Putin’s KGB background lowered his inhibitions on imprisoning or murdering political opponents; as time passed, his word became law. The author has no quarrel with the accusation that Putin destroyed the democratic liberties that followed glasnost, but he also points out that, for most Russians, the 1990s were a time of crushing poverty, crime, and disorder. Early on under Putin, living standards increased, and the streets became safer. Few Russians admire the Soviet Union, other than its status as an empire and great power. Many Russians, including Putin, are angry about how the U.S. boasted of victory during the Cold War, gave advice but little else during the lean years, and broke its promise not to expand NATO to former Soviet nations, thereby stoking Russia’s long-standing paranoia about being surrounded by enemies. Putin’s 2014 seizure of Crimea and backing of secessionists in eastern Ukraine remain popular, and many Russians support the invasion of Ukraine despite its difficulties. Having read obsessively and interviewed almost everyone, Putin included, Short delivers a consistently compelling account of Putin’s life so far. Contradictions abound, and the author is not shy about pointing out frank lies from sources that include Putin as well as his enemies.

Required reading for anyone interested in global affairs.
WHAT THE CHILDREN TOLD US
The Untold Story of the Famous “Doll Test” and the Black Psychologists Who Changed the World
Spofford, Tim
Sourcebooks (368 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-1-72824-807-3

A biography of the pioneering psychologists who were “determined to use disciplined intelligence to rock the foundations of segregation so that all Americans, especially the children, could live, learn, and work together.”

In 1940, the racial segregation still pervasive in the U.S. made it difficult for Kenneth Clark, a Black psychologist, to find work, despite his doctorate from Columbia. Nonetheless, using grant money, Clark and his wife, Mamie, designed an experiment that showed the pernicious effects of segregation on both Black and White children. In the “doll test,” the Clarks interviewed White and Black children, using White and Black dolls to elicit answers to a series of questions, including which doll looked like them and which was good or bad. In test after test, the Clarks discovered that children often chose the Black doll as the bad one and hesitated to pick the Black doll when choosing one that looked like them. Black children even denied their racial heritage, stating they were dark from the sun or, in the case of light-skinned children, that they were actually White. For years, the results were controversial, but they eventually helped sway the Supreme Court in Brown v. Board of Education, which changed school segregation throughout the country. Spofford delivers an educative, sometimes dense biography of the Clarks, giving lengthy background information on their relationship and the important work they conducted together—not only the doll testing, but also the youth programs they established in Harlem, where Kenneth grew up. Spofford tells more than he shows, but this is a story that deserves to be better known. For readers interested in a unique tale at the intersection of psychology, race, and activism, Spofford’s in-depth portrait of the Clarks will be welcome reading.

An overly detailed but well-researched account of a couple who contributed to the erosion of racial segregation in the U.S.

SINKABLE
Obession, the Deep Sea, and the Shipwreck of the Titanic
Stone, Daniel
Dutton (536 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-0-593-32937-5

An exploration of the aftermath of the Titanic’s fatal voyage.

Since the Titanic sank on April 15, 1912, the ship has been the subject of legends and myths, edging on an obsession for some. Rather than focusing on what caused the ship to sink, science writer Stone, author of The Food Explorer, chronicles what has happened since the night the ship struck an iceberg. “In cultural lore, the Titanic is the wreck around which all others orbit,” writes the author. “The same way a pop musician can’t escape the influence of the Beatles or Michael Jackson, shipwreckers can’t bypass the brightest star.” Stone attributes much of the ship’s outsized, iconic status to “good storytelling.” Drawing on eyewitness accounts and expert reports, the author tracks the shipwreck’s history, including how it broke apart, the discovery of its resting place in September 1985, and subsequent plans and attempts to salvage the ship. “Raising it, however, would create a new set of problems,” writes Stone, including accelerating the ship’s decay. The author also discusses how surviving the tragedy changed many lives, particularly the survivor’s shame faced by those who were able to find a lifeboat and row away from the sinking ship, leaving hundreds behind. One woman “lived the rest of her life trying to salvage her and her husband’s reputations as heartless cowards.” Additionally, Stone discusses versions of the Titanic’s story that have appeared in books and film, including, of course, James Cameron’s 1997 mega-blockbuster. Though the author focuses on the Titanic, he writes about other maritime tragedies and maritime-related science, including hypothermia, what to do if you find yourself on a sinking ship, how sound travels underwater, disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle, and the effects of water pressure on the lungs. From the beginning of the narrative, Stone effectively draws readers in with his own great storytelling skills.

A captivating read for Titanic and maritime enthusiasts.

THE STATUS GAME
On Human Life and How To Play It
Storr, Will
Harper360 (416 pp.)
$18.99 paper | Aug. 23, 2022
978-0-00-835467-1

Forget about doing away with inequality, writes science journalist Storr—not while humans are humans and leopards don’t change their spots.

What keeps striving humans up at night? Not wealth, sexual conquest, or security: No, writes Storr; it’s status, the relative position we hold vis-à-vis those around us. The quest for high status deforms our better angels. “Always on alert for slights and praise,” he writes, “we can be petty, hateful, aggressive, grandiose and delusional.” In fact, “status is a fundamental human need.” It’s not just that we need to be admired; we must be admired more than the person next to us, and we’re hard-wired for that golden key: Holding status affords access to wealth, sex, security, and every other thing that we desire. Digging into anthropology, psychology, neuroscience, and other realms, Storr outlines the evolutionary history of our need as social animals to belong to a group—and, once inside a group, to attain
rank. Sometimes this plays out in odd ways. One of the many layered examples the author presents is the case of a Micronesian island community in which status is attained by the farmer who could grow the largest yam to present to the village leader, resulting in a society of secretive, jealous, mistrustful Mendelians and plenty of disharmony. Those who do not attain status through yams or heroics—or are shunned or ridiculed—can do very bad things. Storr locates status loss as an ingredient in the makings of serial killers, the Unabomber, and other miscreants.

“Humiliation can be seen as the opposite of status, the hell to its heaven,” he writes. “Like status, humiliation comes from other people.” When other people engineer that status loss, mayhem can ensue, especially today’s “neoliberal game,” which relies on a zero-sum formula of have and have-not. Pair this eye-opening book with W. David Marx’s equally revelatory *Status and Culture: A Natural History*.

An interesting, deeply researched, and sometimes disturbing look into the science of what makes us tick.

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**QUEEN ELIZABETH II**

*An Oral History*

Deborah Hart & Gerald Strober

Pegasus (560 pp.)

$35.00 | Aug. 2, 2022

978-1-63936-191-5

Voices from the queen’s circle.

Updating their previous oral history of Elizabeth II, *The Monarchy*, the Strobersons reinterviewed some individuals and talked on Zoom and by phone with a few more to round out an admiring portrait of the British queen. Some topics newly addressed include the withdrawal of Harry and Meghan from royal obligations, accusations of racism in the royal household, the succession, and the death of Prince Philip. Respondents share fond memories of Philip while not understanding the strength surrounding the Queen.

The Monarchy is largely a matter of extrapolation, and despite challenges, we can take precautions, such as insuring our house, putting aside money for an unexpected crisis or, on a larger scale, building the Global Seed Vault. Sprinkled throughout the book are well-placed moments of deadpan humor to leaven the authoritative research.

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**A fascinating perspective on what it means to be human, told with a clear voice and an expansive canvas.”**

*THE INVENTION OF TOMORROW: A Natural History of Foresight*  
Suddendorf, Thomas, Jonathan Redshaw & Adam Bulley  
Basic Books (304 pp.)  
$30.00 | Sept. 20, 2022  
978-1-5416-7572-8

Why the ability to imagine the future is a cornerstone of human survival and development.

How do we think ahead? How do we incorporate new information into our plans? Is our foresight trustworthy? Australian academics Suddendorf, Redshaw, and Bulley pull together a wide range of scientific disciplines to explain the nature of foresight, beginning with humanity’s prehistoric past. They examine the capacity of early humans to look ahead—from knowing when food would become available to carrying a bag of stones to ward off predators—allowed the species to thrive. As civilization developed, foresight became even more important; it was critical to forecast tides, seasonal changes, and planting and harvesting times. As the authors show, complex foresight is a uniquely human quality. A few animals, such as dolphins and apes, have some capacity to look ahead, but it is limited, and their ability to communicate with others does not match that of humans. “To live in the present, our brain must continually interfere with our rationality. One reason is ‘optimism bias,’” which causes us to overestimate the chances of good outcomes. In fact, our foresight is often wrong, and the authors entertainingly recount predictions that went hilariously awry. Foresight is largely a matter of extrapolation, and despite challenges, we can take precautions, such as insuring our house, putting aside money for an unexpected crisis or, on a larger scale, building things like the Global Seed Vault. Sprinkled throughout the book are well-placed moments of deadpan humor to leaven the authoritative research.

A fascinating perspective on what it means to be human, told with a clear voice and an expansive canvas.
An award-winning winner chronicles her attempts to get pregnant.

Guggenheim fellow and PEN/America Award winner Tea recounts in intimate, comic, and irreverent detail her four-year quest to get pregnant, beginning in 2011, when she was 40, a recovering alcoholic and addict who stabilized her mental state with antidepressants. Although happily independent, she felt firm in her decision to have a baby. Describing herself as “mostly gay,” the author realized that getting pregnant through sex with a man was unlikely. Among her many gay friends, Quentin, a “virile, healthy 28-year-old” drag queen, happily agreed to be her sperm donor, coming to her service every time she ovulated. A close friend stood by to shoot semen into her vagina with a syringe; soon, Orson, Tea’s new queer lover, took over the process. Tea’s journey to motherhood involved tarot cards, astrology, and witches; a loving queer community; a caring partner, and medical practitioners sympathetic to a queer woman’s desire for a baby. Though many anecdotes are amusing, she reveals the emotional and physical cost of the “baby-making/baby-failing roller coaster” that completely dominated her life. At first, she writes, she was “determined to graciously accept any inability to actually have a baby” but after months of failed attempts, both with her homemade insemination technique and in vitro fertilization, she admits that “the feelings that accompany the surge of blood in my underwear are not so mild.” Tea shares the particular challenges that queer and trans individuals encounter when seeking medical help, and she records the bodily changes, mood swings, fears, and anxieties that she experienced, including worries about her response to her baby’s gender. “Folks in my world have separated sex from gender so wholly that there is no way to comfortably relax into the idea of a baby girl being like this, or a baby boy being like that.” Nevertheless, “whatever potential the baby expresses,” she felt ready.

A refreshingly entertaining, lighthearted memoir about a serious topic.

LIKE A ROLLING STONE
Wenner, Jann S.
Little, Brown (692 pp.)
$35.00 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-0-316-43519-4

The Rolling Stone founder and publisher recounts a golden age of sex, drugs, rock ‘n’ roll, and cash flow. As Wenner (b. 1947) admits, he grew up in privilege: His first car was a Jaguar, and he got his first editing gig with the yearbook of his private school. He was swayed from preppiedom with the advent of rock, which he correctly deems a form of “soft power.” Though he missed the Beatles’ legendary performance on The Ed Sullivan Show, he became a devotee after seeing A Hard Day’s Night. This long narrative is bracketed by his 2017 sale of the magazine he founded in 1967, its title borrowed from the Dylan song and not the British band. Soon enough, though, Wenner became friendly with both the Beatles and the Stones. The magazine was revolutionary, especially early on. As the author notes, it “introduced black music to an expanding white audience—not as music for white people created by black people, but as black music in and of itself.” Staffed by the likes of Ben Fong-Torres, Joe Eszterhas, Hunter S. Thompson, and Annie Leibovitz, it also soon became an outlet of choice for musical acts around the world. In fact, John Lennon’s first extensive interview ran in its pages. (Wenner does allow that there were bands that hated the magazine, notably Led Zeppelin.) In time, Wenner decided to abandon the “fading hippie orthodoxy” of San Francisco for the bright lights of New York, where—with the madcap Thompson in tow—Rolling Stone became a journal of politics as much as music, cheering on Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. The author writes frankly about money, sex (including his own long years in the closet), and his regret at selling its creation: “The new mantra was clear: What counted was not the printed word but the number of ‘hits’ on the website.”

A scholar and translator attempts to unravel the mystery of her sister Edie Sedgwick (1943-1971).

In a memoir addressed to her brother, who died in 1965, Wohl (b. 1931) recounts her attempt, over more than 50 years, to understand her sister Edie, who in the mid-1960s, burst onto Manhattan’s cultural scene, “a fantasy image of upper-class glamour,” as Andy Warhol’s companion and muse. “I’m trying to figure out exactly what happened when Edie got together with Andy,” writes the author. “I want to know what she had that I so totally failed to see, but that he saw and put to such effective use.” Their unabashed self-promotion, Wohl asserts, “led to the present that we are all living out”—dominated by selfies, influencers, and relentless seekers of instant celebrity. Wohl was the oldest of eight children; Edie was the seventh. They were privileged but also isolated, raised on a ranch and tyrannized by their parents’ “despotic” rules. At boarding school when Edie was a child, Wohl saw only glimpses of the girl she portrays as demanding, headstrong,
and often spoiled. Unlike her siblings, Edie’s tantrums got her whatever she wanted, and the author partly blames the family’s insularity on Edie’s appeal. When she arrived in New York in 1964, she appeared transcendent: “beautiful, unattached, and eager for life. She was also unimaginably innocent because literally everything was new to her.” She was beautiful, to be sure, and so vain about her appearance that she spent hours putting on makeup. “Severely bulimic” and an addict, she already had spent months in psychiatric hospitals. Wohl is not just interested in examining Edie as a cultural icon; she also seeks to expose their family’s dark side: her father, mentally unstable, narcissistic, and philandering; her mother, devoted to protecting him even after Edie accused him of molesting her. One brother killed himself, and Wohl was estranged for years. Edie, it turns out, was not the family’s only victim.

_An absorbing portrait of troubled lives._

**ALL OF THIS**

_A Memoir of Death and Desire_

Woolf, Rebecca
HarperOne (256 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-0-063-05267-3

A successful writer and blogger explores how her husband’s untimely death forced a confrontation with her unfulfilling marriage and undefined sexuality.

By the time Woolf’s husband, Hal, was diagnosed with terminal cancer, their marriage was “in relative shambles—backs turned to each other in a bed big enough to keep us from touching.” Hal resented Woolf for her financial success, and Woolf resented Hal for the lies she felt compelled to tell him to keep the marriage “stable.” However, his illness made the author desperate. Rather than seeking a divorce, she found herself wanting Hal to live. For the remainder of his life, the author swore she would never leave his side, “the only marital vow I didn’t break.” The tumultuous mixture of love and hate complicated a difficult grieving process that began even before he died. As she revisited their shared past, she mourned her “inadequacies as a wife, as a partner” while also excoriating herself for passively accepting what she knew was a “toxic relationship.” After Hal’s death, Woolf found herself “performing” widowhood for others while gnawing on a powerful desire to “get fucked”—less to satiate her desire and more to fill the emptiness that had carried over from her marriage. An affair with a friend she’d met at Hal’s funeral provided some release. Then she signed up for Tinder and fell into a pattern of “one-night standing,” which eventually included both male and female partners as well as experiments in polyamory. In the process, Woolf learned that however traumatic, Hal’s death had actually prepared her for the short-term relationships she realized were what made her feel the most free and alive. By turns disturbing and profound, this intimate book about one woman’s path to personal liberation also reveals the sometimes-labyrinthine nature of the bonds that unite people in love and marriage.

_A provocative and memorable work of autobiography._

**HITLER’S GIRL**

_The British Aristocracy and the Third Reich on the Eve of WWII_

Young, Lauren
Harper/HarperCollins (240 pp.)
$29.99 | Aug. 23, 2022
978-0-06-293673-8

A fresh analysis of fascism in 1930s Britain.

Using the outrageous behavior of Hitler devotee Unity Mitford, the youngest of the Mitford sisters, as a point of reference, Young examines the ingrained fascism of upper-crust British society in the years before World War II. Thanks to newly opened and expanded archives, the author is able to expose a host of fascist-leaning figures during the 1930s, revealing the shockingly broad complacency and complicity among the aristocratic class. As the author shows, the rise of nationalism occurring in Germany after the ravages of World War I was exported to Britain during a similarly vulnerable time. Britain was losing many of its imperial realms, and the communist threat was rampant. Consequently, many in Britain admired Hitler’s strong-armed tactics in controlling inflation and squelching opposition, and Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists, a British parallel paramilitary operation of antisemitic, right-wing thugs, gained enormous popularity. Diana Mitford, eldest of the five aristocratic, free-willed Mitford sisters, left her marriage to Bryan Guinness to marry Mosley in secret, while her younger sister Unity, drawn magnetically to Hitler, installed herself in Munich until he drew her into his inner circle of sycophants. Meanwhile, the royal family, of German stock, was being recruited by Queen Mary’s cousin, the Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, all while the Duke of Windsor and Wallis Simpson continued to demonstrate alarming German sympathies—a subject that has been well chronicled elsewhere. Young capably discusses many of the right-wing groups proliferating at the time as well as the long-running currents of antisemitism in Britain and the defeatist nature of Neville Chamberlain’s government. The author also wonders how Unity, followed by British intelligence, could have met “with Hitler more than 140 times between February 1935 and September 1939, espousing Nazi vitriol, without the British government ever taking a real interest.”

_A pertinent historical study of “a dangerous combination of complacency and complicity.”_
The far-reaching consequences of abortion activism.

Legal historian Ziegler, who has documented the complexities of the abortion debate in several previous books, revisits the growth of the anti-abortion campaign with a focus on its impact on the Supreme Court, connection to campaign finance laws, and shaping of the contemporary political scene. After a brief overview of medical and legal arguments about abortion beginning in the mid-19th century, the author traces the controversy over right to life versus right to privacy that culminated in the 1973 Supreme Court decision in Roe v. Wade. After the court upheld Roe in 1992, activism shifted from local candidates to the national scene, focused on supporting presidential aspirants who would appoint conservative justices to the court. Campaign finance reform became part of that effort because limiting contributions made it difficult for advocacy groups to exert influence. The anti-abortion movement, therefore, saw an advantage in doing away with campaign finance limits, which, its lawyers argued, were equal to “restrictions on political speech.” Republicans have seen the issue of judicial nominees as a way to energize base voters, and they welcomed campaign finance deregulation to fill their coffers. However, as Ziegler shows, both alliances have weakened the GOP, opening the door to well-funded populists and fostering the party polarization that allows extremists, whom the party previously would have sidelined, to flourish. As in previous works, she casts a wide net, examining recent research to reexamine the long-running nature-vs.-nurture debate. In fact, writes the author, the argument has become rather meaningless, with the evidence now suggesting that it is the interaction of genes and environment that determines an animal’s behavior. Zuk shows how genetic structures are not as immutable as once thought—there are cases where they have been changed by environmental factors or repeated actions—and evolution is a far more complex process that its early adherents understood, with paths leading to odd places. Why does a cockatoo called Snowball dance so well to the Backstreet Boys? Is there an evolutionary advantage in collecting YouTube likes? Academic researchers argue vociferously about such issues, with protracted fights over definitions and data interpretations. Many of the problems, writes the author, stem from the tendency to assess behavior against standards based on a hierarchy of sophistication. But does it make sense to measure an animal’s intelligence according to its likeness to humans when that might be of little importance to the animal? Zuk devotes a chapter to the social evolution of dogs, but she also has interesting things to say about tool-using crows, innovative bees, and clever sea slugs. Particularly intriguing is the chapter on how parasites change the behavior of their hosts (such as making mice unafraid of cats) to work their way up the food chain—although many animals have developed effective anti-parasite techniques as well. Consistently entertaining, the book is also packed with provocative questions and useful insights.

Fascinating stories from a knowledgeable, humorous guide. Another winner from Zuk.
These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

**SKATER CIELO** by Rachel Katstaller .................................................109
**COMING UP CUBAN** by Sonia Manzano ........................................... 113
**ACTION!** by Meghan McCarthy .......................................................115
**TUMBLE** by Celia C. Pérez ...............................................................118
**DIGESTION! THE MUSICAL** by Adam Rex; illus. by Laura Park ...119
**CREepy CRAYON!** by Aaron Reynolds; illus. by Peter Brown........120
**THE POLTer-ghost PRoBLEM** by Betsy Uhrig .............................125
**LIONEL POOPS** by Eric Veillé .......................................................133

**KINDERGarten Where Kindness Matters Every Day**
Abiyya, Vera
Illus. by Joey Chou
Random House Studio (40 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | June 21, 2022
978-0-593-48462-3
978-0-593-48461-0 PLB

While shy Leo wants no part of sharing ways to be kind aloud with his new kindergarten class, that doesn’t mean he isn’t kind.

Leo enjoys quiet activities and time with his extended family, so it’s only natural that he’s nervous about starting school. Luckily, Leo has the perfect teacher. Not only does she greet Leo personally and offer to help him get through his nervousness, but she also sets him up with new friends who also prefer quiet activities. Still, Leo, who wears a zipped-up jacket with the hood up, attempts to blend in and hopes Ms. Perry won’t call on him to contribute ideas to the Kindness Pledge the class is working on. But Leo and his kindness are certainly not invisible to his new classmates, who specifically call out the many ways he has been kind during the day. Suddenly, Leo feels ready for this new adventure called kindergarten, and his now-unzipped jacket and bare head reflect that confidence. The digitally painted illustrations are full of bright colors and familiar school scenes. An author’s note describes how to use the Kindness Pledge in classrooms, when it may be especially helpful, and reminds readers that it’s also important to be kind to yourself. Leo, his family, and Ms. Perry are brown-skinned, and Leo’s classmates are racially diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Will help alleviate fears and start kids thinking about ways to create their own KINDergartens. (Kindness Pledge poster) (Picture book: 4-8)

**A LIttle BIt of RESPECt**
Alexander, Claire
Happy Yak (32 pp.)
$19.99 | May 3, 2022
978-0-7112-6442-7
Series: Ploofers

A little Ploofer learns to stand up for themselves.

The round, gray Ploofers are on an adventure and find a new land with pink, raindrop-shaped inhabitants. The pink
creatures welcome the Ploofers. When the littlest Ploofler shows off their ability to make small, colorful clouds, one of the inhabitants finds it adorable. The pink inhabitant treats the Ploofler like a baby, calling them cute, pinching their cheeks, and even commenting on their cute walk (“Widdle, waddle, widdle, waddle!”). The little Ploofler starts to visibly get more agitated as they expel a red cloud, and the inhabitant suggests the “cutie pie” needs a nap. Fed up, the little Ploofler kicks what looks like a pebble but turns out to be another little creature (“Excuse me! I do not like being kicked!”) who eventually helps them speak up and demand a bit of respect. This third entry in the Plooflers series is a fun book with a sound lesson on boundaries, consent, and respect—our words and actions can be hurtful despite our intentions. The only downfall is the ending, perhaps intended to be humorous, in which the offending pink inhabitant repeats the same mistake with another creature, not really learning anything. The illustrations are adorable and portray the different emotions well. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A charming story for young readers about respect and speaking up. (Picture book 3-5)

GRAPE, AGAIN!
Arquilevich, Gabriel
Fitzroy Books (173 pp.)
$15.95 paper | July 19, 2022
978-1-64603-247-1

Don Quixote has spiders...just like Grape.
Middle schooler Grape, the son of Argentinean Jews, attributes his propensity for trouble to “spiders” in his brain. When readers last saw Grape, he had just finished writing a journal about his history to avoid being sent to Riverwash, the school for “trouble kids.” The principal is impressed enough with his reflection that she not only lets him stay at his old school, but recommends him for an advanced English class, where he meets Don Quixote, who, like Grape, has his own “trouble spiders.” Just like Don Quixote, Grape’s tale is riotously funny yet also concerns deeper issues. Bike riding, sailing, and new friends are woven through discussions of divorce, parental depression and illness, foster care, and coping with trauma. Through it all, the looming specter of Grape’s bar mitzvah underscores this transitional period in his life. As difficult as making sense of the world can be, he’s never alone. Told through letters to Grape’s friend Lou and set in 1976, this sequel to Grape! (2019) provides enough context to firmly situate readers unfamiliar with the first book and delves into some, but not the chimerical ones—particularly the scorpion-tailed Girtablilu people drawn from the epic of Gilgamesh and the Mahabharata’s Navagunjara, made up of parts of nine creatures—appealingly bizarre. His 20 alphabetized selections, which span the globe, include unicorns, griffins, the golem, merfolk of Mimi of Arnhem Land, and Te Ika-a-Māui, a truly large fish that consumes precious metals, the wildlife-protecting archipelago’s Navagunjara, made up of parts of nine creatures—appealingly bizarre. His 20 alphabetized selections, which span the globe, include unicorns, griffins, the golem, merfolk of Mimi of Arnhem Land, and Te Ika-a-Māui, a truly large fish that consumes precious metals, the wildlife-protecting.

A touching, tumultuous journey. (Realistic fiction. 9-12)

ME AND MUHAMMAD ALI
Asim, Zahari
Illus. by A.G. Ford
Nancy Paulsen Books (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 20, 2022
978-1-5247-3988-1

A child named Langston anticipates his hero’s visit to his hometown.
On the Wall of Respect, a mural of Black heroes, Langston, a Black boy, notices a flyer announcing that boxing champion Muhammad Ali is coming to town. Langston admires Ali not only for his athleticism, but also for his poetry. Ali’s boastful rhymes delight Langston, who tries out his own rhymes on the playground at school. Langston’s mom loves Ali’s commitment to justice: “He is never afraid to tell the truth.” Finally, the big day arrives. Langston gets his hair cut just like Ali’s while listening to elders’ stories about Langston admires Ali not only for his athleticism, but also for his poetry. Ali’s boastful rhymes delight Langston, who tries out his own rhymes on the playground at school. Langston’s mom loves Ali’s commitment to justice: “He is never afraid to tell the truth.” Finally, the big day arrives. Langston gets his hair cut just like Ali’s while listening to elders’ stories about Ali’s commitmen

A gallery of strange creatures of lore, from dragons to eaters of gold and dreams.
Capped by a sinuous dragon on a double gatefold, Auerbach’s translucently hued figures are more graceful than fearsome, but the chimerical ones—particularly the scorpion-tailed Girtablilu people drawn from the epic of Gilgamesh and the Mahabharata’s Navagunjara, made up of parts of nine creatures—are appealingly bizarre. His 20 alphabetized selections, which span the globe, include unicorns, griffins, the golem, merfolk of several varieties, a benign nightmare eater from Japan, a Chilian bird that consumes precious metals, the wildlife-protecting Mimi of Arnhem Land, and Te Ika-a-Māui, a truly large fish that became New Zealand’s entire North Island. The visuals have to carry the load here, however, since despite appending brief references to older sources of information about each entry in

A touching, tumultuous journey. (Realistic fiction. 9-12)
Growing up, I encountered few, if any, books with queer characters. The happy endings of these books—mostly YA—were often quiet ones, and sometimes mere survival was as close to a happy ending as readers got, as with Sandra Scoppettone’s *Happy Endings Are All Alike* (1978). It’s uplifting now to see queer stories, like the picture books and middle-grade novels spotlighted here, that are told for a much younger audience and feature characters who strive not just for survival, but for joy and community. At a time when people’s very identities are being debated, these books are reminders to queer youth that they matter—and that they belong.

When Annabelle, the protagonist of *Different Kinds of Fruit* by Kyle Lukoff (Dial, April 12), befriends new student Bailey, who is nonbinary, she assumes they are the first queer person she’s ever been close to—until her parents start opening up about their own identities and she begins to question her own. As Lukoff matter-of-factly explores a range of queer identities, Annabelle’s winsome, quirky voice keeps this edifying novel from ever being didactic.

Assigned an essay on their “authentic self,” Gabriela, the protagonist of medina’s *The One Who Loves You the Most* (Levine Querido, May 10), struggles. As a Honduran child adopted by a White mother, they’ve long wondered where they fit, but new friends Abbie, who is trans and intersex, and Héctor, who’s bisexual and genderfluid, help Gabriela figure it out. Through prose that’s spare but brimming with honesty, medina offers a resonant depiction of a young queer person carving out a sense of self. (Read an interview with the author on Page 96.)

With *If You’re a Drag Queen and You Know It* (Running Press Kids, May 17), Lil Miss Hot Mess once more offers an inspired, queer take on a beloved childhood song (after 2020’s *The Hips on the Drag Queen Go Swish, Swish, Swish*). Olga de Dios Ruiz again illustrates, with a diverse group of queens who certainly do “know it” and “show it” by blowing kisses, striking dynamic poses, and shouting, “Yesss Queen!” Oozing color and movement, the art is a show-stopper, while the text will have kids singing along.

With her picture book *The Rainbow Parade* (Dial, May 31), Emily Neilson draws from her memories of attending San Francisco Pride with her mothers. Though young Emily loves watching the parade, she’s hesitant to join in, wondering if she belongs, but Mommy and Mama reassure her. Graceful art with swirls of color sets a festive tone, but Neilson’s sensitive text also acknowledges that forging an identity can be tough: “Sometimes finding your pride takes a little practice,” as Mommy puts it.

Jacqueline Briggs and June Jo Lee’s picture-book biography *Sandor Katz and the Tiny Wild* (Readers to Eaters, June 7) follows the food writer and activist from his childhood on New York’s Lower East Side to, after receiving an HIV-positive diagnosis in 1991, rural Tennessee, where he flourished among a community of other queer people and channeled his pain into experiments with fermentation. Though the text touches on sadness, it nevertheless exudes an energy matched by Julie Wilson’s vibrant illustrations, often drawn in exuberant scrawls; the result is a triumphant celebration of food and community.

*The Language of Seabirds* by Will Taylor (Scholastic, July 19) finds 12-year-old Jeremy spending two weeks at the beach with his unstable, recently divorced father and his uncle. The guarded preteen—who conceals a love of fashion magazines and an attraction to other boys—opens up when he meets and falls for Evan. This quiet yet potent novel acknowledges Jeremy’s very real fears but emphasizes the joys of embracing his true self. As Taylor notes, “The risk had made him happy. That was something to hold on to. He wanted more than safety now.”

Mahnaz Dar is a young readers’ editor.
a closing section, all that he offers to accompany the pictures are a few perfunctory descriptive notes or explicated legends drawn, to judge from the booklist at the end, from secondary sources. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

More eye candy than reference tool, but young monster hunters may find some fresh quarry. (Informational picture book. 7-10)

**OCTOPUS SHOCKTOPUS!**

Bently, Peter  
Illus. by Steven Lenton  
Nosy Crow/Candlewick (32 pp.)  
$17.99 | Aug. 9, 2022  
978-1-5362-2396-5

How odd to have a giant octopus sitting on your house!

One day, a family in a seaside town hears a bump and goes outside to see a huge pink octopus sitting on their roof. “Our neighbor Mrs. Antrobus said, ‘I don’t like that octopus! An octopus just looks all wrong. An octopus does not belong.’” Mrs. Antrobus calls in the fire brigade, but they can’t shift it. At first the octopus seems bored, but when the kids and their friends ask it to play, the octopus gladly joins in, playing catch and soccer. It turns out humongous octopuses make great slides and wash lines, and they are handy for rescuing kites and painting fences (at the same time). It even wins over Mrs. Antrobus when it saves her cat. Through autumn and winter (and even Christmas), the octopus stays and helps out; everyone loves it (though the local baker would rather have a squid). And everyone is sad when it disappears…but soon it returns with a wonderful surprise for the whole town! This charmingly silly British import features bouncy, rhyming text that will enchant readers. Enhancing the narrative are colorful, detailed cartoon illustrations. Characters are diverse throughout. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**SPLASH! Ethelda Bleibtrey Makes Waves of Change**

Boxer, Elisa  
Illus. by Elizabeth Baddeley  
Sleeping Bear Press (32 pp.)  
$17.99 | July 15, 2022  
978-1-53411-143-1

Splash! One brave girl finds her own power and freedom in swimming—and beyond.

Boxer and Baddeley tell the story of Ethelda Bleibtrey, who survived polio as a teenager to become an accomplished athlete and nurse. After Ethelda is left physically limited by polio in 1917, her doctors suggest swimming as therapy—and it works. Ethelda feels at home in the water, free and mobile…and powerful. Ethelda fights gender inequality by protesting sexist double standards for swimming costumes; she also competes in the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp, Belgium, where she becomes the first American woman to win a gold medal in swimming. She goes on to live a life of public advocacy and supports children as a nurse. A keystone of her work becomes helping children recover their belief in their bodies through aquatic therapy. Backmatter includes an overview of Ethelda’s life, complete with photographs, and a note from Boxer about fictionalizing thoughts and dialogue. This compelling story makes full use of the illustrations. The blues and greens of the water reflect both depth and movement and the shift in Ethelda’s life from stillness to freedom. The illustrator’s use of line is particularly effective, showing Ethelda moving through water and space. Ethelda was White; people who appear in the book are diverse in terms of skin tone. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Readers will love reading about this gutsy woman. (Picture-book biography. 6-10)
THE PRINCE AND THE BLIGHT
Butler, Kathryn
Crossway (320 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Aug. 2, 2022
978-0-593-37615-7 PLB
Series: The Dream Keeper Saga, 2

This sequel to The Dragon and the Stone (2022) reunites readers with tween hero Lily, reformed bully Adam, and talking dragon Cedric.

Lily has been home for a few months following an adventure in which she was whisked away to the Somnium Realm to save her father. However, she’s having trouble settling down in her normal life: All she daydreams of is seeing some more mythical creatures. When she accidently brings a papier-mâché pterodactyl to life in art class, the latest in a series of such mishaps, Adam decides that things are starting to get out of hand. In fact, new student Keisha was a witness to what happened and, seeking more excitement, ends up joining Lily and Adam in their next mission after Cedric arrives requesting help and bearing news of the disappearance of Prince Pax and a lethal illness taking over the Realm. The trio encounters an enormous white bear; arctic foxes pulling a sled; majestic, shimmering swans; and more magical creatures throughout this ever evolving fantasy world. Lily is appealing as a strong, smart, fearless protagonist in this story that is both whimsical and thought-provoking as it explores themes of hope and trust. Lily and Adam read as White; Keisha is cued as Black.

An action-packed fantasy. (Fantasy. 9-12)

THE DAREDEVILS
Buyea, Rob
Delacorte (240 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Aug. 9, 2022
978-0-593-37614-0
978-0-593-37615-7 PLB

While forging their own identities, brother and sister twins uncover family secrets.

With names that are nods to country music icons, twins Loretta and Waylon will be starting middle school in the fall and for the first time attending separate classes. They both have plans for the summer: Movie enthusiast Loretta, perpetual protector of her smaller-sized brother, plans to toughen him up; survival-story fan Waylon wants to prove he can defend himself. The siblings narrate in alternating chapters, addressing readers directly at times, and their stories blend when they stumble upon a clearing in the woods that they name the Circle of Stones. After meeting home-schooled Louie, whose mother is deemed “crazy” by the locals, Loretta and Waylon reference Indigenous coming-of-age ceremonies and include Louie in a series of their own rituals.

These are meant to honor Forest Spirits, their name for what they believe are the spirits of unspecified people who explored these woods long ago. These invented ceremonies, along with mentions of such cultural elements as dream catchers, wigwams, and counting coup, recur in the narrative in ways that evoke exoticized stereotypes of Native peoples. While conducting these rituals, Loretta and Waylon discover family connections and begin to understand the mental health issues that trouble Louie’s mother. Additional storylines involving school bullies and first crushes converge in a trite conclusion. Main characters read as White.

Explores changes that come with the transition to middle school but is marred by stereotyping. (Fiction. 8-12)

SECRET SCHOOLS
True Stories of the Determination To Learn
Camlot, Heather
Illus. by Erin Taniyuguchi
Owlkids Books (48 pp.)
$18.95 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-77147-460-3

Inspiring tributes to select underground and nontraditional schools and those who founded them.

Gathering her brief accounts into thematic chapters, Camlot starts off with cases of schools founded to preserve suppressed languages or cultural identities—for Japanese migrant workers in Brazil and Indigenous Kichwa speakers in Ecuador in the mid-20th century, for instance—then goes on to highlight similar efforts to educate enslaved or imprisoned people (in the United States and the Third Reich) and girls and women in countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Poland. Many of the activist founders and teachers remain anonymous, but Camlot does offer nods to, for example, Frederick Douglass and Nelson Mandela as well as Ecuador’s crusader Dolores Cacuango, Lithuanian book smuggler Jurgis Bielinis (whose birthday is a national holiday), and Mohammed Nasir Rahyab, supporter of the subversive “Golden Needle Sewing School” in Herat, Afghanistan. How an ensuing look at spy training academies in Canada, Great Britain, and the USSR fits in is anybody’s guess, though, and along with reporting on a school in Jakarta for children of Muslim suicide bombers and underground reading groups in South Korea in the 1980s, the final chapter features only tantalizing glimpses of modern experiments in, as the heading has it, “Radical Learning.” Taniguchi’s stylized illustrations of studious figures in small groups underscore the fact that most of the courageous teachers and students here are or were people of color.

Runs off the rails partway through but offers food for thought to children taking their right to an education for granted. (notes, bibliography) (Nonfiction. 10-12)
THE U-NIQUE LOU FOX
Carmichael, Jodi
Pajama Press (240 pp.)
$18.95 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-1-77278-258-5

A spirited and creative wannabe playwright in Winnipeg navigates grade 5 with dyslexia and ADHD.

Louisa Elizabeth Fitzhenry-O'Shaughnessy has 36 letters in her name—and she hates spelling. She'd rather go by Lou Fox, the dream name that she plans to use when she becomes a Broadway playwright. For now, though, she is stuck in class with Mrs. Snyder, someone who seemingly doesn't like anything about Lou and can sense her daydreaming a mile away. Lou nicknames her teacher the Shadow Phantom, after the stealthy character in her dad's comic books. Lou attempts to control her wandering mind but nevertheless ends up regularly visiting the principal's office. But trouble with her friends over her behavior as director of the school play and stress at home since her mother became pregnant with twins mean her level of distraction grows. Still, she is supported by a humorous, devoted father full of love for Lou just as she is. The book's text design and font were selected with accessibility for readers with dyslexia in mind, and the author shares her own struggles with ADHD in a note to readers. Lou reads as White, and there is some racial diversity in the supporting cast; unfortunately, these characterizations feel superficial, and Lou’s Chinese Canadian friend leans heavily into model minority stereotypes.

A strong neurodiverse protagonist nearly makes up for flatter secondary characters. (recipe, further information, resources) (Fiction. 8-12)
GOOD NIGHT, LITTLE BOOKSTORE
Cherrix, Amy
Illus. by E.B. Goodale
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-5362-1251-8

An independent bookstore closes for the evening.
At the Little Bookstore, on Little Street, a tiny customer reaches for a picture book, while another snuggles a large teddy bear. The door chimes, and the register rings. Visiting dogs, the bookstore cat, and a forgotten hat and pair of glasses all get wished a good night as readers get a peek behind the scenes at the work booksellers do to prepare for opening the next day. New titles in boxes to be put out for display, stacks of books that were perused and need to be reshelved, and bags of recycling all receive a good night, too, as the evening’s duties are completed and the door locked. One of the final spreads makes it clear it’s ‘good night’ not just to the Little Bookstore on Little Street, but to little bookstores all over the world as various stores are pictured with their names in different languages. The artwork has beautifully established details. From the titles of the many, many books showcased on shelves, in boxes, and in the hands of readers to the textured hair of the diverse characters throughout the story, there are little bits of nuanced representation that show that bookstores are for every person and every interest—though, with its basic rhyme structure, the book doesn’t build on its Goodnight Moon muse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A sweet but formulaic ode to indie bookstores. (Picture book. 4-8)

LIBRARY GIRL
How Nancy Pearl Became America’s Most Celebrated Librarian
Clark, Karen Henry
Illus. by Sheryl Murray
Little Bigfoot/Sasquatch (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-63217-318-8

Taking solace in books, a bullied child finds her confidence (and future career) at the public library.
Before rising to fame as a librarian, literary critic, and author, Nancy Pearl was a lonely kid who “loved reading more than recess.” While the school library offers a safe haven from teasing classmates, it isn’t open on the weekends; this prompts Nancy to make her first trip to the Detroit Public Library. Two friendly librarians welcome the shy, light-skinned girl and help her find the items she’s most interested in: books about horses. Nancy then visits the branch every weekend, reading through the librarians’ recommendations and building confidence. Eventually, the librarians convince Nancy to “give a talk about horse books” to her fellow students. Spurred on by their encouragement, the equine-loving reader leans on her imagination to calm her nerves and get through her presentation. The talk magically transforms her relationships with her peers, who go from belittling her love of reading to “[circling] around her with questions about books.” Nancy grows up to be a librarian, “because reading, Nancy knew, helped people find dreams of their own...with the turn of every page.” Gentle, slightly fuzzy illustrations depict Nancy’s journey. Hampered by a clunky narrative and unfortunate pacing, however, this title doesn’t stand out in the growing field of engaging biographies for children. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A rather lackluster tale about the joy of reading and libraries. (Author’s note, photographs) (Picture-book biography. 6-10)

IS THIS YOUR CLASS PET?
Cummings, Troy
Random House (40 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | June 28, 2022
978-0-593-43216-7
978-0-593-43217-4 PLB

Meet Arfy, a worker dog with a paw-pose.
Arfy’s “job” is helping students gain confidence as they read to the canine in the school library. One day, Arfy discovers a turtle inside their helper-dog-vest’s pocket. Arfy aims to track down the owners of the reptile, dubbed “Hidey.” To accomplish this goal, Arfy sends chatty emails and illustrated written queries (Arfy grips a pencil between their teeth to accomplish this), signed with paw prints, to various school personnel, including the principal, cafeteria staff, gym coach, and art teacher. They reply, also through electronic or written means, until the satisfying resolution is reached: Hidey’s owners are found—an event foreshadowed by sly references to a particular teacher. A fuzzy Zoom conference convenes, and Arfy sends Hidey a farewell note. This delightful epistolary tale will captivate readers with good-natured humor and references to tech devices. Other pluses include modeling how to write a letter: Communiques throughout contain examples of courteous written discourse as well as correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation (admittedly, more appealing to adults than youngsters). Additionally, various messages offer valuable pointers on the proper, safe handling of turtles. The illustrations are cheery and charming, as is Arfy’s wide-eyed expressiveness. School staff and students are racially diverse; one child uses a wheelchair. Note the comical illustrated twist at book’s end. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Got the message? Who wouldn’t love a school helper or pet like Arfy? (Websites on cat and dog adoption) (Picture book. 5-8)
THE NIGHTMARE BUG
Daecher, Hillary
Illus. by Angie Hohenadel
Schiffer (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 28, 2022
978-0-7643-6431-0

When the Nightmare Bug disrupts sweet dreams, Mama has a simple solution.

In this picture book in verse, Daecher sends a wailing child back to dreamland armed (so to speak) with a parental suggestion to find that nightmare bug and give it a good, loving...hug. A surreal chase (“The bug suddenly appears, and with him a crash, / as candy rains down on us like volcanic ash”) leads at last to “a big smooshy hug” that “makes the bug shrink smaller” and the rhyme scheme collapse likewise under the strain so that “the darkness of my dream glows brighter in color.” Still, black backgrounds do indeed brighten the colors of the plush toys, flowing blankets, hard candy, rainbow unicorns, and drowsily smiling sea creatures that accompany the tan-skinned sleeper through Hohenadel’s illustrations. A set of standard-issue parental tips and inane discussion questions (“Have you ever had the Nightmare Bug visit you in dreams? If so, have you ever thought about showing him love so he leaves your dreams?”) add a suitably dozy finish.

Soothing relief in a nightmare’s wake, though the strategy is simplistic and the narrative’s more a stumbler than a trotter.

(Picture book. 4-6)

THE MOST HAUNTED HOUSE IN AMERICA
Dapier, Jarrett
Illus. by Lee Gatlin
Abrams (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-4197-5246-9

Patriotic fare gets a scary vibe in this bouncy tale of “a Halloween din.”

Three little skeleton drummers receive an important invitation. They have been invited to play at the White House, aka the most haunted house in the nation, on Halloween. The three lose no time getting their act together, soon playing on the front lawn for a diverse group of dressed-up children and Barack Obama himself, with Michelle at his side! It’s only when they go inside that they encounter a roll call of all the spirits that haunt the home, from a giant cat to Abigail Adams to ghostly pets of all shapes and sizes. Though spirited (pun intended), occasionally the rhymes stumble a little in their scansion (“So come along, join us, as we make our way / to America’s capital, where we’ll play”). Readers may hardly care as Gatlin’s cheery skeletal crew (like a bonier version of Alvin and the Chipmunks) is full of verve. An author’s note lists the reported hauntings that have occurred at the White House (almost all of whom appear in the text and art throughout the book) and even mentions how Dapier himself dressed up like a skeleton at the Obamas’ first Halloween celebration.

(Picture book. 3-6)

TITAN KING
Dawkins, Tony
Rockport Publishers (224 pp.)
$13.99 paper | Aug. 2, 2022
978-0-7603-7687-4
Series: Titan King, 1

Kidnapped and forced to participate in an intergalactic tournament, a hotheaded Honduran teen must train and team up with a terrifyingly powerful beast to survive.

On a bus ride to military school after a skirmish with local cartel goons, Eli Santos finds himself in a whole new heap of
In medina’s debut novel, a middle schooler explores their identities and discovers the power of friendship

BY ROBERTO RODRIGUEZ

Middle school, for youth of marginalized communities, can be among the most harrowing of experiences, from the psychological wounds of bullying to the often bumpy and tangled roads toward self-discovery.

In their debut middle-grade novel, The One Who Loves You the Most (Levine Querido, May 31), medina reimagines what growing up queer, nonbinary, asexual, and adopted could look like with the support of steadfast friendships and mentorship from adults who reflect our own identities back to us. The novel’s protagonist, Gabriela, is a Honduran middle schooler adopted by a single White mother who yearns for friends that will accept them as they are. When two new students—Abbie, a trans intersex girl, and Héctor, who is bisexual and genderfluid—enroll in their school, Gabriela goes through a formative education in expanding their lexicon on LGBTQ+ identities and expressions and, for the first time, begins to see and express themself for who they authentically are. As medina says, “The characters came to me because they heard my call.”

The author spoke to us at length about their motivations for writing this novel and the urgency to publish work that reflects diverse and complex identities. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

In recent years, the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth have changed drastically and, seemingly, quickly. How would you say your experience as a middle schooler compares to Gabriela’s?

I was in middle school in the early 2000s in Maine, so there wasn’t discussion around LGBTQ+ issues. I’m not sure if that’s just where I grew up or the time, generationally. But I definitely have some commonalities with Gabriela in terms of their whole demeanor: their introverted nature, being cautious, a little reticent. But I also think that is compounded with all of their identities and the complexities of their identities and trying to figure out who they are and where they sit in the world.

I would attribute that to not feeling safe to be themselves. I spent most of my middle school experience in survival mode. I was bullied up until the time I met a new friend in seventh grade. I truly believe that having one true friend makes all the difference. She gave me permission to be myself. It was because of her love, attentiveness, and care for me that I felt safe. I could express all parts of me and begin to share with someone that I trusted (other than my mom) that I might be gay. That friendship unlocked something inside of me, and I was more free and authentic than I could have ever imagined I could be. That’s the power of being seen.

How about adult mentorship?

In middle school, I was really obsessed with writing, so my mentors and people I admired were my English teachers.

The theme of seeing and being seen, of representation, comes up often. Would you say the need to represent diverse forms of identity and gender expression drove the writing of this novel?

It is so validating when you see something or someone that reflects you. For me it’s about normalizing that people are queer, people identify in different ways. I wrote from a place of identifying with the main character. So I do identify as nonbinary trans demisexual lesbian. Most of what I write is rooted in the longing for connection, chosen family, friendship, and community.

What, if any, novels did you see yourself reflected in as a youth?

I wrote more about this in my We Need Diverse Books essay. The short answer is, I didn’t really see myself in books. I had to compartmentalize different aspects of myself, so I would read a book about race or a book about adoption or a book about disability, and then I had to reimagine what that would look like if that was the whole person.
Unlike many other novels, which privilege romantic relationships as the driving force of the plot, here Gabriela’s friendships are the force that occasion tremendous change. Was centering friendship an intentional decision? How did these characters come to you?

I do not know the longing for romantic relationships, but I am no stranger to wanting friends. All I ever wanted was a friend. When I began writing my book, I had originally only envisioned Abbie as a new friend because I knew I wanted to confront the complex feelings and questions around gender identity. And then Héctor appeared. And I began to realize that it was not only friendship that I was longing for, it was community. A place where no one is denied entry. A place where no one’s humanity is denied because everyone has the right to belong. Even Jonathan, who bullies Gabriela throughout the beginning of the novel, has redeemable qualities. Everybody does. An environment where someone is given a chance and seen for their best self can compel them to grow.

In my writing, the core of my fundamental values and beliefs are revealed. They’re all birthed out of an emotional unmet need. The unmet need in *The One Who Loves You the Most* is community. The heaviness of wanting desperately to be in community with people who love me with abandon has followed me like a dark cloud my entire life. I write contemporary children’s books, but to me, they often feel utopian or fantastical. I feel I am radically reimagining how life could be and should be. There’s love that flows in all directions. It’s a full and bountiful type of nonjudgmental love that offers understanding and pushes us to grow and do better in a way that is nurturing. This particular type of love was something I had never experienced. I was always on the outside, tiptoeing at the perimeters looking in and wondering what parts of myself I needed to bend, break, or contort in order to fit in. I would stand at the sidelines, unwilling to abandon any parts of myself to fit in, and so I’ve always been unsuccessful in finding a way in. The characters came to me because they heard my call.

Another of the novel’s central themes is duality. As Gabriela says, “Two cultures. Two separate sets of rules—rules I never felt I had access to.” This can be true for many first- or second-generation children, who must negotiate their inherited cultures while navigating a dominant White American culture that forces assimilation. Do you have any words of wisdom for young people caught in this double bind?

To be honest, I still struggle with the conundrum of being adopted. Like Gabriela, I also grieve my birth culture, birth family, and birth country. What made a difference as a transracial adoptee was going back to Honduras, finding community and longtime friendships with other adoptees. I would say follow whatever your heart is compelling you to do. Celebrate yourself. Align yourself with people and things that make you feel happy and whole.

The act of writing is a third theme that emerges again and again throughout the novel. Of Gabriela’s big English project, Mr. Shapiro says, “[The] story isn’t about knowing who you are, but about telling your story.” Is writing an act of liberation? Or perhaps one of reflection and self-discovery?

Writing is a self-reflective act and can be very transformative. Writing also empowers us to speak our truth. When we are being authentic and honest and are no longer silent, we have the capacity to build true friendships and community. Writing is not only an inward act; perhaps the most powerful act is outward. It’s action. Part of showing up and doing the work is speaking up. Speak up to make a change. Silence won’t set us free.

Roberto Rodriguez is a Poe-Faulkner Fellow in Fiction at the University of Virginia. *The One Who Loves You Most* was reviewed in the March 15, 2022, issue.

**the one who loves you the most**

medina
A gentle tribute to the power of nature to help regulate difficult feelings.

THE UGLY PLACE

Deal, Laura
Illus. by Emma Pedersen
Inhabit Media (28 pp.)
$17.95 | Sept. 6, 2022
978-1-77227-432-5

Wearing a red hoodie and a big frown, a child in a foul mood walks through miserable weather on their way to the ugly place.

The ugly place is where the protagonist goes when “things seem ugly and cloudy in my head and I feel a lot of feelings all at once.” The blues and grays of the accompanying landscapes feel wet and dreary, while inanimate objects look on frowning, their expressions echoing the child’s. The light brown–skinned child sloops through the rain and mud, leaving a mucky trail across the wet tundra, to the rocky coast where even the fish in the water frown back. When the child finally looks up, however, they notice the sea gulls overhead, the gentle lapping of waves, and the taste of dried salt on their lips. And just like that, a smile appears on the child’s face as well as on the creatures’ in the water. The rain stops, and nature is now welcoming in its beauty. Text and images work together deftly, using sensory descriptions to evoke both the miserable mood and its transformation. Though this transition from inner turmoil to outer peace comes a bit quickly, the meaning is nevertheless clear: Nature heals the heart. And this child knows it. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A gentle tribute to the power of nature to help regulate difficult feelings. (Picture book. 4-8)
A TASTE OF MAGIC
Elle, J.
Bloomsbury (304 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 30, 2022
978-1-5476-0671-9

A sixth grader discovers her magical abilities and must navigate her new world while holding on to what means the most.

Kyana Turner didn’t believe her mom when she said that she’ll get to learn the family secret now that she’s turned 12—not until her fingers sparked. Once Kyana learns that she’s a witch, life drastically changes, which means lying to her best friend, Nae. She begins attending Park Row Magick Academy, a secret school located at her hair salon, but normal life doesn’t stop, and Kyana juggles learning new spells and improving her math scores with keeping an eye on her Memaw, who has Alzheimer’s, to help ease Momma’s burdens. When financial pressures threaten to close her magic school, Kyana jumps into action by entering a baking contest that offers a $50,000 prize. However, her magic gets out of control as she’s baking, things go terribly wrong, and Kyana must work with unlikely allies and push past her fears if she wants to save her magical community. This fast-paced, heartfelt story deliciously blends realism with the whimsy of the mystical. Themes of inequity and self-worth are explored through Kyana’s narration as she rises to the additional responsibilities she receives, but they are balanced with sweet moments like time spent in the kitchen making Creole food with Memaw, who is from Louisiana. Kyana and the majority of the cast are Black.

A charming story of magic, love, and community. (Fantasy. 8-12)

TEEN INNOVATORS
Nine Young People Engineering a Better World With Creative Inventions
Estes, Fred
Zest Books (208 pp.)
$17.99 paper | Sept. 6, 2022
978-1-72841-721-9

An underwater robot, a test to detect lead in water, a talking glove...would you believe all of these inventions were created by teenagers?

Estes highlights young people who have made great innovations, often spurred by circumstances. Jack Andraka, who lost a close family friend to pancreatic cancer, developed a test to detect the disease quicker by identifying a key biomarker. Born in Malawi, where 80% of the population live on what they can grow themselves, William Kamkwamba (whose family had neither running water nor electricity) recognized that windmills would mean both power and wisdom for his village, so he built one himself out of scrap parts. Estes includes a wide range of subjects, from the undocumented teens from Mexico living in the United States who built underwater robots to an Indian American teen who invented a method to purify water after visiting India with her family and observing children drinking from puddles, and explores the difficulties they have faced such as economic challenges, the fear of deportation, and bullying. The teens share wise words—on the importance of working hard and being willing to experiment, for instance. A list of next steps along with a glossary and website list for further research make this guide useful as well as inspiring. Sidebars delve deeper into scientific topics. The rich variety of individuals and projects highlighted will encourage budding scientists.

A compelling read for teens interested in the STEM fields and an inspirational resource for science classrooms. (Nonfiction. 10-15)
The execution of some panels could have been better. In some backgrounds, characters seem oddly placed and limbs overlap. This makes for a harder reading experience. Though the protagonists’ race and ethnicity aren’t specified in the text, illustrations depict Asha as brown-skinned and Mary and Baz as light-skinned.

Spunky protagonists get a realistic look at a historical female scientist in an accessible series opener. (timeline of the U.S.–Soviet Union space race; information on Mary Sherman Morgan, Chris Hadfield, and the Soviet Union; resources on space) (Science fiction. 6-9)

A child has two grandmothers in two different countries. Nina, a little girl with short brown hair and light brown skin, lives in the United States, while her two grandmothers live elsewhere: Nana in the United Kingdom and Nenek in Malaysia. Through juxtaposed images split across spreads, Nina explores the differences between visiting Nenek and Nana. The background details of the illustrations include many cultural references to both the U.K. and Malaysia, while the text highlights major differences such as language (“Nana asks Nina for some help around the garden,” while “Nenek needs some help around the halaman too”) and common activities and games. The text is often split across the pages (one page focusing on Nana, the other on Nenek), which can make for a disjointed—though not too confusing—reading experience. Though life with each of her grandmothers is different, ultimately Nina finds love with both of them in this gentle tale. The illustrations are studded with homey details, and the warm tones add to the welcoming and cozy atmosphere. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A lovely story, grounded in visual details, about how identity can be uncomplicated. (Picture book. 4-7)

Slow and steady wins the day. Little Tortoise is thrilled about the first day of school. She’s anxious to be punctual, so she zips along as fast as she can. Might she arrive first? Kids will likely understand right away that tortoises aren’t fast, and the humorous, hyperbolic

Can you find who dealt it?

Readers who appreciate the sublime joy of seeking out Waldo but wish his oeuvre had included more toilet humor will find their wish granted—somewhat. The titular striped-shirt lead has nothing to do with this tale but instead has been replaced with a cast of flatulent friends and their equally noxious belongings. Across 13 double-page spreads, readers are tasked with hunting the six farters, including Flatulent Flamingo, Upwind Unicorn, and Nasty Narwhal—depicted on an introductory spread with green clouds emitting from their backsides—as well as odorous objects like a perfume bottle, a pile of trash, and a belching frog. On some spreads, the characters appear to be copy-and-paste additions from their initial introductions, while in other cases, the artist has redrawn the characters, altering their poses slightly. This makes for a harder challenge but also makes the book as a whole somewhat uneven. The execution of some panels could have been better. In some backgrounds, characters seem oddly placed and limbs overlap in unnatural ways. Quibbles aside, the book is a fair if somewhat mundane example of the seek-and-find genre, although readers who love potty humor may find it to be a gas. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Ho-hum but not a total stinker. (Picture book. 6-10)
SEAN MOSES IS

MARTIN LUTHER,
THE KING Jr.

Moses D. Powe
Illustrated by Angelina Valieva


“A boy gets to portray a hero in Powe’s picture-book introduction to several Black figures from U.S. history.”

“Powe presents a hopeful narrative in this cleverly structured book, which also includes portraits of such men as Frederick Douglass and President Barack Obama. Each biography includes an inspirational quote from the person described and discusses his greatest achievements.”

“A well-illustrated tale that’s also a great pick to expand libraries’ Black history sections.”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

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mail@mosespowe.com • mosespowe.com
narration clarifies from the outset that Little Tortoise’s “swiftness” is a product of her own wishful, overexaggerated thinking. Her ambition to be first is dashed quickly when, one by one, various other, genuinely fast animal schoolmates overtake her, leaving her less confident about her place in the school-arrival pecking order. She plods on nevertheless, hoping not to be last. When even Snail outpaces her (albeit on a scooter), Little Tortoise is glum. Then, a very special teacher, who fully empathizes with Little Tortoise’s leisureliness, solves a mutual problem and imparts wisdom. But wait—in a riotous ending, a most unexpected student arrives…late! Children will giggle at this funny story about persistence and trying to do one’s best; they’ll definitely root for Little Tortoise. The humor is amplified by swift pacing, abetted by brisk page turns and snappy, exclamatory sentences. Onomatopoeic words and words occasionally set in large capitals enhance the comedic effect. A plus: Kids may learn a bit about various speedy critters. The colorful illustrations exude liveliness; animal characters are very expressive, especially Little Tortoise, who’s an endearing, self-assured charmer. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Hurry to read this adorable, delightful twist on a very familiar tale. (Picture book. 4-7)

THE ILLUSTRATED ROBERT FROST
25 Essential Poems
Frost, Robert
Bushel & Peck Books (64 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-63819-106-3
Series: Illustrated Poets Collection, 2

Collage illustrations and sidebars accompany 25 of Frost’s most accessible poems.

Organized in three groups, the selections reflect Frost’s keenly observed walkabouts and rueful interrogations of youth and age. A convivial series introduction invites readers’ enjoyment: “There is NO wrong way to experience a poem.” Each sidebar contains three sections. “Engage” poses questions to help readers ponder poetic form and themes. “Imagine” suggests an activity for creative expression, and “Define” explains potentially unfamiliar words (bolded in each poem). The collaged mashups, composed of stock and public domain images, affix birds, flowers, and figures onto rich-hued but often banal landscapes that alternately evoke 19th-century European paintings and retrograde greeting cards. In all but one image, people appear to be light-skinned. Even where Frost specifically names species or describes scenes, generic, often misleading pastiches predominate—a sorely missed opportunity to extend and add visual nuance to the poems. “Hyla Brook” describes a dry June waterway “gone groping underground” with the Hyla frogs—a “brook to none but who remember long.” An image of a frothing, blue-and-white stream contradicts the poem’s subtle meaning. Notwithstanding the editorial openhandedness, an appended commentary provides didactic synopses and final suggestions for understanding each poem. A popular misconception of “The Road Not Taken” is thankfully corrected here, but for “Birches,” Frost’s meticulous imagery of a boy, a “swinger of birches,” is interpreted as “children on swings” in a complete misreading of the poem.

Could have been wonderful; isn’t. (Biographical facts, bibliography) (Poetry. 8-11)

CRIMSON TWILL
Witch in the City
George, Kallie
Illus. by Birgitta Sif
Candlewick (64 pp.)
$14.99 | July 12, 2022
978-1-5362-1463-5

A quirky witch puts her own spin on witchery.

Unlike “typical” witches, Crimson Twill is giggly, cheerful, and colorful. She can’t wait to travel from rural Cackle County and spend her hard-earned money at Broomingdale’s in New Wart City. In search of a cat, Crimson manages to find a lost puppy, whom she promptly rescues from the disapproving saleswitch. On a floor filled with endless pointy witch hats, she finds the only hat she likes, one with an enormous bow—but also finds fellow young witchling Mauve, who has been saving up specifically for it. Crimson opts to be nice instead of wicked. Mauve overheard a boy who said he lost his puppy, so the duo set out to reunite boy and dog. But the puppy gets loose at a fashion show, and Crimson’s pursuit lands her on the runway. Mauve saves the day by applauding Crimson’s “fashion statement”—and the suggestible crowd, which previously ridiculed Crimson’s norm-breaking stylings, follows suit. Instead of buying anything, Crimson acquires something more valuable than gold—friends. The narration’s great humor throughout—featuring puns and wordplay—doesn’t undermine the earnest, wholesome sincerity of Crimson as she navigates the world on her own bighearted terms. Grayscale full-page and spot illustrations—with smeary shading and sharp linework (especially in pointy witch noses)—depict Crimson as pale and Mauve as dark-skinned and show diversity in background witches.

A bewitching series opener. (Fantasy. 7-10)
WHO WAS A DARING PIONEER OF THE SKIES?

Amelia Earhart
Gillman, Melanie
Illus. by A.C. Esguerra
Penguin Workshop (64 pp.)
$12.99 | $7.99 paper | Aug. 16, 2022
978-0-593-22466-3
978-0-593-22465-6 paper
Series: Who HQ Graphic Novels

Fasten your seat belt and prepare to join Amelia Earhart as she attempts to set one last record—flying around the world at the equator.

This book’s preflight briefing includes an introduction to aviation history, Earhart’s course in the male-dominated skies, and her reasons for a globe-circling flight at the equator. Dramatic black-and-white comic illustrations and journal-style entries based on Earhart’s notes and letters, as well as periodic pagelong sections in prose about Earhart’s crew, plane, and radio direction finder, transform her last flight into a compelling and tense drama. Too many fundraising schemes, too little preparation, and the extra weight of promotional items hint at doom. During the journey, delays, loss of crew members, and difficulty spotting small jungle runways foreshadow disaster ahead. The leg to Howland, a tiny island in the middle of the Pacific, was the hardest part of the journey. Almost hourly log entries track communications from USCGC Itasca waiting near Howland as it struggles, and fails, to make contact with Earhart. Numerous panels focus on the intense media coverage following Earhart’s disappearance and reactions from women from various walks of life, but this story ends on a positive note with excerpts from Earhart’s last letter from the day she set out for Howland about the joy of flying through stormy weather and knowing that if she can “tilt my plane up,” she will “emerge into sunlight.”

A suspenseful, well-researched story that captures the drama of Earhart’s life and last flight. (timeline, bibliography) (Graphic nonfiction. 8-12)

ALICE AUSTEN LIVED HERE
Gino, Alex
Scholastic (176 pp.)
$17.99 | April 5, 2022
978-1-338-73389-1

Middle schoolers Sam and TJ discover queer history on Staten Island.

Sam, who has pale skin and dirty-blonde hair, and their best friend TJ, who has dark hair and tan skin, have to research a historical Staten Island figure for their boring, supertraditional history teacher. If they get the highest grade in the class, their report will be entered in a boroughwide contest to design a new statue for Staten Island Borough Hall. With help from some adult queer mentors, Sam discovers Alice Austen, a famous local photographer, lesbian, and, most exciting of all, former resident of Sam’s exact apartment. Even when another project gets the highest grade, Sam, TJ, and their queer family are not ready to give up on Alice Austen. The main character and their best friend are both nonbinary, and though it is mentioned that some people don’t understand this, they are supported by the important people in their lives. In fact, when talking to their older lesbian neighbor, they are shocked to learn how difficult life was for queer people in the past. Featuring relatable characters and an accessible plot, this book makes it clear that queer people have always existed and that they can be anywhere and any age. It also highlights the importance of queer history and intergenerational communication, though at times the writing can be clunky and overly earnest instead of letting the characters’ experiences speak for themselves.

Though somewhat didactic, this is an entertaining story stuffed with important lessons. (author’s note, photographs by Alice Austen) (Realistic fiction. 8-12)
Basic principles for distinguishing facts from alternate facts.

Gravel may insist that “fake news is not funny at all,” but with the best will in the world she can’t keep a straight face for long—and readers certainly won’t either. Relying on made-up examples, Gravel explores how a doctored photo can spark widespread fears of scorpions-swarming-out-of-toilets, clickbait headlines like “Governor Marries a Turtle” can raise ad revenues for a website or spread the conviction that underwear is dangerous, and a politician’s claim that an opponent pinches puppies can gain more traction through repetition than any denials, no matter how heated. Her cartoon illustrations of googly-eyed jelly beans looking panicked or greasily confident as they spread mis- or disinformation heard on “Wolf News” don’t exactly underscore the seriousness of the topic either. Still, even though in pitting reason against human nature she’s taken on a tall order, her insights into how fake news are fueled by a combination of fear and confirmation bias but can be countered by common sense and by careful evaluation of actual sources are spot-on. And, had she chosen to use real-world examples, at least half of her potential audience (or at least the adult voters) would have shrugged her off as just another liberal whiner. Beneath the goofiness, an earnest call for logic and better judgement. (Graphic nonfiction. 7-10)

A talented high school quarterback weighs gridiron glory against the scary possibility of permanent brain damage. Greenwald lays out a scenario—set a few years later at the same school as in Game Changer (2018)—that will give anyone whose world revolves around stripping on shoulder pads and getting into the huddle second thoughts. As he leads the Walthorne Wildcats through an undefeated season, freshman quarterback Caleb Springer shows every sign of being well on the way to following his father’s footsteps into the NFL...except that ominous symptoms follow every hard hit he takes to the head, and as the season wears on, he also sees his strong, confident dad exhibiting ever more erratic behavior, uncharacteristic bursts of anger, and serious signs of memory loss. Will Caleb’s love of the game, combined with the high expectations of his father, teammates, coaches, and fellow students, spur him to carry on despite determined opposition from his tough-minded new girlfriend, Nina Rojas, and even after his dad, forced at last to see a neurologist, gets a diagnosis of early-onset dementia? Along with a list of resources at the end, the author folds frightening scenarios with an injured teammate and another ex-NFL player into the story as he takes his confused protagonist through the championship game to a decision that may be smart even if just possibly too late. The cast mainly presents White.

A survival story with some guardrails still in place. (Adventure. 9-13)

Stranded on a deserted island, a 13-year-old struggles to survive while her cousin refuses to give up hope that she’s alive. Coral and Isa Bituin-Rousseau may be cousins, but they’re as close as siblings: Their Filipina mothers are sisters who married brothers, the girls’ White American fathers. They grew up together in Pebble Island, New York, eating lobster Isa’s father caught and their mothers’ Filipino cooking. The two are rarely apart except when Coral and her parents go on one of their journeys to see the world. Following an earthquake and tidal wave while they are sailing through the Indonesian archipelago, Coral is thrown overboard and stranded on an uninhabited island. With the help of survival skills learned from her father and mysterious gifts of freshly killed small game, Coral keeps herself alive. But how long will it be before rescue comes? Isa, meanwhile, is left alone on Pebble Island, with parents who seem willing to abandon hope and a newly introduced cousin who Isa can’t help but feel is meant to replace Coral. Partly a survival story and partly an exploration of coping with grief, heavy topics are touched upon with a soft hand. Coral’s struggles and triumphs offer an introduction to the wilderness adventure genre, but more experienced readers may find her a little too lucky. Isa’s story serves as a nice counterpart to Coral’s, as she struggles with moving on and forming new relationships.

A cogent cautionary tale showing football at its most violent and joyless. (Author’s note) (Sports fiction. 10-14)
A TANGLE OF SPELLS
Harrison, Michelle
Clarion/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-0-358-68233-2
Series: A Pinch of Magic, 3

In this third series entry, Betty Widdershins and her sisters move to a peculiar village shrouded in witchcraft.

As 7-year-old Charlie, 13-year-old Betty, and 17-year-old Fliss move with Father and Granny from Crowstone to Pendlewick, they are filled with hope only to find their dilapidated new home, Blackbird Cottage, resembles a witch’s house. Warned to not talk about magic, they nevertheless keep encountering stories of witches in Pendlewick. A secret room in their cottage reveals the portrait and diary of Ivy, a girl who lived there but vanished two years ago after weird happenings made it appear she was a witch. After Miss Webb, a suspicious old woman, seems to curse her, Fliss begins to act dazed and bewitched. Suspecting that what happened to Ivy may now be happening to Fliss, Betty and Charlie spy on Miss Webb and are shocked to discover that there may be more to her story than they realized. Meanwhile, other elements in Pendlewick surreptitiously pursue Fliss for their own nefarious purposes while duping the villagers. Aided by Charlie, Betty must rely on her wits and a pinch of her own magic to untangle an insidious web of spells, leading them through treacherous Tick Tock Forest and back to Crowstone as they try to save their sister. Bizarre occurrences, unexpected revelations, and the overall dark, brooding atmosphere of isolation, suspense, and duplicity effectively reinforce the dominant witchcraft theme. Main characters read as White.

Another intriguing, memorable adventure. (Fantasy. 8-12)

TOOFER & THE GIBLET
By Author Paulette LeBlanc & illustrator Dmitry Morozov

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ISBN 979-8-9851507-0-4
At truck stops, and sleeping in the cab of their truck, all over the country, hauling all kinds of cargo, overnighting and garden—Hautala realistically explores tough issues. Persistence and Levi's condition is deteriorating. When Persephone discovers that Levi had intended to submit their former mining town in Wisconsin to Small Town Revival, a reality show that awards $100,000 to the contestant who transforms their town most dramatically, she realizes that the prize could buy Levi expensive advanced treatments as well as pay existing bills. Forgiving Levi's signature, she submits his application, setting off a chain of secrets and lies that threatens to ruin everything. Despite quiet magical touches—an uncannily communicative cat; an eccentric woman tending her temperamental, sentient house and garden—Hautala realistically explores tough issues. Persephone's grief and trauma are unflinchingly portrayed, as are her strained relationships with her equally wounded but staunchly supportive family and friends. Persephone's inadvertent exploitation of Levi, who cannot consent, which is born out of her desperation to help, is gently but firmly countered by her parents' respect for his dignity. Occasionally lyrical prose enhances the alternately cozy and stifling small-town atmosphere. Most characters, including Persephone, default to White. Hazel's grief and trauma are unflinchingly portrayed, as are her strained relationships with her equally wounded but staunchly supportive family and friends. Persephone's inadvertent exploitation of Levi, who cannot consent, which is born out of her desperation to help, is gently but firmly countered by her parents' respect for his dignity. Occasionally lyrical prose enhances the alternately cozy and stifling small-town atmosphere. Most characters, including Persephone, default to White.

A compassionate, thought-provoking take on family, friendship, grief, and renewal. (author's note) (Fabulism. 10-14)

Half half-lumberjack and half vampire, Lumberjackula must figure out where he belongs. Lumberjackula, Jack for short, is a cute, blue-skinned 1/2-year-old boy with the pointy ears and fangs of a vampire and the bushy beard of a lumberjack. It is time for Jack to decide whether to follow in his burly mother's footsteps and attend lumberjack school or attend vampire school like his spooky father. While he has talents in both areas, Jack's real passion is dance. There are several spreads that showcase Jack's adorable dance moves, which he breaks out especially when processing emotions. He really wants to attend Tip Tap Twinkle Toes Dance Academy, but he is afraid to tell his parents. While Jack worries about what his parents think, it's clear to readers that they will never be anything less than supportive. This keeps the stakes low and makes for a predictable read, even for the intended age group. Despite this lack of tension or anticipation, the premise, endearing cartoon art, whimsical worldbuilding, and characters are charming enough to carry readers to the end. The moral is a step above the obvious "be who you are": a more nuanced "be everything you are."

A low-stakes plot balanced by lovable characters and setting. (Graphic novel. 7-11)
Gray days can be just as much fun. Granny and Bean are out for the day, and although the weather is gray and a little dreary, they’re not going to let that stop them. Bundled in raincoats, warm hats, and galoshes, the pair make their way along the beach, enjoying their time together. Told in rhyming verse, the story is a quiet study of life by the sea. The illustrations, which rely on grays, browns, and tans, perfectly capture the chill and damp of a blustery day. With Granny’s yellow coat and Bean’s blue coat and red pants combination, the two stand out in sharp contrast to the seaside, making the story appropriate for large storytimes and classroom reads. Lap readers will appreciate Bean’s facial expressions and body language as the pair dodge the cresting waves, run along fences, make sand castles, greet friendly dogs, and enjoy cupcakes and a banana. Librarians and educators will appreciate that the book provides a gentle counterpoint to the plethora of “sunny days at the beach” books, and caregivers, especially those living near the sea, will find the message that a gray day can be full of activities useful. The few characters who appear are all light-skinned. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Perfectly captures the mood of the day. (Picture book. 4-6)

The arrival of a new girl creates drama at a riding stable. Drama is the last thing Victoria needs: She arrives at Edgewood Stables from rival Waverly Stables following a blowup with former best friend Taylor that leaves her shaken. Taylor has her own horse and takes riding and showing very seriously. Victoria is a good rider, but she understands that her accountant mom will never be able to buy her a horse, and she wants to have time for other things, like watching her favorite science-fiction show, Beyond the Galaxy. Despite a rocky start at Edgewood, she develops friendships with the other middle schoolers in the barn: uber-extrovert Norrie, quiet Hazel, and Sam, who is the only boy. Her new friends are not only Beyond the Galaxy fans, they also help her regain her own confidence in herself and around horses. The story is told from both Victoria’s and Norrie’s points of view, with flashbacks to Victoria’s friendship with Taylor. The emotional arc is realistic and finely developed, with the underlying message, emphasized by illustrations depicting riders with a broad range of skin tones and body types, that there are many ways to be a rider. Norrie is cued as South Asian; Sam reads as Black, and the other main characters appear White. The horses are well done, too. The clean, jewel-toned artwork is especially strong at portraying emotions through facial expressions and body language.

Combines sensitive character exploration with horses: a blue-ribbon winner. (Graphic fiction. 9-14)

“Corey’s picture book offers a fable about growing up as an adopted child.”

“...Corey acknowledges adoptive children’s feelings of loss and disconnection from their origins…”

“A reassuring, beautifully illustrated book with empathy for adopted kids.”

—Kirkus Reviews
A genuine and authentic memoir from an award-winning journalist and activist.

ONCE I WAS YOU—ADAPTED FOR YOUNG READERS
Finding My Voice and Passing the Mic
Hinojosa, Maria
Simon & Schuster (272 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 30, 2022
978-1-66590-280-9

A genuine and authentic memoir from an award-winning journalist and activist.

Before it became one of the largest cities in the world, Mexico City was Hinojosa’s hometown. She was born in 1961, and even though her family immigrated to the U.S. only a year later, she paints a vivid and affectionate picture of the place, from the sensory overload of mercados filled with colorful produce to the experience of Catholic guilt and a deep sense of community. After her professor father was recruited by the University of Chicago, though, Hinojosa’s story takes a turn, as they encounter racism and xenophobia. Threading her own personal history with accounts of the treatment of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, the author gives readers a clear picture of Latin American experiences in the U.S. The book effortlessly weaves Spanish into the narrative, utilizing Spanish for terms that are loaded with cultural meaning. The narrative voice is grounded and engaging, even when the subjects discussed are upsetting and revolting, and there is a richness to the book’s uplifting nature, even in its darkest moments. Hinojosa delves into questions of mental health, identity, representation, sexism, elitism, imposter syndrome, and finding her way in the highest echelons of U.S. education and media. This powerful adaptation of the highly acclaimed 2021 original for adults is as relatable as the title suggests and will empower readers who see their lives reflected in it.

A timely and important story skillfully adapted for young people. (Memoir. 10-14)

DUCK’S BACKYARD
Hub, Ulrich
Illus. by Jörg Mühle
Trans. by Helena Kirkby
Gecko Press (88 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 6, 2022
978-1-77657-473-5

A lonely duck with a “wonky leg” longs for a friend but hesitates to venture into the world.

One day, a self-centered, blind chicken wanders into the duck’s backyard and quickly decides the duck will support her on an adventure to the “place where all our secret wishes come true.” They progress in fits and starts. Sometimes the chicken leads; sometimes the duck is the brave one. Together, they conquer a scary black forest, cross a ravine on a narrow plank, and climb the highest mountain in the world—or do they? In a final test of their friendship, the chicken stumbles on a secret that casts the adventure and their friendship in a totally new light. This deceptively simple book’s philosophical tone and sophisticated vocabulary make it ideal for older, practiced, and thoughtful readers or listeners (it makes for a solid read-aloud, too). Brief lines of orange text signal transitions and possible chapter breaks. Illustrations, all bold and abstract, are spare but are both strategic and impressive, anchoring the pair’s emotional journey and clarifying the shifting leadership roles. Images of gnarly black trees, a brilliantly blue mountaintop followed by white pages (all that is visible amid the mountaintop clouds), and a canyon in earthen colors and wild brush strokes add welcome bursts of visual drama.

A simple story for philosophical listeners, who will ponder the opening statement: “The goal is in the way.” (Fiction. 8-12)

RAVENFALL
Josephson, Kalyn
Delacorte (256 pp.)
978-0-593-48359-6 PLB
978-0-593-48358-9
Series: Ravenfall, 1

Two lonely young people team up to fight an ancient evil.

Anna, 13 and the youngest child in a Jewish and Irish family that is psychically endowed, is dismayed about her own gift of psychometry. For Anna, touching someone who has experienced another’s death gives her a vision of that death; it’s hard for her to understand how that could be useful. Her family runs Ravenfall, an inn in the magical town of Wick, Oregon, “where magic is never far from your fingertips” and the veil between the Otherworld and our own is somewhat permeable. As the family anticipates their annual celebration of Samhain, 14-year-old Colin arrives, seeking refuge after his parents’ murders. Colin has known little about his own magical powers but discovers that his Irish ancestor Fin
Varra, one of the faerie folk also known as the King of the Dead, plans to use him to reclaim a place among the living. The first-person narrative switches between Anna’s and Colin’s perspectives. Both kids are home-schooled and isolated, Colin as his family fled mysterious pursuers and Anna as she struggles with a cat. Magical traditions, creatures, and objects abound in this intriguing setting, offering possibilities for sequels. A pitched climactic battle provides the young heroes with a swift if somewhat predictable victory over the dark forces.

Largely spellbinding. (Fantasy. 9-14)

SKATER CIELO
Katstaller, Rachel
Orchard/Scholastic (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-338-75111-6

Following a brutal tumble, a rad little skater rediscovers the courage to pick up the board again with the help of her friends.

Cielo loves to skate all over town, devoting her time to zipping around with “a steezy push and a good pop.” Conquering sidewalks via ollies and breezing down streets in fast downhill rides, the fearless brown-skinned girl zips across town, her own playground. When a new skate park with deep pools opens, Cielo finds a new obstacle to overcome: The Whale, aka the biggest, highest pool at the park. The fateful day arrives, and Cielo hangs over the rim, ready to skate down The Whale. Bam! Instead, she stumbles, falling flat. Shaken and frustrated, Cielo reattempts The Whale. Will Cielo fly again? An overall exceptional depiction of Cielo’s flights and tumbles. Above all, this book was reviewed digitally.

Like a steezy gem. (Picture book. 4-8)

A FRIEND FOR GHOST
Kaufman, Suzanne
Neal Porter/Holiday House (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 23, 2022
978-0-8234-4852-4

Rain is falling on a row of old-fashioned-looking houses as a ghost wearing glasses stares out an attic window. Hanging out in the park, unseen, Ghost remains woeful—no one ever seems to know Ghost is there. A big red balloon—on whom Ghost draws a smiling face—floats by, joining Ghost on the seasaw and for a refreshing serving of ice cream. The two are seemingly compatible, but, alas, the balloon floats away. Ghost searches everywhere, to no avail. When the balloon finally returns to the park and a despondent Ghost, the true intent of its unseen mission becomes happily clear. The balloon has brought back the perfect ghostly companion for Ghost, this one sporting a bow tie. Fluid illustrations bring to life—so to speak—the amorphous main characters, washes of color heightening the emotion. The children playing in the park have a range of skin tones; one child uses a wheelchair, and one wears a hijab. The tale offers plenty of opportunities to spark discussions about friendship and compatibility. Is it their similar appearance that draws the ghosts to each other? Children will enjoy seeing ghosts behaving as nonthreatening, fun-seeking, and peoplelike. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

In this delightful tale, kindred spirits find happiness together. (Picture book. 3-6)

ADVENTURES FOR BREAKFAST
Keegan, Anastasia
POW! (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-64823-004-2

An improbable adventure helps pajama-clad siblings Luna and Milo avoid eating the oatmeal that their grandmother serves every morning. They leave a polite letter that explains that they can’t come to the breakfast table because a terrible flood swept them out to sea. They landed in a jungle, traveled through underground tunnels, flew in a hot air balloon, ended up in a desert, and floated down a river. After they hid in a bear’s belly, the bear spat them into outer space, where they befriended a dragon. The children’s toys—seen grouped around the table early on—become props in their rich imaginings. In case we miss what an amazing adventure this is, almost every sentence ends with an exclamation point. Emotions—horror, fear, and excitement—show clearly on the children’s faces, and the story is heavy on humor and exaggeration. Even the cartoon faces on the planets register alarm when the bear “spat us out into outer space! But we were not scared at all!” Some of the language is somewhat stilted (“They, however, prefer for every day to start with an adventure. And so they thought up a solution”). In other places, the language is rich and evocative: “The sun almost cooked us like bacon and scorpions hunted our legs!” Bursting with movement, the playful pictures expand the story with details not mentioned in the text. Both children are light-skinned. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Not likely to sell much oatmeal but certain to make young kids laugh. (Picture book. 4-7)
WAKE ME UP IN 20 COCONUTS!

Keller, Laurie
Christy Ottaviano Books (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 20, 2022
978-0-316-31196-0

A romp about saying “I don’t know.” An apartment building full of cartoonlike creatures shown interacting through their windows (a clever illustrative decision) evokes the lively life of urban living. When one neighbor asks another (via the window) to wake them up in “20 coconuts,” the neighbor agrees but then admits to himself that he doesn’t know what that means—something that bothers him because he is known for being a know-it-all; in fact, he comes from a family of know-it-alls. Ah, pressure! The know-it-all gets himself into a tizzy, cleans his ears and finds a sock and a chicken, consults “Phoney” (his cellphone), and even gets his brain washed by Wally’s Wash Works. If this all sounds extremely silly and somewhat chaotic, it is—which means kids will probably love it. Eventually, he wakes up his neighbor with his yelling (right on time, apparently) but admits to her he doesn’t know what 20 coconuts means. She offers to explain, but then he says he has to be somewhere in “11 bananas,” throwing her into confusion. The energetic (some may say frenzied) tone is amplified by illustrations that have lots going on, with various characters talking in dialogue bubbles to each other, but the message itself comes across as a little light until an explanatory note from the “brains” spells it out—it’s OK to say you don’t know. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A worthy message wrapped up in a playful romp. (Picture book: 3-7)

SOME BODIES

Kennen, Sophie
Illus. by Airin O’Callaghan
Sleeping Bear Press (32 pp.)
$17.99 | July 15, 2022
978-1-53411-141-7

“All bodies are good—/ that’s important to know. / And yours is good too, / however you grow!”

This theme carries throughout this rhyming picture book that shows off people’s bodies in all their forms. Depicted are people who use prosthetics or wheelchairs, who have different skin tones (people with vitiligo are included, too), who wear head scarves, who use cochlear implants, who have tattoos and surgical scars (possibly indicating gender-affirmation surgery), and more. The book ends with a note to parents, caregivers, and teachers about the importance of talking about how people’s bodies look and function differently and sample questions from children (e.g., “Why is that man fat?”) and neutral, body-positive answers. This book definitely practices what it preaches. O’Callaghan’s illustrations represent body diversity and include people of various skin tones, shapes, sizes, and abilities. With warm colors and varied settings, the art is inviting and engaging. Kennen’s text offers no judgment, just simple descriptions with the mantra that “all bodies are good.” There is even additional discussion about people making some choices about how their bodies look (letting skin show, getting tattoos, wearing a wig). (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An important, affirming conversation starter about respecting—and celebrating—diverse bodies. (Picture book: 4-7)

THE MIDNIGHT ORCHESTRA

Khoury, Jessica
Illus. by Federica Frenna
Clarion/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$16.99 | June 14, 2022
978-0-358-61291-9
Series: Mystwick School, 2

Amelia Jones isn’t a typical seventh grader.

She attends a boarding school dedicated to the mastery of Musicraft, a type of magic conjured by playing musical instruments. On top of that, she’s the only student with the ability to Compose, that is, create new spells, an unusual skill she has recently discovered. This sequel to 2020’s The Mystwick School of Musicraft picks up just a week after the harrowing events of the previous novel. Now, the interscholastic Orphean Trials are fast approaching, and default White Amelia joins the team along with her best friend, Jai Kapoor, who is cued as South Asian, and new pal Darby Bradshaw, who has some Japanese heritage. Amelia must use her fledgling Composer abilities to write an original spell and lead the Mystwick team to victory. The pressure to compose a masterpiece for the competition mounts, and Amelia doubts that she has what it takes to write a winning spell. Meanwhile, strange invitations to something called the Midnight Orchestra begin to appear in unexpected places, which soon leads Amelia and her friends into the shadowy web of a mysterious composer who is seeking black spells. Amelia will need to draw on all her strength to save her classmates from this malevolence. Vividly descriptive language and characters readers will root for make this a strong second installment.

A well-orchestrated fantasy that will have readers asking for an encore. (Fantasy: 9-13)

FINDING FIRE

Kline, Logan S.
Candlewick (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 6, 2022
978-1-5362-1302-7

“Long before the secrets of fire / had been discovered, people had to find fire. / And if they lost it… / if it went out… / someone would need to search for more.”
“An appealing tale of fortitude with just the right amounts of spookiness, playfulness, and heart.”

LILY AND THE NIGHT CREATURES

When alternate versions of her parents invade her home, a young English girl must find the strength to vanquish the demons.

Lily wishes things were how they used to be—before she got sick and before her mum got pregnant. When The Baby’s arrival is imminent, Lily is dropped off at Granny’s house. Missing the cuddly toy whale she sleeps with, Lily sneaks out at night and walks around the village toward home. There, she finds her mum and dad—but quickly realizes they aren’t her actual parents. They are cruel parent-things with strange eyes like lumps of coal, and they tell her this is no longer her house. Outside, Lily meets talking animals: Crow, Mouse, Mole, and Snake. Over the course of the night, they help her try to reclaim her home. Lily ultimately learns to accept her chronic illness and become a loving big sister. This story beautifully blends horror elements with animal fantasy and realistic issues. The replacement parents are creepy and reminiscent of those in Neil Gaiman’s Coraline, but there is plenty to differentiate the tales. The animals add humor and levity to the adventure, while Lily is believably frustrated with her sickness and scared that The Baby is taking over her place in the family. Gravett’s illustrations add to the magic and whimsy; they are particularly striking when showcasing the animals’ expressive features. Main characters read as White.

An appealing tale of fortitude with just the right amounts of spookiness, playfulness, and heart. (Fantasy. 9-12)

LIMIPING through the changing scenery on an injured foot, the child encounters and teams up with a similarly imperiled mastodon calf. Luck strikes, and they succeed in finding fire. A long, treacherous journey back to the cave causes an argument about who, presumably, will be the one to bring back more fire. A red-haired, light-skinned child volunteers and sets off on a quest. Rugged, sparse mountains and outcroppings, white-capped rivers, weather, and saber-toothed predators all present varied challenges for the child in the lush, earth-toned illustrations, rendered in graphite, ink, oil paint, and digital techniques. Limping through the changing scenery on an injured foot, the child encounters and teams up with a similarly imperiled mastodon calf. Luck strikes, and they succeed in finding fire. A long, treacherous journey back to the cave ends on a high note, with the entire community—now including one mastodon companion—warm and dry around a roaring hearth. This is a simple but heartwarming story told through a well-balanced variety of panels and full double spreads.

This book was reviewed digitally.

A simple and fun story that beckons kids to imagine. (Picture book. 3-7)

MILA AND HER FRIENDS

A simple and fun story that beckons kids to imagine. (Picture book. 4-8)

A great day of monster play!

Mila, who splits her time between her mom’s and her dad’s houses, asks if her friends Sam and Liza can play at her dad’s house after school. Once Sam’s and Liza’s parents agree, Daddy picks all three of them up, dubs them “little monsters,” then carries the monster theme throughout the afternoon. Daddy cooks monster pancakes with strawberry jam and provides glittery hair gel for making “monster hair” (which Daddy also uses), and then they all dress up like monsters. When the mommies return, four monsters and Mila’s exuberant dog greet them at the door. Simple and utterly cheerful, the story offers a positive representation of a single-parent household, with a dad who is fully engaged in his child’s life and completely invested in participating in her fantasy life. Nijis’ illustrations, similar to the Canadian Caillou books and TV series, feature vibrant colors and simple backgrounds. While the adults look distinct from one another, the children’s simple facial features are so similar that complexion is their primary distinguishing feature. Mila and her father are Black, Liza and her mother are light-skinned, and Sam and his mother are brown-skinned; Sam’s mother wears a headscarf. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A simple and fun story that beckons kids to imagine. (Picture book 3-7)

Up close and personal with the world’s largest penguin.

Emperors, according to marine biologist LaRue, and Adelie penguins are the only ones of the clan’s 18 species that actually live in Antarctica. Emperors can dive deeper than any other bird, sport 12 different kinds of feathers, and may not be able to fly but are fine swimmers and even “pretty good climbers.” These and like juicy info-bits are scattered on pages festooned with images of adult and hatchling penguins enhanced with maps, portraits of the creatures’ prey and predators (some killer whales are “partial to a penguin,” the author writes), current and extinct relatives, required clothing and gear for Antarctic
“Entertaining reassurance and lighthearted encouragement for those tough first moments of putting pencil to paper.”

**BRAINSTORM**

Lee, Sophia N.  
*Holding On*  
Lee, Sophia N.  
*Brainstorm*  

As a grandmother slowly loses her memory, her grandchild learns to connect through song.

The narrator loves spending summers at Lola’s house. The sounds of Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, and Filipino singers Nora Aunor and Basil Valdez fill the house while Lola and the child dance and sing together. “If you want to hold on, you gotta sing your songs,” Lola always says as she embraces the narrator. “Holding on” means remembering—Lola holds on to the child’s long-outgrown items, like a baby bottle or pajamas, and makes something beautiful out of them. Lola also shares her stories of how she met Lolo and how the grandmother’s memory does. This is a moving story of the bond between a grandmother and a grandchild—a bond that won’t fade even as responsibilities swirl around. The pages grow dark as in a big storm: “Huge ideas flowing fast!” And finally, after some joyful splashing in puddles of words, the sun appears, and a rainbow arches over a “flood of possibility.” The metaphor nicely captures the creative process—from the frustration of waiting for inspiration to the anticipation of something gathering in the distance to the sought-after deluge of ideas. A page of writing prompts and a glossary of writing terms follow. Pair this with Andrew Larson’s *A Squiggly Story* (2016), illustrated by Mike Lowery, or Peter H. Reynolds’ *The Word Collector* (2018) to stoke creative fires. *(This book was reviewed digitally)*

Entertaining reassurance and lighthearted encouragement for those tough first moments of putting pencil to paper. *(Picture book. 6-8)*

**A WORLD OF PRAISE**

Lock, Deborah  
*World of Praise*  
Lock pens a hymn of praise in thanks-giving for all the Lord has provided.

From the morning breeze to the harvest that feeds us, our homes to our friends, Lock lists the many things we have to be thankful for, also sprinkling in the responsibilities that come with those gifts: “We thank you for the countryside—/ help us to care for plants and animals.” “May we share your riches with one another.” And she asks for further blessings of peace, safety, and joy and offers recognition of God’s presence in everything around us. The verses vary widely in terms of accessibility, lyricism, and stiltedness: “Oh, the sway of the ripening wheat!”, “With friends, with family, / you shine love within.” Paradoxically, this last is illustrated by boxing bun-nies. Verses from Psalms start and end the book. Cann’s water-color, collage, and colored pencil art is the real star, combining naturalistic flora and fauna in spot and double-page-spread illustrations each country/region highlighted. For Greenland, readers see a seaside community of houses connected by paths through deep snow from the viewpoint of geese flying overhead, while Japan’s illustration includes a ginkgo tree, a pagoda, and an arched bridge. From the first spread of a sunrise to the closing one of a tan-skinned child asleep, the illustrations subtly move through both a full day and the seasons of the year. *(This book was reviewed digitally)*

Stellar illustrations uplift this thankfulness prayer. *(thumbnails of countries represented)* *(Religious picture book. 5-9)*
CITY OF SPEED
London, Alex
Scholastic (272 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-338-71657-3
Series: Battle Dragons, 2

When cyborg dragons threaten Dra-kopolis, dragon racer Abel must find a way to save both it and them.

As in the series opener, it’s cops vs. criminal gangs both in the sprawling, corrupt city and in 13-year-old Abel’s family, where his older brother, Silas, works for the Dragon’s Eye secret police and his big sister, Lina, is a fugitive member of the politically subversive Sky Knights kin. He himself only wants to train and race dragons—queen act, and glancing mention of same-sex crushes.

Fondness for being read to and occasional mentions of an anarchist kin dubbed the Wind Breakers, leaven the proceedings. While the plot does indeed feature two breathtaking, high-speed aerial races among the skyscrapers and a massive climactic melee featuring hundreds of maddened dragons with cybernetic enhancements and hacked DNA, it’s more than just a pretext for set piece battles, as London also perceptively explores both the dynamics of a close family beset with conflicting loyalties and issues tied to subjugating and experimenting on wild creatures who don’t talk and suffer varied consequences in the aftermath of Castro’s rise to power. Ana’s father is home from fighting in the mountains with Fidel; her family, like many Cubans, wanted to build a better country only to realize too late that Fidel had fooled them. Miguel, on the other hand, is one of thousands of Pedro Pan children, sent to the U.S. alone to protect them; he arrives in Miami and goes to live in an orphanage. Zulema and her rural community learn to read thanks to young brigadistas—but they’re only allowed access to state-sanctioned propaganda. In Havana, Juan loses his best friend, who eagerly participates in the militaristic pioneros; being on opposing sides wreaks havoc in their lives. Through these young people’s experiences, the realities of Cubans’ lives are presented in nuanced and complex ways in this thoroughly researched work. Many moments will ring true to young Cubans who have grown up on family stories, down to the slang and details of daily life at the time.

A well-researched, thoughtful, and moving look at post-revolutionary Cuba. (author’s note, historical notes, timeline, resources) (Fiction. 9-13)
Through tales both familiar and new, two sisters navigate growing up and an international relocation. It is Mid-Autumn Festival time in Singapore, and the Guo family's gathering feels poignant because grandmother Ah Ma, Ma Ma, Ba Ba, and sisters Peijing and Biju are moving to Australia the following day for Ba Ba's new job. As 11-year-old Peijing helps Ah Ma prepare moon cakes, the salted duck egg yolk center symbolizes the moon as the narrative theme interwoven throughout their family's journey during their first year in their new home, through reinterpreted lore and superstitions. When the contents of the sisters' secret Little World—paper-book crafted flora, fauna, landscapes, and a red barn, all housed in a cardboard box—vanish on the morning of their departure, only the paper jade rabbit (a legendary occupant of the moon) is salvaged and with it, the hope of rebuilding their private universe. Contrasting Peijing's anxiety as the eldest child bearing expectations of responsibility, 5-year-old Biju's exuberant, improvisational storytelling centers the sisters' interactions as their lives transform in a new and very different environment. While Peijing finds her voice and makes new friends and Biju shines in the school play, Ah Ma's declining health prompts them to capture memories in the moment. Biju's retold legends are a highlight, showcasing her irreverent humor and demonstrating a self-assured strength that it went into space, and with Gustav's plans and Henri's airy riddles, the book's characters gather at the appointed time, but when the cake goes missing, Detective Gustav is on the case. Although the cover features shades of red, blue, and yellow, illustrations inside are black outline drawings with gray shading and blue highlights. The tales brim with enough humorous references, wordplay, and tricky plots to keep readers young and old entertained.

Inventive, ironic retellings frame this folktale-centered family story. (Fiction. 8-12)

**SPACE, TIME CAKE!**
Matthews, Andy
Illus. by Peader Thomas
Red Comet Press (128 pp.)
$14.99 | Sept. 6, 2022
978-1-66590-343-1
Series: Gustav & Henri, 1

Get ready for the creative twists and turns of moon adventures, time travel, and a disappearing Pig Day cake. Meet Gustav, a pig, and Henri, a dog, who problem-solve their way through three stories. When their badminton shuttlecock goes missing midgame, Gustav deduces that it went into space, and with Gustav's plans and Henri's know-how, an aerodynamic pig spaceship is soon ready. After landing on the moon, the pair successfully complete five creative challenges to wrangle the shuttlecock away from a crab who has turned it into his crown. Unfortunately, their spaceship is now too heavy, and they have to leave the shuttlecock on the moon. Good thing they like tether tennis! When Gustav's local librarian double-cancels his library card, Gustav creates a time machine so he can return his book on time and eventually succeeds—well, sort of. When Gustav throws Henri a Pig Day party complete with an amazing and delicious cake to eat in the bathroom (where every Pig Day feast is eaten), all of the book's characters gather at the appointed time, but when the cake goes missing, Detectiv Gustav is on the case. The illustrations are light-skinned; those in the last spread, depicting modern characters, are more diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Swim-pressive! (biography, sources) (Picture-book biography. 4-8)

**ANNETTE FEELS FREE**
The True Story of Annette Kellerman, World-Class Swimmer, Fashion Pioneer, and Real-Life Mermaid
Mazeika, Katie
Beach Lane/Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-66590-343-1

A sweeping biography of an influential woman.

Annette Kellerman (1887-1975), a White woman from Australia, had a varied career that spanned the globe. When she was young, she loved to dance, but a physical illness made her legs weak, and she had to wear restrictive braces. In an attempt to lift her spirits, her father taught her to swim. Annette flourished in the freedom of the water, and her legs got stronger. She went on to swim competitively, breaking records even in coed races. However, she still felt restricted in the elaborate and cumbersome swim costumes women were expected to wear, so she created her own swimsuit, which matched the men's. Arrested in Boston for indecency, Annette won her case for functionality and fairness, later selling her creation to the public. She also pioneered the dancelike moves of artistic swimming as she performed in international shows and several movies. In an author's note, Mazeika observes how Annette's physical disability led her to her life's passion, setting her on the path of success. However, she still felt restricted in the elaborate and cumbersome swim costumes women were expected to wear, so she created her own swimsuit, which matched the men's. Arrested in Boston for indecency, Annette won her case for functionality and fairness, later selling her creation to the public. She also pioneered the dancelike moves of artistic swimming as she performed in international shows and several movies. In an author's note, Mazeika observes how Annette's physical disability led her to her life's passion, setting her on the path of success and breaking boundaries. Annette's legacy in competitive, artistic, and recreational swimming is undeniable, and Mazeika's text deftly balances her subject's varied career. The illustrations have soft edges and strong, textured colors—perfect for depicting so many water scenes. People depicted in historical scenes are light-skinned; those in the last spread, depicting modern times, are more diverse.
“Movie history deserves no less than this stunning encapsulation, cleverly designed and gorgeously rendered.”

**ACTION!**

**How Movies Began**

McCarthy, Meghan
Paula Wiseman/Simon & Schuster (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 23, 2022
978-1-5344-5230-5

McCarthy presents an ambitious encapsulation of the birth of movies with humor and modern touches.

Blending her customary, big-eyed cartoons with a more sophisticated realism, McCarthy offers a stirring, occasionally quirky deep dive into early film. From Eadweard Muybridge’s galloping horse to the last movies of the silent era, a selection of famous films is presented as McCarthy chronicles cinema history. Meticulous art captures architectural details, silent film stars, and even the world’s earliest example of a silly cat video (“The Boxing Cats” from 1894). The book links early films with movies kids may have seen; the Maschinenmensch of Metropolis is paired with C-3PO of Star Wars, Harold Lloyd’s Safety Last with Hugo and Back to the Future, and so on. Some inclusions, like Johnny Depp’s appearance in Benny & Joon, are unfortunate in light of their stars’ behavior. McCarthy briefly addresses the prejudice confronted by people of color in the film industry, with special attention paid to Josephine Baker and contemporary films like Black Panther. Backmatter includes five stories from film’s past, all worthy of their own books. The overall effect is less exhausting than it is inspiring. Kids will reach the end and likely be disappointed that the story doesn’t continue. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**Movie history deserves no less than this stunning encapsulation, cleverly designed and gorgeously rendered.** (author’s note, bibliography) (Nonfiction picture book: 7-12)

**HELLO, OPPORTUNITY**

The Story of Our Friend on Mars

McDaniel, Shaelyn
Illus. by Cornelia Li
Page Street (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 20, 2022
978-1-64567-469-6

A salute to the now inactive Mars rover that extended a planned mission of three months into a 15-year odyssey.

Like nearly all the picture-book tributes to various Mars rovers, this one anthropomorphizes its subject—though Li artfully manages to suggest a personality without adding eyes or significantly altering any of the rover’s mechanical parts or features. McDaniel characterizes “Oppy” as a “friend” and lauds the way “she kept going,” mixing general remarks about the rover’s construction, journey, and mission to find evidence that water once flowed on the “little red planet” with quotes that are misleadingly presented as if originally sent in plain language (including the poignant final one in 2018: “My battery is low and it’s getting dark”). Opportunity’s sister rover, Spirit, gets nary a mention until a closing timeline that has outdated information about an upcoming European rover. James McGowan’s Good Night, Oppy! (2021) offers a more careful distinction between real and invented details as well as photos to supplement the illustrations by Graham Carter. In the pictures here, human figures back on Earth are racially diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**A tender reminder that when even a hug won’t help, friends are always there.** (Picture book: 2-7)

**ANNI DREAMS OF BIRYANI**

Mehra, Namita Moolani
Illus. by Chaya Prabhat
Two Lions (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 1, 2022
978-1-5420-3041-0

Will Anni succeed in getting the secret recipe for Uncle’s biryani? In an unnamed city’s Little India, a young South Asian girl named Anni lives across the street from the Biryani Café, where gruff Mr. Arif—whom everyone calls Uncle—makes and sells “the best biryani
in the world. Fluffy and fragrant. Spicy and succulent. Absolutely addictive.” An experienced cook, Anni wants to learn to prepare the biryani herself, but although Uncle won’t share, and when Anni finds the cafe shut down one day, she wonders if she’ll ever be able to eat the special biryani again. Although the tale’s resolution wraps up a little quickly and may not be entirely satisfactory, Anni’s perseverance pays off, encouraging kids to follow their dreams. Mehr’s text brings to life the sights, sounds, and smells of the neighborhood, while Prabhat’s vivid and effusive digital illustrations weave in expressive faces and cultural details, including the biryani ingredients and scenes of dirty dishes in the sink. All the people have different shades of warm brown skin, and Anni has two black braids. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A curious and determined young cook gets her biryani recipe in this tale to savor. (Information about biryani, link to an online recipe) (Picture book. 4-6)

LOUD MOUSE
Menzel, Cara & Idina Menzel
Illus. by Jaclyn Sinquett
Disney-Hyperion (48 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 27, 2022
978-1-368-07806-1

A little mouse experiences BIG changes thanks to a spectacular talent.

Dee’s a singer to her core. She croons absolutely everywhere, so when her teacher Miss Pink suggests that her students bring in something that symbolizes what they enjoy doing, Dee brings in a song. As she sings it, however, her joy causes her to physically grow huge! At first this makes her feel special, but as the day goes on she feels lonely and out of place. Shrinking back to her normal size, she worries that this means she can never sing again. But thanks to the encouragement of her mother and little sister, she realizes that being special is nothing to be ashamed of. However, though her classmates have skills of their own, only Dee changes, indicating that some talents are more transformable than others. After all, while everyone is enthralled by Dee, Ren the turtle’s talent for drawing a replica of a space station is something he “made everyone watch.” The true standout in this show comes from Sinquett’s dynamic art, capable of encompassing the emotional highs and lows of elementary school kids. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A muddled message shoots for the moon but never quite gets all the way off the ground. (Picture book. 3-6)

NOT ALL SHEEP ARE BORING!
Moyinihan, Bobby
Illus. by Julie Rowan-Zoch
Putnam (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 20, 2022
978-0-593-40703-5

In former Saturday Night Live cast member Moyinihan’s picture-book debut, a toad narrator fighting sleep introduces readers to all the exciting sheep they know.

People count sheep in order to fall asleep, ergo sheep are boring. But the toad, who sports a green striped shirt and black shorts on stick-thin limbs and has an iron bedstead in the sheep’s field, wants to prove otherwise. One by one, the toad introduces sheep like Alice, who has both a jet pack and a helmet (Alice is both “smart AND cool”), Julie, who loves dancing and coffee, and Mike H., who “likes to eat pickles while sitting in a big wet boot.” Gary, who doesn’t know what pasta is, is just plain weird, but weird isn’t boring. The parade of sheep gradually gets less and less cool, from Dan, who requires extra exclamation marks to seem hipper, to Katie, who has never actually pranced on the moon, and finally to Steve. Steve is a sheep in a tan vest and headphones using a metal detector in the field. And Steve IS boring, but “that doesn’t mean...that ALL...sheep...are...NOT...ALL...SHEEP...ARE...Zzzzzzz.” Rowan-Zoch’s digital illustrations keep the details simple to focus on the droll sheep, plain white or the bright green of the pasture serving as backgrounds. Still, readers may have different ideas as to which sheep are boring...and may fall asleep long before they reach Steve. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Hopefully readers’ own flocks are either livelier or more conducive to sleep; this toad’s will do in the meantime. (Picture book. 3-6)

WHEN YOU TAKE A STEP
Murguia, Bethanie Deeney
Beach Lane/Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 27, 2022
978-1-5344-7367-6

A sleepy yet poignant pink highlighting characters’ footwear is the sole pigment in this ode to literal and figurative steps.

Illustrations of nameless characters who are diverse in terms of race and ability are joined by sparse text. The opening question “What happens when you take a step?” is turned over carefully, like a precious stone. Poetic declarations like “You greet the world, wide and full” answer the query. A child with curly hair and skin the color of the white page opens a door from an empty room to a vague outdoor landscape. Other scenes include children observing nature, visiting a museum, and attending a rally (“You move toward hope, and you make the world better.”). Though the message of the power of a single step is a good one, it’s somewhat ambiguous, and some readers may be lost or put off by the negative space and lack
of colors. Caregivers or educators may want to offer guidance or prompt readers to think about the text. While people using wheelchairs, rolling walkers, and crutches are depicted, they are limited to ensemble scenes and to a spread with close-ups of different feet rather than on pages portraying individual children. Those who enjoyed Murguia’s previous works, Henry Cole’s black-and-white Spot & Dot (2016) or Spot, the Cat (2016), or Cori Doerrfeld’s social emotional books will appreciate these gently crafted, spot colored pages. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Encouraging and curious. (Picture book: 3-6)

THE ASTRONOMICALLY GRAND PLAN
Neal, Rie
Illus. by Talitha Shipman
Aladdin (112 pp.)
$17.99 | July 5, 2022
978-1-5344-8148-0
Series: Astrid the Astronaut, 1

Astrid, a spunky, smart California third grader, has great aspirations. She will become “the first astronaut with hearing aids,” a possibility that is treated very naturally within this story, the first in a new chapter book series. Joining the Shooting Stars, an after-school club devoted to all things space, has long been part of Astrid’s “Astronomically Grand Plan.” Though Astrid wants to go to space camp, it’s expensive, but a scholarship is available for the Shooting Stars student who earns the most points for completing the STEM-oriented Astro Missions. She discovers another problem when she realizes that her best friend, Hallie, is more interested in art than in STEM and joins the Petite Picassos club. How can Astrid navigate Shooting Stars without her BFF, especially when she and her teammate Veejay don’t start out well? Club teacher Ms. Ruiz stresses creativity and partnership, and math and science enthusiasts will be attracted to this book, but the real emphasis is on relationships. Astrid must befriend Hallie again after voicing her disappointment with her interests and learn to be a good teammate. Astrid is likable, and her story, told in first person, realistically explores her hearing issues, her initial problem-solving failures, and her successes. Black-and-white illustrations depict Astrid (wearing her hearing aids) and her family as light-skinned, though other students appear to be racially diverse, and Hallie is cued as Asian.

An exuberant portrayal of a girl with hearing restrictions reaching for the stars. (Chapter book: 7-10)

THE BLACK SLIDE
Ocker, J.W.
Harper/HarperCollins (272 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-0-06-299055-6

After a mysterious black tube slide appears at their school playground, kids start going missing.

If Griffin goes down the Black Slide, becoming the first kid to try it out, then bully Ozzie says he will lay off him for the rest of the year. The subsequent surreal, painful, too-long tumble through darkness drops Griffin in an alien world before he snaps back to reality with a broken arm and nightmares for his troubles. In the following days, fifth graders go missing at an alarming rate, their absences unnoticed by adults; two of them Griffin observes go down the Black Slide but never come out. Trying to prevent his hypnotized best friend, Laila, from going down it too, Griffin ends up taking his second trip with her, and they land in the Painful Place, a hard world of rock and metal where children are subjected to painful experiments by the sadomasochistic inhabitants. Accurately described in the acknowledgements as “Hellraiser for kids,” the descriptions focus on the way pain feels rather than physical injuries, and emotional pain is given equal weight. Griffin and Laila must find a way to escape and save their classmates in a plot packed with endless dangers and unexpected alliances. The “happy” ending shows the consequences of their ordeals before landing on a final stinger. Physical descriptors of the kids are absent.

An intense, disturbing read as likely to give nightmares as to become a new favorite. (Horror: 10-14)

THE TREE OF HOPE
The Miraculous Rescue of Puerto Rico’s Beloved Banyan
Orenstein-Cardona, Anna
Illus. by Juan Manuel Moreno
Beaming Books (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 23, 2022
978-1-5064-8409-9

Orenstein-Cardona explores the impact of Hurricane Maria through the story of a stately banyan tree. The tree (in Spanish, jagüey blanco) is well known, providing shade by the San Juan Gate, which surrounds the old city. When the hurricane hits in September 2017, the tree feels he will survive. “I am ready,” said the tree, digging his roots deeper into the rich Caribbean soil.” But this storm is worse than anything he and the people of Puerto Rico have ever experienced, and it almost kills the tree. Finally, the large tree cracks, and its huge crown falls into the nearby ocean. His stump and roots remain, but in language that treats the tree in human terms “he drifted between this world and the next.” An unnamed girl, with dark hair and brown skin, discovers the tree’s plight and brings help. In “Behind the Story,” the author discusses the true story that...
inspired this tale. Some may object to the anthropomorphizing of the tree, but this meaningful story evades didacticism and links the tree’s resilience with the fortitude of Puerto Ricans determined to rebuild their lives. People are pictured with different skin tones, reflecting the diversity of Puerto Rico. Observant children will notice the young girl who helps the tree, pictured with her family, in many of the realistic illustrations, which picture the Caribbean island before and after the intense storm. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An engaging story about rescuing a tree and reconstructing Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. (author’s note) (Picture book. 6-8)

**TUMBLE**
Pérez, Celia C.
Kokila (368 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-0-593-32517-9

Adela Ramírez’s life is like a telenovela. At least that’s how it feels for the seventh grader, who has discovered something that her remarried, pregnant mom has been hiding about her biological father’s identity: He’s actually Manny “The Mountain” Bravo, a famous luchador! When Addie decides that she would like to meet him, she is thrown into the world of the Bravo family’s wrestling dynasty. Though Manny remains distant, Addie’s other newly introduced relatives welcome her with open arms, and she is immediately included in the family pastime. Addie quickly learns that each member of the Bravo family is also wrestling with their own personal struggles, including living up to the family’s illustrious name. On top of that, Addie must decide whether being adopted by her doting stepdad would be a positive next step. Addie navigates her new connections, middle school drama, disappointments, big decisions, and surprises with courage and humor. The characterization is strong, and the book offers portrayals of authentic, complicated relationships that are written with care, showing readers that biological family and found family can be equally important. Addie and her family are Mexican American; secondary characters are racially diverse, and one of Addie’s uncles is a drag queen.

A plucky, heartwarming tale that celebrates the complexity of family relationships. (Fiction. 9-14)

**THE STORY OF US**
Perkins, Mitali
Illus. by Kevin Howdeshell & Kristen Howdeshell
Beaming Books (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 20, 2022
978-1-5064-8284-2

The biblical story, from Creation through the Resurrection and beyond, summarized.

Focusing on the four elements, aka Them, Perkins begins with Creation: “One day, Creator came— / to sort the mess, / using Them to make Us. / Air. / Water. / Earth. / Fire.” Several spreads of the first man and woman enjoying the Garden of Eden and its flora and fauna follow. But then, “We said, ‘No, Creator,’ ” after which They also rose up against the couple: “Tornado. / Flood. / Earthquake. / Inferno.” Thus begins a war between nature and humans…until Redeemer comes, “using Them to serve Us.” The next spreads show Jesus’ ministry, using dirt to heal a blind man, water to wash feet, air to draw a last breath on the cross, and fire to cook fish for his friends after his resurrection. A final page, requiring a 90-degree turn of the book, shows an idyllic scene of people of various races and ages enjoying a park: “At peace— / Them and Us,” a rather misleading statement amid today’s natural disasters, climate change, and pollution that many children will recognize as patently facile and false. The illustrations by the Howdeshells, a married couple, are beautiful and full of meaning that partially fills in the vital missing pieces that Perkins’ sparse verse leaves out. Still, those without a solid religious background will be lost. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Roots the Bible in the four elements; the sparse text and overly simplistic ending disappoint, but the images save the day. (Religious picture book. 7-10)

**MY BROTHER OTTO AND THE BIRTHDAY PARTY**
Raby, Meg
Illus. by Elisa Pallmer
Gibbs Smith (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-1-4236-6141-2

Two siblings go to a friend’s birthday party. An anthropomorphic bird and their younger brother, Otto, who is autistic and nonspeaking (he uses a tablet to communicate), prepare for the celebration in their own ways—the protagonist wants to wear a pretty dress, while Otto wants to wear his favorite color, yellow. The narrator dons a new headband, while Otto puts on his noise-canceling headphones. Otto is very good at picking out presents, since he connects people he loves with certain objects. The birthday girl, Ruthie, a deer, is also neurodiverse—she doesn’t look people in the eyes when she’s talking to them, and she presses her forehead to another
person’s to show thanks. Ruthie loves Otto’s present, and she rocks back and forth happily while Otto flaps his wings in celebration. The narrator, who is neurotypical, patiently explains how Otto experiences things “in his own way”—for instance, he will only eat a piece of cake that has yellow on it, because other colors are “too much” for him. These times and the adults’ explanations for some of Otto’s and Ruthie’s behaviors are all presented in the same understanding tone. Exuberant, brightly colored, cartoon-style pictures revel in the celebratory atmosphere of the story and depict an all-animal cast. When present on the page, Otto’s tablet shows images or words conveying his current emotion or a message. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Wonderful situational representation of neurodiversity. (Picture book 3-7)

**LITTLE RED AND THE BIG BAD WOLF**
Rector, Rebecca Kraft
Illus. by Shanda McClasky
Aladdin (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 6, 2022
978-1-5344-6929-7

Each time Mr. Wolf seems about to devour Little Red on her way to Granny’s house, he is thwarted both by Red’s cleverness and by the poorly written letter she is bringing to thank her grandmother for her new cape.

In this funny riff on a much-parodied folktale, beginning writers and the read-aloud crowd are exposed to new words and lots of similes as they simultaneously learn the rudiments of proper letter writing. Whenever hungry Mr. Wolf surprises Red on her journey—which takes her through both the woods and lots of similes as they simultaneously learn the rudiments of proper letter writing. After he’s done editing, she cleverly shoves into his mouth a delectable baked good from her food bucket, then races away. The cartoonish but aesthetically appealing art and the layout perfectly complement—and add to—the text’s humor; at one juncture, Red escapes the wolf by stealing his skateboard. By the time Granny is reached, the lessons have moved from finger-spacing to headings. Usually, the wolf explains each change, which then shows up in the art; oddly, periods at the ends of sentences appear without comment. Red has tan, freckled skin and orange hair; Granny’s skin is several shades darker. Mr. Wolf has the proverbial big, pointy teeth, softened by his skinny body and the pencil behind his ear. All will enjoy the wickedly funny denouement: Mr. Wolf’s thank-you letter. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Deliciously satisfying. (Picture book 4-8)

**THE STORY OF A BUTTERFLY**
*Learn About the Life Cycle and Habitat of the Painted Lady*
Reed, Margaret Rose
Illus. by Manu Montoya
Sourcebooks eXplore (32 pp.)
$16.99 | $8.99 paper | Sept. 6, 2022
978-1-72826-143-0 paper
978-1-72826-144-7

Monarchs get most of the attention—but here the spotlight shifts to the equally wonderful and even more common painted lady. Aside from a mention that caterpillars transform themselves into “goo” in a chrysalis before emerging as adults, the tone of this portrait of *Vanessa cardui* stands in stark contrast to that of Rosemary Mosco’s *Butterflies Are Pretty…Gross*! (2021)—focusing instead on the “magic” of metamorphosis and the insect’s life cycle while following two young visitors through a tour of a butterfly house and then on to the creation of a butterfly garden based, as is proper, on locally native plants. Though Reed doesn’t explain how the species’ populations on both sides of the Atlantic can go through long migratory cycles that take several generations to complete (backmatter merely states that migration is “another wonder of nature”), she adds further facts about them, as well as moths and butterflies in general, at the end. Montoya enhances a pair of appended photos with paintings that highlight his fluttery subject’s lovely wing patterns and feature a mix of children and adult helpers in school and garden. Characters are diverse in skin tone and include a hijab wearer and one young student in a wheelchair. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An oddly rare introduction to a widely distributed butterfly. (Informational picture book 6-8)

**DIGESTION! THE MUSICAL**
Rex, Adam
Illus. by Laura Park
Chronicle Books (76 pp.)
$16.99 | Oct. 25, 2022
978-1-4521-8386-2

Will sweet, nutty Li’l Candy’s plunge to stardom prove transformational? Every time.

On a dark stage lit by neon bright flashes of dazzle and dominated by a towering, cutaway human body, a round, pink ingé-nue takes a leap of faith to the Broadway rhythms of a chorus of little carrots: “Past the teeth now! Past the tongue now! Past the palate to the pharynx! She could end up in the lung now if she blunders down the larynx. Or go higher in the head instead and come back out the nose! But she slides down the esophagus, where all the foodstuff goes.” Proving along the way that she’s not just empty calories but has a nutritional heart of gold—or, more precisely, peanut—and pausing only for the occasional
production number (“My name’s Platelet! / If you’re hurtin’ / I make plugs to stop / the spurtin’”), she, or her remains, arrive at last in the large intestine just in time for the big finale. “LET’S GET THIS POTTY STARTED. / EVERYBODY PANTS DOWN….” Taking a cue from Maris Wicks’ sensational Human Body Theater (2015), this showstopper gives the purposes and processes of digestion the lavish, glitzy production they deserve, from teeth to toilet. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

As “gross and amazing” as its topic, certain to receive thunderous ovations—standing or otherwise. (Informational picture book. 5-8)

**CREepy crayon!**

Reynolds, Aaron
Illus. by Peter Brown
Simon & Schuster (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 23, 2022
978-1-5344-6588-6
Series: Creepy Tales!

When a young rabbit who’s struggling in school finds a helpful crayon, everything is suddenly perfect—until it isn’t.

Jasper is flunking everything except art and is desperate for help when he finds the crayon. “Purple. Pointy...perfect”—and alive. When Jasper watches TV instead of studying, he misspells every word on his spelling test, but the crayon seems to know the answers, and when he uses the crayon to write, he can spell them all. When he faces a math quiz after skipping his homework, the crayon aces it for him. Jasper is only a little creeped out until the crayon changes his art—the one area where Jasper excels—into something better. As guilt-ridden Jasper receives accolades for grades and work that aren’t his, the crayon becomes more and more possessive of Jasper’s attention and affection, and it is only when Jasper cannot take it anymore that he discovers just what he’s gotten himself into. Reynolds’ text might as well be a Rod Serling monologue for its perfectly paced foreboding and unsettling tension, both gentled by lightly ominous humor. Brown goes all in to match with a grayscale palette for everything but the purple crayon—a callback to black-and-white sci-fi thrillers as much as a visual cue for nascent horror readers. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**Chilling in the best ways. (Picture book. 4-7)**

**CLOVER**

Robert, Nadine
Illus. by Zin Long
Trans. by Nick Frost & Catherine Ostiguy
Milky Way (64 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-990252-14-3

An indecisive child finds their way. Clover, who lives on a farm, has dark hair and pale skin and, like their many brothers and sisters, wears overalls and a stocking cap. As usual, Clover can’t figure out what to do—will it be mushroom picking or mussel collecting? At last, the appealing protagonist follows their family to a nearby river, where they see a young goat that has wandered from the farm into the woods. Clover follows the goat to bring it home; unsure of which path to take, the child asks a tree, a stream, and the wind for advice but receives no answers. Lush, finely detailed ink and watercolor artwork forms the basis of this gently suspenseful story. While Clover searches for the goat, their siblings search for her, the somewhat treacly lesson being that “listening when our heart speaks will always lead us where we need to go.” It’s difficult to tell whether the odd formality of this French import comes from the original text or the translation, though it does work with the illustrations to conjure up a dreamlike, bygone era with hints of the magic of the natural world. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A quirky and quiet pastoral tale that offers instruction to young children on independence and decision-making. (Picture book. 4-8)

**THE STONE CHILD**

Robertson, David A.
Puffin/Tundra Book Group (256 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-0-7352-6616-2
Series: The Misewa Saga, 3

Twinned expeditions into the northern woods drive this third installment in The Misewa Saga.

When last readers saw Cree teen Morgan, she had just woken up next to Eli under the Great Tree that is their portal from their foster parents’ Winnipeg attic into the magical land of Aski. The colossal footprints that lead from her foster brother’s unresponsive body can only mean that the giant Mistapew has stolen Eli’s soul, and it’s up to Morgan to get it back. Soon Morgan and the squirrel Arik are trudging north with Eli’s inert body on a sled. They are accompanied by a White girl named Emily, a new school friend whom Morgan’s hastily brought through the portal to help (and who becomes something more than friend as they go). This journey is mirrored by a subsequent trip north on Earth so that Morgan can meet her kókom, the old woman who’s now her only surviving biological forbear. The shift from race-against-time fantasy adventure to a more mundane car excursion may throw readers,
but Morgan's grief at the newfound loss of the mother she’d been taken from years ago forms a unifying throughline. Robertson (Norway House Cree Nation) has a lot of narrative balls in the air in this outing, and they don't all stay there—in particular, the time-travel mechanism becomes quite convoluted—but the story's emotional arc shines true.

A mostly satisfying return. (map, glossary) (Fantasy. 10-14)

MALALA YOUSAFZAI
Saeed, Aisha & Chelsea Clinton
Illus. by Alexandra Boiger & Gillian Flint
Philomel (80 pp.)
$14.99 | July 5, 2022
978-0-593-40291-7
Series: She Persisted

This latest in the She Persisted series explores the life of Malala Yousafzai, the fierce teenage activist from Pakistan who advocated for the right to an education.

This nonfiction chapter book opens with Yousafzai’s birth in Pakistan’s verdant Swat Valley. Readers learn that Yousafzai’s father named her after legendary Afghan poet Malalai of Maiwand. Inherently curious, she was a bright student, encouraged by her schoolteacher father. When the Taliban started closing and then blowing up schools, 11-year-old Yousafzai was forced to give up her education temporarily. But she refused to let that defeat her and began to write and talk about what was happening—a move that brought her into the Taliban’s crosshairs; when she was 15, two men shot her in the head. Yousafzai recovered from her injury and refused to let the attempt on her life deter her, becoming an inspiration to the world, a staunch advocate for the right to education. The book brings together major events in Yousafzai’s life yet also offers readers a deeper understanding about larger issues such as the right to education, which has often been denied to girls and women, and the power of advocacy. It also offers a comprehensible yet nuanced consideration of Islam (“But Malala was also Muslim, and she knew what they were doing was not acceptable in her religion”). Final illustrations not seen.

A compelling story that’s empowering and inspirational. (“how you can persist,” references) (Illustrated chapter book. 7-10)

MARY HAD A LITTLE PLAN
Sauer, Tammi
Illus. by Vanessa Brantley-Newton
Union Square Kids (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 6, 2022
978-1-63655-038-1
Series: Mary Had a Little Glam, 2

Mary’s “little plan” becomes a major green community project with some planning and assistance.

Mary, a Black girl who wears a nest complete with a family of birds on her head, passes an abandoned lot full of trash and promptly gets an idea for “a cleanup and an overhaul.” She draws a design and, with a caregiver’s help, hauls in paint and decorations and collects donations of flowers, tools, and wood from local shops. After a half-day of picking up trash, though, Mary feels overwhelmed. Prompted by a spider who sits beside her, Mary is inspired to ask friends for help. A diverse group of children and adults joins her efforts to clean up, weed, plant, water, paint a wall, decorate, and set up a free “nook for books.” Even the birds living on Mary’s head help out. Mary and her friends marvel at their neighborhood improvement: “It showed what love can do.” The rhyming text is organized in well-paced couplets that read effortlessly and offer an occasional nod to other nursery rhymes. The type includes words set in a whimsical font in colors that complement Brantley-Newton’s lively, playful illustrations. Mary and her friends have loads of personality, and readers will be charmed by the ingenuity, dedication, and community spirit they display. A light read, this story is a glowing example of the magic that results when a thoughtful initiative receives support. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Fun and inspiring. (Picture book. 3-7)

THE HAPPIEST LION CUB
Shatokhin, Oleksandr
Trans. by Zenia Tompkins
Red Comet Press (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-66053-038-1

Must a lion prince abandon his love of music to fulfill his destiny?

The cub scandalizes the other animals—not to mention his father—with his musical ambitions. After all, “a REAL lion ought to hunt. And also roar LOUDLY and EXPRESSIVELY!” The lion’s father shoots down his son’s dreams, compiling a list of what a “real” lion should do (in addition to being “honest,” “brave,” and “serious,” real lions “maintain a regal silence” and “observe carefully”). The cub, dejected, walking around in the rain, playing his instrument (“Oh, how sad it is when no one UNDERSTANDS you”). A turning point comes when the lion’s music helps rescue a fox pup; lost in the underbrush, the fox hears the swells of music and rushes out. At last, the lion’s father realizes that his son can be both a musician and a great leader. Loosely drawn, light-infused images with a slightly retro feel show animals typical to the African savanna—an elephant, a zebra, a giraffe, and gazelles. The lions walk upright but are clearly identified by their orange coats and spiky manes. Both text and artwork are playful (the list of virtues that the father creates will induce giggles), bringing whimsy to a familiar story. While the message is evident, the story is choice-affirming rather than didactic. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Positive, uplifting, and unique. (Picture book. 4-7)
The book could help create a space to talk about illness with children while offering hope in the form of togetherness and empathy. Although the metaphors in the book feel unwieldy at times, the art more than compensates for it. Patterns twist and turn alongside Leila’s feelings, weaving a stunning tapestry that turns alongside Leila’s feelings, weaving a stunning tapestry that finally blossoms onto the pages as Leila finds new ways of dealing with her jumbled-up feelings. Exploring the complexities that children grapple with when faced with illness in the family, this picture book is ultimately about finding little pockets of happiness. The book could help create a space to talk about illness with children while offering hope in the form of togetherness and empathy. Although the metaphors in the book feel unwieldy at times, the art more than compensates for it. Patterns twist and turn alongside Leila’s feelings, weaving a stunning tapestry that finally blossoms onto the pages as Leila finds new ways of dealing with her jumbled-up feelings. Exploring the complexities that children grapple with when faced with illness in the family, this picture book is ultimately about finding little pockets of happiness. The book could help create a space to talk about illness with children while offering hope in the form of togetherness and empathy. Although the metaphors in the book feel unwieldy at times, the art more than compensates for it. Patterns twist and turn alongside Leila’s feelings, weaving a stunning tapestry that finally blossoms onto the pages as Leila finds new ways of dealing with her jumbled-up feelings. Exploring the complexities that children grapple with when faced with illness in the family, this picture book is ultimately about finding little pockets of happiness. The book could help create a space to talk about illness with children while offering hope in the form of togetherness and empathy. Although the metaphors in the book feel unwieldy at times, the art more than compensates for it. Patterns twist and turn alongside Leila’s feelings, weaving a stunning tapestry that finally blossoms onto the pages as Leila finds new ways of dealing with her jumbled-up feelings. Exploring the complexities that children grapple with when faced with illness in the family, this picture book is ultimately about finding little pockets of happiness. The book could help create a space to talk about illness with children while offering hope in the form of togetherness and empathy. Although the metaphors in the book feel unwieldy at times, the art more than compensates for it. Patterns twist and turn alongside Leila’s feelings, weaving a stunning tapestry that finally blossoms onto the pages as Leila finds new ways of dealing with her jumbled-up feelings. Exploring the complexities that children grapple with when faced with illness in the family, this picture book is ultimately about finding little pockets of happiness. The book could help create a space to talk about illness with children while offering hope in the form of togetherness and empathy. Although the metaphors in the book feel unwieldy at times, the art more than compensates for it. Patterns twist and turn alongside Leila’s feelings, weaving a stunning tapestry that finally blossoms onto the pages as Leila finds new ways of dealing with her jumbled-up feelings. Exploring the complexities that children grapple with when faced with illness in the family, this picture book is ultimately about finding little pockets of happiness.
bookstore and spends his days suggesting books to a racially diverse group of customers—it gives “him such a pleasant feeling, like introducing someone to a friend.” Leopold is tested, however, when a gray-furred goat requests a book…for ingest. Acknowledging his faux pas, the unnamed goat allows Leopold to guide his book-selection adventure, with disastrous (but fibrous?) results. Thankfully, Leopold’s wife, a brown-furred goat, reminds her husband that he was once like this tricky customer, motivating Leopold to suggest the title that helped him discover that books were for more than just a light snack. The plotting is droll, and the illustrations—done in gouache (decorating shoes, remaking a racetrack), and nature (greeting (and name) and less about Leopold’s life. It’s a fine story but one that may not appeal to the gray-furred goats of the world. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Quaint but doesn’t leave you wanting seconds. (Picture book. 3-8)

**TODAY IS A ME DAY**

*Starkey, E.V.*
Illus. by Kristiina Haapalainen & Sami Väbä-Aho
POW! (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 20, 2022
978-1-64823-002-8

A young child spends a day indulging in fun, tranquil pastimes.

In a bucolic, seaside setting, the world calls to the narrator, who chooses activities that are quiet, indulgent, or just plain pleasant. The child watches raindrops, licks honey from a spoon, has a picnic with a stuffed bear, and then tosses leftover crumbs to some birds. The narrator focuses on the self (counting their freckles, practicing yogalike poses), creative endeavors (decorating shoes, remaking a racetrack), and nature (greeting a dragonfly, stuffing their pockets with smooth stones). Even bedtime is pastoral, as the child sleeps in a canopied hammock under a large tree and a full moon. Tomorrow is left open to the possibilities of adventure and empowerment. Without stating it outright, this book promotes rejuvenating breaks, when life can be enjoyed moment to moment. Only one of the activities involves another person—painting Mama’s fingernails—while the rest are spent in blissful solitude at the narrator’s pace and discretion. Both the measured text and the balmy pictures cultivate the meditative atmosphere. The soft, watercolorlike illustrations, frequently showcasing a sweeping countryside, are contemplative and peaceful. The child and their mother both are light-skinned. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Mellow calmness. (Picture book. 3-7)

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**LLAMA ROCKS THE CRADLE OF CHAOS**

*Stutzman, Jonathan*
Illus. by Heather Fox
Henry Holt (48 pp.)
$18.99 | July 12, 2022
978-1-250-77676-1
Series: Llama Book, 3

Llama’s single-minded pursuit of delicious desserts reaches new frontiers.

This third installment in the series finds Llama obsessing over the “spectacular” doughnut with extra sprinkles he ate at his birthday party yesterday. If only he could eat it again! The “rational llama of science” sets out to do exactly that. But when his new time-travel pants take him further back in time than expected, Llama finds (and eats) a different birthday doughnut, unknowingly altering the space-time continuum for his younger self. Baby Llama’s sad, lonely birthday “Long, Long Ago” without sweets—or friends to share them with—offers sympathetic context for Llama’s present-day hoarding tendencies and distrust of strangers. Both are on full display after Baby Llama and a host of other creatures from the past and present follow Llama back to his “Today” and start to destroy his home—what if his secret cake cellar is next? But when he and Baby Llama rush to protect the desserts, Llama realizes what his younger self wants even more than sweets. Tight narrative pacing, well-timed instances of onomatopoeia, and expressive, cartoonish illustrations make this an engaging read-aloud. While the narrator seems to take a dark pleasure in describing the consequences of Llama’s inability to read instructions, follow rules, or predict the consequences of his own actions (“he would pay dearly for it”), the cautionary tale elements are tempered by a reassuringly positive outcome for all llamas involved. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

As silly (and sweet) as a basement full of cake, with a hint more substance. (Picture book. 3-8)

**YOU ARE MY FAVORITE COLOR**

*Sze, Gillian*
Illus. by Nina Mata
Philomel (32 pp.)
$17.99 | June 7, 2022
978-0-593-20310-1

A light-skinned caregiver shares with their children the wonder of their dark brown skin as the youngest grows from newborn to toddler.

“When you ask me why your skin is brown, / I will tell you that you are my favorite color.” The caregiver and a child welcome a new baby, and on the next page, the trio cuddle against a warm backdrop of family photos as the text continues, “I will say that your skin was decided long, / long ago. Time was just waiting for you.” Spread after spread shows the new baby growing and exploring their world with the older child by their side, and all the while, the text describes brawny bears, singing cellos,
reaching sequoias, and more to prime the children’s understanding of their unique personal canvases. Sze’s text unpools a letter of love—a caregiver’s love and the self-love it inspires—as Mata’s illustrations combine gentle earth tones with vibrant, playful splashes to capture all the family adventures of a little one growing up. This is a sweet, languorous celebration of brown skin in all its infinite shades and of multiracial, multifaceted families. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Lovely. (Picture book: 3-7)

THE FIRE STAR
Tait, A.L.
Kane Miller (320 pp.)
$6.99 paper | Aug. 1, 2022
978-1-68464-437-7
Series: A Maven & Reeve Mystery, 1

In this medieval mystery series opener, a missing gemstone and a murder spur two teenage sleuths into their first case.

Fledgling squire Reeve and lady’s companion Maven are initially at odds, as both see their noble principals being forced into an unwanted marriage—but after a bold scheme to get the wedding called off by staging the fake theft of a valuable heirloom goes badly awry, leaving a corpse in its wake, the two gradually discover that they make good, quick-witted, keenly observant partners. Both have secrets: Reeve faints at the sight of blood, which is not a good quality in a would-be knight, but Maven skates closer to the edge, as she not only knows how to read, but with her mistress, belongs to a secret society of women and girls, either of which would get a young lady of honor wind up falling for one another, the partnership looks destined to extend into sequels. Characters default to White.

Smart, lively fun. (Historical mystery: 10-13)

THE WOLF’S HOWL
Tait, A.L.
Kane Miller (304 pp.)
$6.99 paper | Aug. 1, 2022
978-1-68464-438-4
Series: A Maven & Reeve Mystery, 2

Two teen detectives accompany their noble employers on a covert mission to a castle that is, it turns out, positively ridden with spies and secrets.

Continuing a storyline opened in The Fire Star (2022), as part of larger political maneuverings, Sir Garrick Sharp and his new wife, Lady Cassandra, have been sent to wind-swept Clawn Castle to sound out the loyalties of its overlord, Airl Riding—leaving squire Reeve and lady’s companion Maven to find out where the rest of the castle’s residents stand...and also to puzzle out a mystery involving a missing cook and a recipe that contains a coded message. As before, the young sleuths’ quick wits and complementary temperaments come into play—as does Maven’s membership in a secret society dedicated to educating women and helping them improve their lives—as the duo solve mysteries, effect rescues, and neutralize a mysterious ring of spies who may or may not be working for the realm’s wastrel king. Along with effectively using the constant titular gale to add atmosphere to the remote medieval setting and chucking in conflicts with a cunning mean girl as an ongoing subplot, Tait has a bit of fun by forcing Reeve to exchange clothes in one scene with a woman who rides off whooping at “the freedom afforded by a pair of breeches.” Every cast member in the ficto-British kingdom of Cartreff presents White.

More feudal finagling, with feminist strains running through a round of clever clue gathering. (Historical mystery: 10-13)

CONCRETE
From the Ground Up
Theule, Larissa
Illus. by Steve Light
Candlewick (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-5362-1250-1
Series: Material Marvels

An eye-opening survey of this ubiquitous building material’s history and uses. Continuing the architectural theme of his 2018 tour of a construction site, Builders and Breakers, Light offers informal but usefully detailed portraits of concrete buildings and other structures, from the Pantheon to modern skyscrapers and the Sydney Opera House—lightened by occasional additions like the rabbits (“Whole herds of happy hoppers!”) that lived in the gap between the two Berlin walls and often depicted with a racially diverse cast of inventors, engineers, and general commentators in attendance. Meanwhile, along with explaining concrete’s composition, strengths, and weaknesses, Theule chronicles its appearances through the ages, beginning in Neolithic Göbekli Tepe and in cultures from the ancient Mayans to Chinese Dadiwan, saluting the ancient Romans in particular, highlighting the crucial development of reinforced concrete and of formulations that would set even under water, and closing with the tantalizing suggestion that the wonderfully adaptable stuff has a future as bright as its past. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Lays down a foundation of basic knowledge as solid as its topic. (bibliography) (Informational picture book: 9-11)
Sisters who are opposites may help readers find ways to feel comfortable out of their comfort zones...if they have the support of their siblings.

While most children will not feel the same way Beatrice does about the dark, spiders, quiet, and picnics in graveyards, they will understand her love for those things and her confusion when faced with their opposites—sunny days and loud things and talking, all things her younger sister, Roo, loves. Tucholke presents each sister’s preferences in a way that will have readers empathizing with both and wondering how they will ever get along. But in the end, a sisterly hand in the dark of night, a potion to help Roo appreciate the dark, and a song to help Beatrice learn to enjoy the light bring the two together. They don’t suddenly change their likes and dislikes, “but they can love each other, all the same.” Thrice repeated words in a font that increases in size weave a spell over readers and emphasize mood. For instance, Beatrice doesn’t understand “why some things are so bright bright bright and so loud loud loud.” Le’s artwork masterfully uses color to set the mood: deep background colors, black, and orange and red highlights for Beatrice’s pages; white or light blue backgrounds and bright colors filling Roo’s pages; and a blend of the two when the sisters come together. Both sisters are light-skinned with light hair. (This book was reviewed digitally)

A sweet tale of sisterly differences and love. (Picture book. 4-8)

Three schoolmates recount their eerie encounters at a long-abandoned orphanage, making for a peculiar “what we did this summer” school project.

Aldo Pfefferkuchen, Pen Q. Blaisewell, and Jasper Yi struggle to find interesting things to include in their collective summer journal until a suspiciously pale boy leads them to a moldering building that once housed an orphanage. The trio should be terrified, but the ghost children—yes, there’s a group—need help. It’s weird that they appear young since most are the spirits of orphans who had moved away and died at ripe old ages. However, they were recently drawn back and trapped there by a poltergeist. Even stranger, the boys discover that the poltergeist is the toddler ghost of a bitter woman who died at over 100 years of age. A diarist and sufferer of verbal diarrhea, Aldo is the designated typist for their group project. His wit shines through as he faithfully describes his friends’ personalities and their wildly funny disagreements and dilemmas. It all makes for a laugh-out-loud, high-action read, complete with shrieking and notes in crayon from a frustrated entity trying to communicate about a mystery involving an inheritance and warped family history. Pen’s “Useful Index” appears at the end—a humorous nod to a running joke about his fondness for indexes. Oddities abound, as do astute observations about family dynamics and friendships, especially between the boys. Jasper’s surname cues him as Korean American; the other boys are minimally described.

A-plus entertainment. (Paranormal. 8-12)

A celebration of difference, connection, and community. Verde and Reynolds continue their “I Am” picture books with this installment encouraging individuality. A nameless child with brown skin and tight purple curls leads the way. Throughout, a silver remote-control dog, an orange cat, a lion, and another nameless person, with brown skin and a larger body frame, weave in and out alongside statements such as “Difference is what makes life beautiful and miraculous.” Caregivers may want to encourage little ones to spot the characters as they read or listen—a straightforward way to engage alongside the high-level messages of the book. The primary character grows to care and ultimately declare love for the other human character—which could be read as deep friendship or romantic love. “I” statements dominate the text, offering conversation starters. Statements like “I can surround myself with those who see me, stand up for me, and support me” may require longer explanations or discussion. These are balanced by simpler declarations like “I can dance to my own rhythm any time I want to move and groove.” Text and illustrations, featuring graceful, energetic linework, will draw a wide audience. The content will be most meaningful for children who need the confidence boost offered to stay true to themselves while still seeking positive relationships. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Predictably upbeat and inviting. (author’s note with meditation instructions) (Picture book. 4-7)
“Chá,” “all around the room, heads popped up.” In a series of “you have to cry better.” If you can “cry like a fountain,” pigeons Arabic, Spanish, German, Swahili, and Portuguese. The word humorous examples presented, though outlandish, prove to be boiled for pasta. The narrator notes that everyone cries at tears in pale blue hues provide amusing visuals for each of the silliest scenarios. Winter crying can make an icy lake for the little worm to skate on, while summer crying can help the flowers grow, with the little worm’s tears watering a daisy. And though we never find out why the main character is so upset, the worm’s weeping is never dismissed but acknowledged with tenderness—and humor. (This book was reviewed digitally.) A lighthearted approach to recognizing—and respecting—the positive effects.

An omniscient narrator, fearful that the worm might drown, tries to lighten the mood and points out the benefits of a good cry. Attempting to cheer the worm up, the narrator notes that there are many reasons to cry, but “you have to cry better.” If you can “cry like a fountain,” pigeons seeking a birdbath will be pleased. Or your tears might fill a pot to be boiled for pasta. The narrator notes that everyone cries at some point—police officers, kings, dogs, even rocks. Individuals cry in every season and for any kind of event, happy or sad. The humorous examples presented, though outlandish, prove the point. A good cry can be emotionally satisfying, and crying is a universal language. Softly animated illustrations depicting tears in pale blue hues provide amusing visuals for each of the countries highlighted; in an author’s note, Wang describes the childhood experience that inspired the book. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A warming and gentle celebration of connection. (Information on the countries depicted) (Picture book 3-6)

LULI AND THE LANGUAGE OF TEA
Wang, Andrea
Illus. by Hyewon Yum
Neal Porter/Holiday House (40 pp.)
$18.99 | May 17, 2022
978-0-8234-4614-8

A group of children find commonality and togetherness through tea.

While a diverse group of grown-ups attend English as a second language class, young ones attend free child care next door. Like the adults, no one speaks English, and “all around the room, children played alone.” However, Luli, who is cued as Chinese, has a plan to get everyone to play together. Today, she’s brought a full tea set. When the table is set and Luli calls out in Chinese, “Chá,” “all around the room, heads popped up.” In a series of panels, children chime back in Russian, Hindi, Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Spanish, German, Swahili, and Portuguese. The word for tea sounds quite similar across languages, and soon enough each child grabs a seat at the table to share a warm cup of tea. Shy smiles lead to full hearts. Yum’s colored-pencil illustrations work alongside Wang’s simple, rhythmic text to highlight the concepts of uniqueness and similarity. Gentle, repeated refrains like “all around the room/table” and measured moments of tea cups passed back and forth create beats of unity and circularity. Languages are presented in their script with romanization/transliteration for pronunciation. Perspectives and layouts vary for a dynamic read and give space to each child and their individuality. Endpapers showcase teacup designs from the 10 countries highlighted; in an author’s note, Wang describes the childhood experience that inspired the book. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A beautiful—though complex—exploration of generational trauma. (Author’s note) (Fantasy 10-14)
IF YOU BELIEVE IN ME
Wells, Rosemary
Red Comet Press (28 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-63655-016-9

Positive thinking can work wonders. A young bear remarks on—and demonstrates—a number of skills and talents—cartwheeling, flying a kite, knowing books by heart, even being fearless—that, the bear adds, can only be accomplished if “You believe in me.” (“You” is depicted throughout as a caring, loving, stalwart adult bear.) The small ursine proceeds to declare confidently that no matter what the future holds, their dreams will always come true because of the special adult’s positivity. The message here is commendable: Parents and caregivers should always strive to cheer their little ones on. This volume would make a welcome gift for expectant or new parents to remind them how important it is that they develop and maintain children’s strong self-esteem. Strengthening the case that the book is aimed at adults, the narrator’s voice seems directed at them rather than youngsters; as a result, kids’ attention and understanding may flag. Though youngsters feel empowered and buoyed on a visceral level by adults’ affirming behaviors, they’re unlikely to actually compliment their special grown-ups with the phrase “You believe in me.” Small children will probably also be confused by the book’s final line—“I believe in you”—which reverses the story’s familiar refrain suddenly. Willems comes through with her usual engaging illustrations. Lively and sweet, they present an endearing, warm adult-child relationship. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Makes a good, reassuring case for positive reinforcement, but it’s not a standout. (Picture book. 4-7)

THE FRUSTRATING BOOK!
Willems, Mo
Disney-Hyperion (96 pp.)
$12.99 | Sept. 27, 2022
978-1-368-07482-7
Series: Unlimited Squirrels

Crank the irritation level up to HIGH as the latest Unlimited Squirrels offering explores a quintessential childhood feeling.
Frustration has its day, and in many different forms. Willems has always used his Unlimited Squirrels as a way to deliver easy-reader sketch-comedy segments à la Laugh-Ins or Ace-Hole. Running gags pop up periodically, like Happy Squirrel’s repeatedly thwarted attempts to say something only to be repeatedly stopped by the stage manager. There are the customary groan-inducing “It’s Acorn-y Joke Time” gags. And there are the longer sections, like a legitimately amusing storyline involving Zoom Squirrel discovering new emotions. Research Rodent is on hand, asking the squirrels how they deal with frustrations; their helpful responses include taking deep breaths, solving problems new ways, and counting lucky stars. Whether kids will retain these lessons is by no means a given, but they provide a nice breather (no pun intended) between the jokes. Little wonder that this book is one of the more enjoyable outings with the Willems squirrels. After all, the author did make his name with a pigeon book that leaned heavily on that very same emotion. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

The Unlimited Squirrels series finds its footing in the identifiable. (Easy reader. 4-7)

HOW MESSY!
Welsh, Clare Helen
Illus. by Olivier Tallec
Happy Yak (32 pp.)
$18.99 | May 3, 2022
978-0-7112-6970-5
Series: Dot and Duck

The Odd Couple for a new generation.
Dot and Duck have another quarrel to reconcile. Light-skinned Dot—wearing a red-hooded, yellow polka-dot romper—is frustrated with Duck. There’s toothpaste on the bathroom floor, Duck’s bed is a rumpled mess, and Dot can’t stand accidentally stepping on Duck’s scattered toys. The titular phrase is repeatedly muttered and shouted: “How messy!” Annoyed, Dot drags Duck to the beach. It’s much easier to be messy outdoors. Alas, their tendencies follow. Dot prefers everything to be precise while making sand castles (“Neat and tidy. Tidy and trim”), while Duck is, well, the opposite. Sand flies everywhere, and mounds of kelp are piled high. The two argue until Duck shows they accidentally slip and ruin the art. With wide, imploring eyes, the duo look directly to the audience and ask, “Now what do we do?” Luckily, a creative solution makes the most of both their talents. Pulses with a visual energy, the art is peppered with splatters, splashes, and comedic pratfalls. Short, exclamatory phrases and expansive white space make this a fun choice for both young independent readers or a group read-aloud. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A neat and tidy look at how messy the art of compromise can be. (Picture book. 3-6)

AGENT LLAMA
Woolfe, Angela
Illus. by Duncan Beedie
Tiger Tales (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-1-68010-285-7

A deceptive doppelgänger can’t stop the fun! Charlie Palmer, aka Agent Llama, is back for another mission, and the stakes are even higher! Charlie is fresh off a successful assignment rescuing a pair of underpants in Agent
“This cute tale proves it’s not hard to see things in a new light.”

**RUBY AND THE ITSY-BITSY (ICKY) BUG**

Wortche, Allison
Illus. by Sally Walker
Knopf (40 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | June 21, 2022
978-0-593-17417-3
978-0-593-17418-0 PLB

Bugs bug some people. Ruby loves animals, particularly furry and ocean-dwelling ones. But bugs? No thanks. Ruby awakens to find a large bug outside the window. Ignoring Mommy's suggestion to study it like a scientist, Ruby instead attempts to shoo the bug away by screaming at it, but it stays put. Worse, the screaming lands Ruby in timeout. This works out well, however, because, left alone with the visitor, animal aficionado and nascent scientist Ruby reassesses the situation and discovers an appreciation of—and even admiration of—“Mr. Yuck-Bug,” who the child thinks might be a beetle. Ruby discusses bioluminescent fish with the bug, draws pictures of him, and even feels contrite about yelling at him earlier. When night falls and the insect flies off, Ruby makes an exhilarating discovery about what's lighting up the sky! This sweet story about changing one’s mind and seeing things from a new perspective will charm young readers, many of whom may be bug fans. Dark-haired, tan-skinned, gap-toothed Ruby, who narrates in a rather first-person, is a realistic character who unashamedly owns up to a bug aversion and uses agency to overcome it. Mommy is light-skinned, while Daddy is brown-skinned. The energetic illustrations, created with a combination of mixed-media and digital techniques, are often set in panels and insets; some type is set in larger colored capitals for dramatic emphasis. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

**This cute tale proves it’s not hard to see things in a new light.** *(Picture book. 4-8)*

**THREE LITTLE VIKINGS**

Woolfvin, Bethan
Peachtree (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 30, 2022
978-1-68263-456-1

How to handle a troll? Just ask three Viking girls.

In a Viking village live three friends, Ebba, Helga, and Wren. One is a redhead and carries an ax, one is blond with braids and glassses, and one is dark-haired and sports a bodybag. The girls report to their gold-loving Chieftain that they hear something scary. No, he replies, it is a storm. But they awaken to find that something has gone through their village upending trees and homes. The Chieftain says that it is nothing more than a fox. More damage comes the next night as forest trees are uprooted. Their Chieftain blames some ravens. The three intrepid and determined Vikings turn to a reference book for answers, and on their hunt they encounter a very big troll. Their chief denies that trolls even exist. The three then take matters into their own very capable hands, deciding to use a pot of gold to lure the troll—until finally the creature meets an untimely end. Bright blues, greens, and purples with appropriate splashes of golden yellow, rendered in gouache and digitally, flash from every page. Though peppered with references to folklore, this fun tale is updated for modern sensibilities, with a resonant message about questioning authority. Characters’ skin color is the white of the page. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

**Female smarts and planning save the day, a village, and its treasure. Clever and timely.** *(Picture book. 4-7)*

**I’M A UNICORN**

Toon, Helen
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-5362-1976-0

A magical act of kindness resolves a small creature’s big identity crisis.

The narrator of this picture book appears to be a small bull calf with only one horn. After the protagonist reads from a book entitled *Unicorns: Facts and Myths*, that singular protuberance leads to the joyful titular declaration, “I’m a unicorn!” However, further reading and reflection on the matter soon provoke doubts. The narrator doesn't “poop rainbows.” Nor do they “sparkle in the sunshine and twinkle in the moonlight,” and their mane does not “flow like silk and smell like peach candy.” After fretting over other self-perceived deficiencies, the narrator spies “REAL unicorns” in the distance and is terribly worried about what they will think of them. While the cartoon-style...
illustrations help to enhance the humor of the spare story, with the narrator displaying a range of expressions and contrasting sharply with the colorful elegance of the “REAL unicorns,” the resolution may strike some as too quick. It arrives when all concerns are laid to rest when the magical creatures nonchalantly accept the narrator as a unicorn—after all, the protagonist does have only one horn. The unicorns even offer a mysterious orb of a fruit to help with rainbow poops. Still, it’s a clever take on a well-trod topic that should spark conversations on identity. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

**A solid, though not groundbreaking, conversation starter on acceptance and openness.** *(Picture book. 3-7)*

**I CAN EXPLAIN**

*Yoshitake, Shinsuke*  
Chronicle Books (40 pp.)  
$17.99 | Aug. 23, 2022  
978-1-79721-690-4

A child with a free-wheeling imagination reveals the real purposes of gross or unconscious habits.

As the child explains to a skeptical mother in Yoshitake’s simply drawn cartoon scenes, it’s all perfectly reasonable: Nose pickers are actually pushing a nasal button that releases “cheerful beams” that put everyone in a better mood; biting nails creates an inaudible sound that drives crows away from the trash bags piled outside; blowing bubbles with a straw sends a signal that “There’s a lot going on, but I’m still okay.” Similarly, fidgeting is the fault of an ill-tempered chair, a “Dash Bug” is to blame whenever the protagonist runs down a hall, and dancing around naked after a bath is just training for when evil, clothes-stealing aliens invade school. Nonetheless, a mild parental request to “try to be a little more mindful of having good manners” is received with equanimity—and the cogent observation that children aren’t the only ones who exhibit such behaviors. The matching serious expressions on the faces of the two figures crank the drollery up an extra notch. Both the child and the mother have skin the white of the page. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

**An easy pick.** *(Picture book. 5-8)*

**BOOP THE SNOOT**

*Anstee, Ashlyn*  
Viking (16 pp.)  
$7.99 | July 5, 2022  
978-0-593-52481-7

An invitation to “boop” the “snoots” of animals in this board book.

“How many of these snoots could a baby boop if a baby could boop snoots?” Quite a few! Booping a baby on the nose is an age-old game played between caregivers and little ones, and this book is an extension of that giggle-filled game. Anstee’s text invites readers to boop some friendly animals on the nose: a dog, cats, even a tortoise and a hare. When the text asks, “Can a baby boop this snoot?” the page features a large pointing hand highlighted by a circle of color, drawing attention to the call to action. The tongue-twister nature of the book keeps the pace bopping. Anstee’s illustrations feature solid-colored backgrounds peppered with flecks, each animal and person drawn with a dark outline and bright fill. The people included in the book range in skin tone; the caregiver-child pair depicted at the end are brown-skinned. Most of the children depicted oddly do not look like babies (shown walking, for example), even though the book speaks directly about them. *Baby* is a term of endearment, of course, and could apply to the bodiless arms on some pages, but it’s still a surprising choice given the book’s infant-appropriate content. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

**Playful and interactive.** *(Board book. 0-2)*

**THIS LITTLE VOTER**

*Bonnie, Ann*  
Illus. by Carol Herring  
Little Bee Books (14 pp.)  
$6.99 | Aug. 23, 2022  
978-1-4998-1324-1

Voting is cool!

Eager, wide-eyed, diminutive students are voting today—to visit the museum or the zoo. They note Election Day on the calendar, “register,” engage in campaigning and debate, and, of course, cast their ballots in makeshift boxes. All these exciting activities are narrated to the jaunty rhythm of the iconic finger game “This Little Piggy.” While that ditty is likely familiar to almost all little ones, the formal procedures of voting, as named and depicted here, are almost surely not. Small children know all about expressing and making choices, but campaigning? Listening to debates? Casting ballots? “Voting”—even if ballots are marked with crayons on paper? The good news is adults will share this board book with young audiences—and have a lot of explaining to do—and, hopefully, be reminded to...
perform their civic duty themselves. The not-so-good news is the verse, unlike the charming original, is clumsy: The cheery illustrations are more appealing; however, since many scenes depicting the activities leading up to and including voting show only groups, it’ll be confusing for kids to identify exactly who “This little voter” refers to on most pages. Kids are racially and ethnically diverse, the teacher is brown-skinned, some students wear glasses, and one child uses a wheelchair. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Don’t elect this as a first choice. (Board book: 2-4)

LITTLE FISH’S OCEAN
Cousins, Lucy
Candlewick (10 pp.)
$7.99 | March 8, 2022
978-1-5362-1685-1

Little Fish introduces toddlers to fishy friends and the secrets of the sea.

Using her signature saturated color illustrations and short verses with simple rhymes, Cousins takes the youngest listeners on an enticing tour of various ocean locations. Little Fish is easy to spot, with a bright orange body, yellow spots, and green stripes. The tour begins at the “rock pools / by the sandy shore.” Lift the sturdy, almost full-page flap to find shells, seaweed, and crabs. Swim deeper with Little Fish, and thread through the kelp beds with a turtle, a dolphin, and a stingray. Finally, dive deep in waters “where it’s dark / as night” to find a squid and an anglerfish’s surprising ability to radiate light from the lantern-like appendage on its head. If you can brave the cold, it’s on to the Antarctic to find penguins, a seal, a narwhal, and a comparatively giant blue whale that, with the help of a flap, stretches the rollicking verses to provide a pleasant, rhythmic, chanting “background” whenever their kids wield their toothbrushes. The colorful, energetic illustrations depict happy, wide-eyed, curious owl looks on. One layout shows the perspective from below the snow pals as they gaze up into the sky as flakes fall and an owl soars overhead, immersing readers in the moment. With a short page count, a bouncy rhythm, and simple, appealing illustrations, this book will charm little ones. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A familiar rhyming structure and quick pace make this an ideal one for babies and toddlers alike. (Board book: 0-2)

BRUSH! BRUSH! BRUSH!
Florian, Douglas
Illus. by Christiane Engel
Little Bee Books (18 pp.)
$7.99 | July 5, 2022
978-1-4998-1340-1

Flash those pearly whites!
Renowned poet Florian’s jaunty rhymes suggest that a hygiene ritual many children consider bothersome can be “fun! fun! fun!” Each spread features lively scenes showing kids demonstrating tooth- and mouth-cleansing techniques as well as two couples in which the second exclamatory line—containing a word repeated three times—rhyme with each other (“Toothpaste on the / brush! brush! brush!” “Take your time. / Don’t rush! rush! rush!”). Parents and caregivers seeking an enjoyable, stimulating way to motivate youngsters to perform this important daily task may wish to recite the rollicking verses to provide a pleasant, rhythmic, chanting “background” whenever their kids wield their toothbrushes. The colorful, energetic illustrations depict happy, wide-eyed, racially diverse small children—some with missing teeth—taking care of their oral-hygiene business with gusto. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

We’ll say it: a toothsome experience. (Board book: 2-5)

I’M A LITTLE SNOWMAN
Elliot, Hannah
Illus. by Anna Daviscourt
Little Simon/Simon & Schuster (14 pp.)
$6.99 | Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-66591-916-6
Series: I’m a Little

Snow pals celebrate winter’s chill.

This board book bounces along to the rhyming cadence of “I’m a Little Teapot” with short stanzas like “I’m a little snow pal, / head to toes. / Here are my buttons, / here is my nose.” The snow pals enjoy winter’s cold by welcoming snowflakes, spending time with snow friends, and more. For the most part, the rhymes read smoothly but a couple have awkward rhythms that might trip up a read-aloud. The illustrations depict an idyllic winter’s day, with a bright blue sky, crisp white snow, birch trees, and red berries. The animal friends are darling: A tiny chipmunk cackles / ’Hee hee hee, / hee hee hee, / hee hee hee,’ and, you know, does it all through the town. The kindly witch shares the
“Captivating illustrations that are enjoyable for adults and children alike.”

BOOK OF OPPOSITES

Award-winning Jeffers’ book *Here We Are* (2017) inspires this colorful board book. Each layout features a different color, with its name and accompanying stand-alone images in each hue against a white background. From the weary-eyed beige camel to the wizened orangutan, the animals have subtle personalities. Jeffers’ soft, vibrant artwork holds the book together. The deep blues of Earth’s oceans contrast with the deep dark green of the continents, tiny lights of humanity glittering across. The beautiful lavender flowers on a tree evoke the feeling of summer, a shady resting spot below and a climbing adventure above. Most impressive is the page for the color white. Jeffers manages to make even the ice blue of a rabbit and the creaminess of a polar bear’s coat pop on the white page. The book lends itself nicely to lap-sitting snugglefests with even infant listeners while also offering rich naming vocabulary to young toddlers as well. Though this one isn’t groundbreaking, readers and caregivers will appreciate Jeffers’ art and style. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

An artistic romp through the rainbow. *(Board book. 0-2)*

BOOK OF COLORS

Jeffers, Oliver Philomel (26 pp.) $9.99 | Aug. 2, 2022 978-0-593-52788-7 Series: Here We Are

Rich illustrations depict a series of basic opposites.

In this board book, award-winning author/illustrator Jeffers takes inspiration from *Here We Are* (2017). Opposites like young and old and day and night are shown through simple stand-alone illustrations, through contrasting landscapes, or simultaneously in one layout. The art is compelling—for *outside* and *inside*, we see a child’s body, the left side covered in pink skin, the right skeleton, the ribs hugging the lungs. The sense of curvature and space is playful and adds visual interest. The illustration for *above* and *below* is also clever—while a small boat rocks on the water, a world exists below it in the ocean. A nesting sea gull sits above the boat on a cliffside, while below, a shark, a narwhal, a sea turtle, and other creatures swim. Jeffers also includes some scenes as a wink to the caregivers reading aloud, like the pages for *asleep* and *awake*, which feature snoozing adults next to a baby in a crib, wide awake and wielding a hammer. Many of the pages are rich with details, like a busy apartment building and a beautiful sloping view of the Earth. This book allows for a range of reader experiences and invites readers to linger on each page. People depicted are diverse in skin tone. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

Captivating illustrations that are enjoyable for adults and children alike. *(Board book. 0-2)*

BOOK OF OPPOSITES

Jeffers, Oliver Philomel (26 pp.) $9.99 | Aug. 2, 2022 978-0-593-52788-7 Series: Here We Are

When hard work needs to get done, who’s gonna call?

Young construction-vehicle mavens will enjoy this fun romp that takes them through a cheery bright-orange excavator’s typical workday: crushing garbage and loading it into a dump truck; helping with the installation of a new water pipe after the old one broke and spewed water through a city street; and digging a deep, wide hole in which to plant the mayor’s new tree. Through all these tough, painstaking tasks, the excavator “wears” an ever present smiling face, headlights standing in for diverse in skin tone and age. Panczyszyn’s likely digital illustrations are adorably unscary. The board-book page tops are different heights, orange type, of course. The unfamiliar word colored illustrations, that they are flying in the country). A were-wolf howls, and a ghost wails. And a vampire with a fanged smile shrieks “voo ha ha” before they all ride the broom together to shout “Happy Halloween” all through the town. Guertin’s rhyme, based on the oft-rewritten tune about the busy and noisy town bus, is a fine new rendition that will have kids singing along the second time through. Panczyszyn’s likely digital illustrations are satisfyingly colorful, that riders’ art and style. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

Definitely worth adding to your holiday collection of chunky-chewy. *(Board book. 1-3)*

ORANGE EXCAVATOR


Young construction-vehicle mavens will enjoy this fun romp for adults and children alike. *(Board book. 1-3)*

Especially for fans of big trucks and machinery. *(Board book. 2-4)*

BOOK OF COLORS

Jeffers, Oliver Philomel (26 pp.) $9.99 | Aug. 2, 2022 978-0-593-52788-7 Series: Here We Are

A board book of colors celebrating natural and human-made parts of our world.
“In the expanding field of children’s mindfulness titles, this one rings true for the youngest.”

**THE ABCS OF CALM**

Exuberant and participatory, like the music and instruments it showcases. (Board book. 2+4)

**THIS IS MUSIC**

**Drums**

Rajan, Rekha S.
Illus. by Tanja Yakunova
Rise x Penguin Workshop (26 pp.)
$9.99 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-0-593-38700-9

A look at drums and drum sounds laced with an invitation to keep the beat.

Exploring everything from Cuban bongos to West African djembes, with marching bands in between, this board book highlights homemade drums, simple drums, wearable drums, and even belly drums. Rajan’s text explains the drum names and their purpose (to “KEEP THE BEAT!” of course). With “TAM! THAKA TAM!” and “RAT-A-TATTAT!” even the words themselves make music. Rajan takes care to explain that drumming can happen almost anywhere, even on the side of a bathtub, on the floor, or on the refrigerator; it’s all about the rhythm. Yakunova’s illustrations are geometric and boldly colored. Characters depicted range in skin tone. The pages are simple yet compelling, allowing readers to start drumming by “playing this book.” This manipulative element really isn’t necessary, especially since the book makes for a great surface without it. The final two pages include labeled images of drums, even the atypical kinds like a playground slide.

Part informational, part playful, and sure to drum up reader interest. (Board book. 2-4)

**Horns**

Rajan, Rekha S.
Illus. by Tanja Yakunova
Rise x Penguin Workshop (26 pp.)
$9.99 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-0-593-38702-3

An introduction to different types of musical horns around the world.

This board book introduces readers to more than just the trumpet. There’s the dung-chen horn of Tibet, the South African vuvuzela, and the South Indian nadaswaram. Rajan also points out that horns show up in all sorts of places, from the loud honk of a big rig to birthday party noisemakers. An interactive element even encourages readers to practice making music by blowing right on the page of the book. Rajan includes vocabulary words like *cafez* on a trumpet. The final page serves as a visual glossary of different types of horns, from the bugle to a bicycle horn. Yakunova’s illustrations include standout solid colors and musicians with an array of skin tones. The pages are simple yet compelling, allowing readers to zero in on the featured horn and its player. This is both a rundown of instruments and cultures and an introduction to music and its musicians. Well-paced with an invitation to participate, this one is a refreshingly joyful concept board book. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**THE ABCS OF CALM**

Discover Mindfulness From A-Z

Rosner, Rose & Brooks Backsen
Illus. by Ando Twin
Sourcebooks Wonderland (28 pp.)
$8.99 | July 5, 2022
978-1-72825-070-0

A petite abecedarium of mindfulness delivered by cheerful, focused animals in rhymed couplets.

“A is for affirmation. / I’m great, and I shine. // B is for breath, / in and out, I feel fine.” Concepts include such emotional states as gratitude and joy. The values of routine self-care, quiet self-monitoring, awareness of the present, and joining others in community are gently unfurled throughout. Each idea gets a short, pithy explanation befitting very young children. Occasionally, the text waxes a bit maudlin: “K is for kindness. / It makes the world go ’round.” A page later, it’s downright metaphysical—“L is for listen. / Even trees make a sound.” The depicted animals correspond with their alphabet letter—F is for frog (and feelings), W is for wallaby (and worry). At always-challenging X, two foxes face each other. “X is for eXpress. / I have so much to tell!” Notwithstanding a couple stutters in scanion, the rhymes are child-centered and appealing. Against pastel backgrounds, animals have googly eyes, comma-shaped smiles, and plenty of positivity. A final page includes five good techniques for helping children calm themselves through relaxation, deep breathing, and creating a quiet place. (This book was reviewed digitally)

In the expanding field of children’s mindfulness titles, this one rings true for the youngest. (Board book. 2-4)

**LITTLE BUCKAROO AND LOU**

Sattler, Jennifer
Sleeping Bear Press (20 pp.)
$8.99 | March 15, 2022
978-1-53411-159-2

Counting is a means to an end in this cowboy-infused nursery-rhyme homage.

A piggy with a penchant for Western wear saddles Lou, the horse, for a ride. Written in the style of the nursery rhyme “One, Two, Buckle My Shoe,” the story counts up alongside simple storytelling: “One, Two, Saddle up Lou.” Repeatedly, the book mirrors the rhyme’s original lines, as when “pick up sticks” becomes “ watch out for big sticks.” Sadly, some lines do not scan as well in their new form. Stronger is the counting element, as boots, hats, bandannas, and more match the number on the page in quantity. Little fingers should have no difficulty pointing to each as it is counted. There are some lost opportunities in this simple tale, though. For example, the cowpoke’s accountments are pictured for identification at the end of the book but
are not named. This makes the broad assumption that caregivers will already know their bridles from their saddles. Gentle art gives characters a rounded, roly-poly look set against a big open sky. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A cute enough offering but ultimately a one-trick pony. (Board book. 1-3)

**HOW MANY?**

van Genechten, Guido
Clavis (20 pp.)
$12.95 | July 12, 2022
978-1-60537-746-9

Counting one to 10 with stuffed animals.

This board book opens with the question “How many stuffies do you have?” From just one for Duck to 10 for a child named Tim, there’s no wrong number. Van Genechten’s illustrations feature mostly animal characters with their stuffies. Each layout includes a small chalkboard with the corresponding numeral. All of the animals and their cuddly friends are drawn in soft colors with fuzzy edges, adding to the snuggly feel of the book. The stuffed pals are chosen as specific fits for their owners, sometimes with a wink to readers. Duck, for example, has just one stuffie, but it’s almost too large for the little bird to carry. Penguin lines up a row of seven tiny snowmen, while the tallest animal (Giraffe) totes along eight of the smallest (mice). A sweet end to the book shows Tim, who has light brown skin and textured short black hair, in bed with 10 stuffies, the very same animals towing along their own loveys on the previous pages. This is a sweet read-aloud for introducing numbers and counting to a lapsitting child. The simple, large illustrations and anthropomorphized animals are appealing. While there is nothing groundbreaking here, it’s still instructive and enjoyable. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

As undeniably charming as a child’s beloved stuffie. (Board book. 0-2)

**LIONEL POOPS**

Veillé, Eric
Gecko Press (26 pp.)
$9.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-77657-463-6

Oh, the places you’ll poop.

The potty-training phase is a period of time filled with joys, frustrations, and the dawning realization for both caregivers and toddlers that everything has the potential to become a toilet. Veillé encapsulates that joie de vivre in the story of Lionel, a young lion happily going about his day until nature calls. But where shall Lionel do his business? Should he go No. 2 on a herd of cows? Should he unloose his caboose on some tennis balls? Perhaps he should go on the Eiffel Tower instead. With each passing suggestion, an unseen narrator (and many a young reader) responds with a resounding “NO, LIONEL, NO!” sending the young lion off to his next possible target. Thankfully, especially for the good citizens of Paris, and those cows, Lionel eventually goes on his potty to a resounding “YES, LIONEL, YES!”

The story is sublime in its simplicity, and the humor will delight its intended audience as well as the caregivers helping remind them of the appropriate place to potty. The primary-hued illustrations excellently capture Lionel’s mood and humor. In the grand scheme of life, potty training doesn’t take too long (huzzah!). But when you’re in the throes, it can seem like an eternity—Lionel will make that eternity much more tolerable. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Potty training has never been so much fun. (Board book. 2-4)

**MY FIRST DINO-HOCKEY**

Wheeler, Lisa
Illus. by Barry Gott
Carolrhoda (12 pp.)
$7.99 | Sept. 6, 2022
978-1-72844-616-5

Series: Dino Board Books

The veggiesaurs face off against the meat eaters in a dino-saur hockey game.

This rhyming board book features hockey-playing dinosaurs as they glide across the ice in front of an excited crowd. With simple text—often no more than two to three words on a page—and an appealing subject matter, this lends itself nicely to toddler readers. Gott’s illustrations capture the speed of the game and the crowd’s enthusiasm. One particularly action-packed scene shows a puck slamming toward the goal, the goalie Troodon’s surprise and determination evident on its face. Gott’s ice shines, while the dinosaurs are depicted in eye-catching greens, beiges, and oranges. The action-packed scenes include dinosaur head-butting moves along with slick hockey skills. There are lots of details, such as the time display on the Jumbotron, the “DHL” logo on the rink, and the names and numbers on the players’ jerseys. The rhyming text is largely descriptive (“Dino-skates. / Stick and puck”), with a simplicity and bouncy rhyme that pace the story appropriately and allow the illustrations to take the lead. Overall, this is a great fit for dino fans and future sports fans. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Basic content with all-star illustrations. (Board book. 0-2)
SLOW DOWN . . . ON YOUR DOORSTEP
Calming Nature Stories for Little Ones
Williams, Rachel
Illus. by Freya Hartas
Magic Cat (12 pp.)
$9.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-4197-6147-8
Series: Slow Down

What’s more magical than nature?
Six brief, charming verses and colorful, endearing illustrations offer up a world of wonderment in familiar surroundings as well as simple, easily digestible information to young readers: A butterfly emerges from its chrysalis, dew forms and evaporates, birds greet the dawn with song, a bee goes about its vital pollination work, a chick hatches, and a spider weaves an intricate, ingenious web. Children are given the opportunity to witness these familiar but no less thrilling phenomena up-close and personal, in the here and now, not only surprising them with the natural world’s amazements, but also reminding them to revel in and be mindful of the wonders as they’re occurring in the moment—hence the Slow Down admonition in the book’s title. Each natural-world miracle in this sweet board book, a British import, is delivered in a two-page spread, with a rhyme on the verso page and intimate pen-and-ink and digitally colored illustrations presented in panels on the recto page. Several words in each rhyme are set in a larger, boldface font with capital letters. The lilting rhymes scan well and benefit from being read aloud. Apart from youngsters enjoying listening to and learning from these delightful rhymes, they can be encouraged to suggest other natural phenomena that fascinate them and then illustrate their ideas. (This book was reviewed digitally)

A lovely aural and visual introduction to some of nature’s miracles. (Board book. 3-5)
A deadly game takes place on an island that only appears once every 100 years. Isla Crown has trained for the Centennial ever since she was a child. When the island of Lightlark emerges from the storm that hides it and becomes accessible again after a century of isolation, a competition takes place wherein the rulers of this world’s six realms fight to undo the curses placed upon their people. The cost? One of them must die. Isla is leader of the Wildlings, a people gifted in nature-based abilities but cursed to eat human hearts and kill those they love. Once the game begins, Isla is quickly consumed by interrealm politics, life-threatening stakes, and a flirtatious rival. She’ll have to keep dangerous secrets close, however, if she wants to survive and free the Wildlings from their suffering. This YA debut is deeply reminiscent of the era in young adult speculative fiction that produced the Hunger Games and Divergent series—for better and worse. Some readers will delight in the familiar beats and tropes, while others might find it all a little too predictable. Grim, one of Isla’s love interests, is a total scene-stealer, often making other characters seem flat by comparison; their steamy scenes are a definite highlight. Characters in this world are varied in physical appearance. Follows a formula many have loved and will continue to enjoy. (Fantasy. 13-18)

A young woman defies the caste system by entering a competition reserved for the elite. In Sollonia, a world where the line between upper-caste Landers and lower-caste Renters is strictly defined, Koral’s family is condemned to fall in between. As a Hunter, a member of a Renter subcaste, she captures and trains maristags—deadly, temperamental sea monsters—for Landers participating in the competition. A philosophical deep dive into a world of caste and race, with themes of Family, identity, and love. (Science fiction. 13-18)
Pride Month is a time for embracing and uplifting diversity in sexuality and gender, something that has recently felt much more difficult between hostile legislation and book bans and challenges. This makes it all the more important that we have books for young people that are triumphant, that celebrate people as they are, that do not flinch from honestly showing real obstacles but affirm that happiness is a possibility, and that portray queer characters embracing multifaceted identities. It’s hard to imagine a future (or present) that you don’t see around you. For young people living in families or communities that are not actively supportive, books can be lifelines: If books didn’t hold such power, people would not try so hard to control access to them. At a time when forces bearing messages of shame are more vocal than ever, the following titles are necessary and meaningful sources of catharsis, recognition, relief, and sheer entertainment.

*Lakelore* by Anna-Marie McLemore (Feiwel & Friends, March 8): Neurodivergent, Mexican American, trans, and nonbinary: These characteristics can feel like obstacles in a world that is often less than accepting of Bastián and Lore, the teens at the heart of this story. But after they find one another in a magical underwater world, the realization comes that “the raw beauty in us, it’s something living and breathing.” This breathtaking novel pulses with emotion.

*Nate Plus One* by Kevin van Whye (Random House, May 10): What could be more romantic than a friends-to-lovers story set against the vibrant backdrop of contemporary South Africa? In this charming, heartwarming story, Nate Hargreaves finds himself traveling halfway around the world to a family wedding with Jai Patel, his friend and band mate—and secret crush—after his mom can’t make it. It’s an arrangement destined to lead to love, but how will they get there?

*The Lesbiana’s Guide to Catholic School* by Sonora Reyes (Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins, May 17): Religiously sanctioned homophobia, racism, and financial insecurity take tremendous emotional tolls on closeted Mexican American Yamilet. Fortunately, she makes loyal friends (and one who’s potentially something more) at her new Catholic school, has a close relationship with her brother, and possesses the resilience to keep reaching out even when people she loves let her down. This nuanced, compassionate story of living courageously will resonate widely.

*Kings of B’more* by R. Eric Thomas (Kokila, May 31): The joyous cover of this celebratory novel about two gay Black boys says it all. Before besties Linus and Harrison are separated by the latter’s imminent move away from Baltimore, they embark on their own version of *Ferris Buehler’s Day Off*. Their adventures include things both momentous (attending their first Pride) and purely fun (riding in a convertible)—as well as plenty of time for sharing deeper truths.

*Fireworks* by Alice Lin (Underlined, June 7): This light romance brings summertime fun plus much-needed, casual, non-angst-y bisexual representation. Taiwanese American Lulu is a bit disappointed with her lackluster love life, but everything changes when Kite, a boy she was friends with years ago who’s now a K-pop star, returns to New York City from Seoul. Sparks fly, but it’s tough being in the public eye, and the novel explores this challenge and more.

*Beating Heart Baby* by Lio Min (Flatiron, July 26): Musical beats and blazing California sunshine infuse this multilayered, heart-achingly memorable novel about Santi and Suwa, two Asian American teen boys who find their way to love. Exploring topics such as grief, multiethnic identity, chosen family, and being gay and trans, the story takes readers on a roller coaster of feelings as the protagonists navigate the vulnerability of honest connection and self-expression.

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
the Glory Race, a lethal chariot competition in which only one Champion is crowned. Forced to serve Landers but shunned by Renters as sellouts, her family’s crippling debt worsens when they fail to capture a maristag and can’t afford the medicine for Koral’s ailing younger sister. Driven by desperation and rage, Koral risks it all to sneak into the Glory Race. While other competitors have spent their lives training, Koral must rely on pure grit and her knowledge of maristags to stand a chance of surviving and saving her family. The Landers are determined to destroy her, but the Freedom’s Ark, a fractious and riotous band of rebels, may prove to be her downfall. Berwah’s worldbuilding is intense, depicting a cruel society in which the power-hungry elite are just as monstrous as the terrifying oceanic beasts. Readers will feel the rawness of Koral’s suffering, beg for a reprieve for her, and question how she can possibly still be alive after being ridiculed, chased, and attacked at every turn. Characters are diverse in physical appearance.

For dystopian fantasy fans seeking something fresh and savage. (Fantasy. 12-18)

**OVER MY DEAD BODY**

_Boo, Sweeney_  
HarperAlley (240 pp.)  
$24.99 | $17.99 paper | Aug. 30, 2022  
978-0-06-305631-2  
978-0-06-305630-5 paper

Foundling witch Abigail risks everything to find her missing friend. Legend at the Younity Hidden Institute of Witchcraft says that 100 years ago, a monstrous demon took a student who had entered the Untamed Woods. Now Noreen, one of Abby’s dearest friends, is believed to be missing in these same forbidden woods. With preparations for the Samhain festivities underway and the Coven supposedly looking for her, most students are quick to dismiss Noreen’s disappearance save for Abby and a few of her close friends. After breaking curfew and doing unsupervised magic, the young witches get into trouble, prompting her friends to give up searching, but Abby is convinced Noreen can be saved and persists in her search. Her investigation reveals secrets and truths about the century-old legend that might help her find Noreen. Spooky, mysterious, and also full of heart, this graphic novel is an enchanting story of friendship and found family. Each witch has a familiar—an animal companion with its own personality—that adds to the depth and charm of the story. Seymour, Abby’s familiar, is a Sphynx cat who suffers from anxiety. The luminous, full-color illustrations are striking and vibrant, adding to the magical, mystical feel. Abby presents as White, with pale, freckled skin and brown hair; her classmates and teachers are diverse in race as well as gender identity and sexual orientation.

An exciting fantasy full of mystery and witchcraft. (Graphic fantasy. 12-18)

**BIASED SCIENCE**

_Currie, Stephen_  
ReferencePoint Press (64 pp.)  
$32.95 | Aug. 1, 2022  
978-1-67820-232-3

An examination of scientific research that has been tainted by explicit or implicit bias.

The book details the now well-documented Tuskegee Institute syphilis study, whose Black subjects were never informed of or offered effective treatments or warned that they were contagious, and the thorny ethical quandary posed by the way cancerous tissue samples from Henrietta Lacks (also Black) have been instrumental in the development of numerous medical advances without the consent of her or her family. The author cites studies pointing to systemic racial bias in the practice of medicine. Currie argues that, as with these examples, sexism is likewise common by pointing to technological
examples—e.g., the sizing of space suits and treadmills’ calculations of calories burned—that, like certain drugs and algorithms used to make medical diagnoses and facial recognition software, were designed for or tested largely on White men.

He goes on to highlight examples of scientific research later proven to be falsified or heavily influenced by financial interests, such as with the tobacco and fossil fuel industries and the supposed link between vaccines and autism. The disquieting number of research studies in general that are turning out to be unreproducible is not covered. This concise, accessible overview features text broken up with stock photos and helpful and interesting sidebars.

A utilitarian but cogent reminder that truly impartial science remains a work in progress. (photo credits, source notes, further research, index) (Nonfiction. 12-18)

Emotionally shuttered 16-year-old trans boy Neil has his world shaken when he starts to fall for his fake boyfriend.

Neil wants to make it extremely clear to Josh, his heartbroken ex-friend-with-benefits, that they’re finished, so he enlists Wyatt, his roommate at their expensive boarding school, to be his date to his brother Michael’s weeklong Beverly Hills wedding celebration. They just have to pretend to be boyfriends in front of Josh, his heartbroken ex-friend-with-benefits, that they’re finished, so he enlists Wyatt, his roommate at their expensive boarding school, to be his date to his brother Michael’s weeklong Beverly Hills wedding celebration. They just have to pretend to be boyfriends in front of Josh, who, as witches, have a special affinity for helping animals but keep their magic secret. College intern Pike Alder, who assists at the sanctuary, has an incredible talent for getting under Iris’ skin and freely expresses his intense dislike and mistrust of witches. When she reaches her boiling point with his arrogance, Iris comes up with a spell to work through her frustration. Unfortunately, her magic goes awry, and the curse that should have burned away without impact instead goes into an injured owl that takes flight, leaving the sanctuary behind. With Pike accompanying her for safety at her mother’s insistence, Iris sets out into the forest to find the owl; if it dies before Iris can reverse the spell, the curse could burn Pike alive. The Pacific Northwest rainforest setting is palpable as the two trek through the backcountry in search of the owl, and their banter moves the story forward as romantic feelings start to build. Unfortunately, Iris’ repetitive internal dialogue, always reminding readers of the stakes, lessens any tension and makes subsequent scenes feel inevitable. Characters are cued as White.

A slow-burn romance but a burnout of a plot. (Fantasy romance. 13-18)

Charlie Owens’ part-time gig for a local ride-share app puts her on the path to self-discovery and an unlikely relationship.

The Backseat app is a convenient way for Charlie to make money. She regularly picks up riders while maintaining her top-notch driver rating. However, her record doesn’t stop her from hitting senior Andre Minasian’s parked car, which turns into her striking a deal: While his car is being repaired, she’ll drive him wherever and whenever he wants in exchange for his not reporting her to Backseat. Their many rides together give Charlie an opportunity to see something more in popular, sporty party boy Andre. Keating includes a side plot that involves a popular social media personality who works in sustainable building and design and is an idol of Charlie’s; there’s a contrived meeting and internship bid for Charlie that feel forced but ultimately end in a pleasant
surprise. Charlie and Andre are both likable, with complicated personal lives that are believable without being melodramatic. Charlie is the last to understand things that readers (along with secondary characters) will readily perceive, a familiar tactic that Keating uses effectively to keep pages turning. This novel delivers the satisfying and comforting familiarity readers expect from the genre. Charlie reads as White; Andre is cued as Armenian American.

A pleasant journey through a teen romance. (Romance. 13-16)
“An emotional eye-opener and a resonant picture of community.”

DESTINATION UNKNOWN

Khanani, Intisar
Snowy Wings Publishing (436 pp.)
$34.99 | $19.99 paper | July 21, 2022
978-1-952667-81-7
978-1-952667-82-4 paper
Series: Dauntless Path, 3

The truth behind the conspiracies Amraeya has uncovered have led to life-threatening danger in this sequel to The Theft of Sunlight (2021).

Rae has been abducted, mutilated, and imprisoned on a snatchers' ship, at risk of being sold along with other stolen young people. Escape is seemingly impossible because of the Darkness, a curse that steals the minds of the captured if they don't back down even after receiving a vicious death threat. Khan's gripping novel, with its upbeat and aspirational resolution, focuses on privilege, corruption, and power, interweaving details about Dua's and her classmates' family dynamics, relationships, and socio-economic situations.

A captivating story about seeking and exposing the truth.
(Fiction. 13-18)

A DARKNESS AT THE DOOR

Khanani, Intisar
Snowy Wings Publishing (436 pp.)
$34.99 | $19.99 paper | July 21, 2022
978-1-952667-81-7
978-1-952667-82-4 paper
Series: Dauntless Path, 3

Two drastically different gay teens meet in New York City in 1987 at the height of the AIDS pandemic. Introverted Micah Strauss lives a sheltered life on the Upper West Side with his liberal Jewish parents, who are clueless about his sexuality. CJ Gorman is his opposite: an openly gay, fast-talking, sometimes-compulsive liar who enraptures Micah from the first moment he sees CJ in a plexiglass bra at a dance club: “He looked to me like everything I never would be.” For Micah, unemotional hookups with closeted jocks from his school are the extent of his contact with anyone not straight. What ensues is a tour de force: an exploration of a relationship that pulls back the curtains on queer 1980s New York City to reveal a community wrestling with life and death. With care, emotional depth, and a myriad of period music references, Konigsberg expertly balances Micah's wonder, fear, despair, and outrage at coming out during the AIDS crisis. Strong characterizations of Micah and CJ are buoyed by excellent dialogue, and believable secondary characters—Micah's doting mother, caring but passive father, hurt and jealous best friend Deena, and supportive lesbian boss—propelling this exhilarating page-turner. It's sure to be an emotional eye-opener for those who did not live through this time and a resonant picture of resilience, community, and activism for those who did. Micah and CJ are White, as is most of the supporting cast.

Historical fiction at its finest. (author's note) (Fiction. 14-18)

THE HONEYS

La Sala, Ryan
PUSH/Scholastic (352 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 16, 2022
978-1-338-74531-3

A genderfluid 17-year-old attends a seemingly idyllic summer camp in order to investigate their twin sister's death. Close-knit siblings Caroline and Mars enjoyed what appears to be a fortunate, economically privileged existence, insulated from life's worries, until Caroline's violent death turns Mars' world inside out. At the funeral service, Mars meets the beautiful girls from the elite Summer Academy at the Aspen Conservancy, friends Caroline called the Honeys—and becomes suspicious about the cause of Caroline's sudden deterioration. Determined to discover the secrets Caroline kept about her friends and life at camp, Mars returns to Aspen, a place they once fled following a disastrous incident and where they face battles as a gender-nonconforming outsider. They try
and discover what the aloof Honeys may be hiding by joining their work at the camp’s apiary. Events soon take strange and fantastic twists as Mars realizes that time and people seem to vanish. Mars’ comfort in these new relationships falters more than once, and unusual experiences test their trust. Answers come, if slowly, in this novel that is ideal for patient readers who enjoy a strong narrative voice and careful examination of inner and outer obstacles. La Sala delivers a sharply observed, imaginative tale of grief, destruction, and the transcendent nature of the reinvention that follows the aftermath of death. Most main characters are assumed White.

As rich and complex as dark amber honey. (Paranormal horror. 14+)  

THE DROWNED WOODS  
Lloyd-Jones, Emily  
Little, Brown (352 pp.)  
$18.99 | Aug. 16, 2022  
978-0-7595-5631-7  

A group of misfits comes together to perpetrate the ultimate heist in a fantasy novel imbued with Welsh folklore elements. It is a risky plan, one with high stakes, dark magic, and a treacherous journey, but in the end, whoever survives gets a share in a mythical treasure. And if their heist also happens to help remove corrupt Prince Garanhir from power, so much the better. This is how former spymaster Renfrew manages to convince Mererid, the last water diviner, to go along with her old handler’s scheme, especially since it could mean gaining her freedom in the end. Their crew includes Fan, a cursed ironfetch; Trefor, his corgi; and Ifanna, a thief and Mer’s old flame who once betrayed her. As their dangerous journey progresses, the ragtag band realizes nothing and no one is as it seems, and their heist has much bigger consequences than they expected. Infused with Welsh folklore and mythology, this beautifully written, otherworldly stand-alone fantasy packs a punch as it examines topics relating to power, agency, and accountability. It features a twisty plot that is full of surprises, well-developed and grounded characters with fully formed backstories, funny moments as well as deeply emotional ones, a touch of romance—and an adorable dog companion (who survives in the end). Characters are assumed White; Mer is bisexual, and Ifanna is lesbian.

A gorgeous, intricate fantasy. (Fantasy. 14-adult)
WORDS WITH...

TUCKER SHAW

When You Call My Name transports readers back to 1990 New York and the height of the AIDS crisis
BY KAREN SCHECHNER

When You Call My Name (Henry Holt, May 3) revisits New York City in 1990, when activism, partying, loss, queer bashing, ACT UP, Keith Haring, hospital visits, Madonna, Sound Factory, etc., were all part of everyday life. The Chelsea Piers were in glorious disrepair, testing for HIV involved using pseudonyms like Nancy Reagan and John Johnson, and losing friends and partners happened with tragic frequency. Tucker Shaw’s portrayal of an important part of New York and LGBTQ+ history—told via the alternating points of view of two young men trying to figure out love and loss—is, according to our reviewer, a “beautiful story that comes close to touching the stars.” Shaw spoke with us about his debut novel via email; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

When You Call My Name immerses the reader in 1990 New York City. Did you plan for the novel to function as both a remembrance and an introduction?
If I had an overarching mission for the book, it was to convey the feelings in the air at a particular time, for a particular group of people, in a particular part of the world. I wanted to honor the memories that I (and so many others) still carry from those days but also to introduce younger readers to the complexities of queer life in 1990. To the feelings.

What did it look like to be a gay teenager back then? What did it mean, in a pre-internet era, to seek and find kindred spirits? What were the dangers specific to queer people, and what did it feel like to encounter them? How was it possible to experience joy and optimism in an atmosphere so thick with sorrow?

When You Call My Name represents only a tiny sliver of the overall experiences of those days. The whole story is infinitely bigger. But I hope, in the rendering, that this story offers at least a hint of what things felt like for some of us.

Which resources best helped you reimagine New York as it was?
I spent a lot of time digging through the shoe boxes I keep under my bed. They’re filled with old photographs, mixtapes, and other mementos from the 1980s and 1990s. I’m also a big believer in tacking things up on a wall where you can’t miss them. For this project, my bulletin board was covered with magazine tear sheets of Linda Evangelista and Naomi Campbell, party flyers from Sound Factory and Save the Robots, action announcements from...
ACT UP, news clippings from the New York Post and the New York Times, and more. My little writing corner was immersed in relics from those days.

That playlist! The Beloved’s “Hello”; Deee-Lite’s “Groove Is in the Heart”; Madonna’s “Like a Prayer,” etc. How did you whittle it down?
The period straddling the late 1980s and early 1990s was such a great time for music. There was so much experimentation and redefining of what makes a “pop” record, what makes a hit. I wanted to include music that really saturated the air during that time but also had specific resonance for me. I wore out The Beloved’s CD in moments of yearning, I heard Jomanda and LNR out at the clubs, listened to Erasure and The Cure and Sade on the mornings after, kept myself going with Janet Jackson and En Vogue. And of course, Madonna was everywhere.

What surprises me today is how enduring some of that music has proved to be, like Deee-Lite’s “Groove Is in the Heart.” Everyone seems to know that song, even today.

Your novel is haunted and buoyed by so many of those we’ve lost to AIDS. How did they guide your storytelling?
Writing is always a bit of an emotional act for me, and creating this story was especially so. When we speak broadly about the early and middle years of the AIDS crisis from the vantage point of 2022, we tend to talk in platitudes—we lean on numbers (this many afflicted, this many dead) or inaccurate hyperbole (HIV “wiped out an entire generation of gay men”).

But in quieter moments, when I think about those early and middle years, I think about the names and faces and small, intimate expressions in the eyes of people I knew. When I set out to write this story, I drew fuel from those tiny reflections, happy and sad and in between. I learned that a haunting doesn’t always have to be dark. Sometimes the ghosts bring light.

Ben and Adam have very different family lives, and through them, we see the ways biological and chosen family members can affect the trajectories of queer youth.

Family is a wonderfully elastic term, isn’t it? I think many people, but queer people especially, define family less in terms of blood and more in terms of connection, understanding, tenderness, unconditional loyalty. Adam is lucky enough to have many (though not all) of these familial elements at home with his parents, whereas Ben does not. The key for them is to find the support they need to fill in the gaps, to allow them to embrace their full and honest selves and offer their vulnerability to the world as a signal that says: I’m here. I’m imperfect. But I’m trying and I want to love you. Will you love me back?

Ben and Adam contend with coming-of-age during the peak of the AIDS crisis. They’re also just kids trying to navigate early love, so they feel both part of a very specific time and universal.

I’m so gratified to hear you say that. It was important to me to try and create characters who, even if they occupy a fictional world grounded in the past, still feel like people you might know today. The determination and resilience they possess are just the same as the determination and resilience that so many young queer people still possess, perhaps even more now. And a good thing, too, because we still require that determination. The problems may have changed, but the need for youthful fire is as strong as ever.

Your storyline and cast feel ready for a sequel. Just saying.
What a thrilling opportunity that would be. I’d love to know what’s next for this crew, too.

Karen Schechner is the president of Kirkus Indie. When You Call My Name was reviewed in the March 15, 2022, issue.
to join the close-knit band that propelled him to sudden stardom and suffers from imposter syndrome. Born and raised in Brazil, Daniel also feels like an outsider as he adjusts to the challenges of life in the public eye and in the U.S. Mistaken first impressions beleaguer Daniel and Sasha’s relationship from the start, but their character arcs are skillfully and compassionately developed. A quick-paced plot and fluid prose make for an enjoyable read as the teens muddle through a blooming romance complicated by ulterior motives and Daniel’s celebrity status. As they grow closer, Sasha and Daniel also meaningfully engage in introspection about their sexuality and heritage, including issues relating to the diaspora and colorism.

A sweet, heartfelt romance that thoughtfully explores identity and belonging. (author’s note) (Romance. 14-18)

DON’T GO TO SLEEP
Moore, Bryce
Sourcebooks Fire (320 pp.)
$10.99 paper | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-72822-914-0

After a yearslong reprieve, the Axeman who haunts survivor Gianna’s nightmares stalks New Orleans’ Italian grocers again.

In this true-crime reimagining of the infamous Axeman of New Orleans with a supernatural spin, the hunter becomes hunted by one of his surviving victims. Seven years ago, Gianna and Enzo were brought together through shared trauma—both of their families survived brutal attacks by an ax-wielding intruder. After 17-year-old Gianna’s reoccurring nightmare of the attack changes in a threatening way, the Axeman strikes again. Believing her dreams are connected to the killer, Gianna and Enzo scour her nightmares for clues, and the grisly crime scenes pile up. Aside from the Axeman’s terrorizing of New Orleans’s maligned Italian community, the city also simmers with the tension of the Great War abroad and the 1918 influenza pandemic; readers will feel déjà vu as they learn about the historical reception of face masks and lockdowns. The supernatural elements—Gianna and the Axeman’s connection, an Italian fortuneteller—offer eerie plot tendrils to follow (though some of these are dropped) and come into play in ways that heighten the dangers during big scenes. The graphic violence grounds the story and stakes. Gianna’s parents emigrated from Italy as young adults; Enzo is third-generation Italian American. Their romantic storyline is perfunctory but does not distract from the story’s tension.

A delightfully dark historical cat-and-mouse game blending the psychic and psychological. (author’s note) (Historical supernatural thriller. 14-adult)

HOW YOU GROW WINGS
Onoseta, Rimma
Algonquin (336 pp.)
$18.95 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-1-64129-335-8

Two sisters escape their toxic home lives and go on to have markedly different experiences.

Growing up in rural Nigeria with an abusive Mama and a silent Papa, sisters Cheta and Zam use opposing strategies to survive. Older sister Cheta deliberately baits their mother and doesn’t hide her emotions. Zam hides in plain sight, avoiding conflict, staying quiet, and remaining dutiful. This results in the sisters having a contentious relationship that borders on hatred due to Mama’s preference for Zam. Narrated in alternating first-person points of view, the novel tells each sister’s story in ways that are moving and show how understandable the decisions they make are, even when they can’t empathize with one another. When their rich Auntie Sophie and Uncle Emeke invite Zam to move to Abuja with them, Zam suddenly experiences wealth like she never before imagined. Cheta, on the other hand, is left behind: Hurt, jealous, and exhausted, she flees to Benin City to crash with Min and her new girlfriend, and running out of money since she’s estranged from best friend Mary, expelled from school for fighting with Mary’s new girlfriend, and running out of money since her mom’s most recent hospitalization for a long-term illness. Min reconnects

WHAT’S COMING TO ME
Padilla, Francesca
Soho Teen (336 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
978-1-64375-191-7

Minerva Gutiérrez is poor, brown, angry—and planning retribution against her creepy boss.

Living on the margins in the Long Island town of Nautilus, 17-year-old Dominican Min should be thankful she got a job at Duke’s Ice Creamery, even if her boss is a sexist jerk who has hidden cameras to watch the girls he hires. But gratitude is the last thing on Min’s mind, not with her life currently falling to pieces: estranged from best friend Mary; expelled from school for fighting with Mary’s new girlfriend; and running out of money since her mom’s most recent hospitalization for a long-term illness. Following an armed robbery at work, old rumors about a secret treasure hidden on the property resurface, and Min and her neighbor CeCe start to get ideas. Meanwhile, Min reconnects
with Mary and gets romantically involved with Duke's assistant manager, Eli, just as events start to escalate dangerously. Padilla's debut is an impactful, no-holds-barred exploration of grief and trauma. With a main character who is smart, cynical, irrepressibly angry, and seemingly intent on self-sabotage, this book takes readers on a beautifully textured journey that combines equal parts coming-of-age novel, heist thriller, and caustic commentary on systemic social inequalities. Despite the seriousness of these themes, when the ending comes, it's joyful, hopeful, and, above all, earned.

A powerful, genre-blending page-turner. (Fiction. 14-18)

BEGUILED
Panin, Cyla
Amulet/Abrams (384 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 23, 2022
978-1-4197-5267-4

In a Celtic-inspired fantasy land, a young weaver struggling for survival makes a deal with a storied spirit. Seventeen-year-old Ella learned to weave at her father's knee, but since his death in debtor's prison, she's braved life in the slums of Eidyn Crag alone. Interactions with Odina, a wealthy client, provide a glimpse of what life could be, and a bargain with the Bean-Nighe, a Scottish folkloric figure, brings the vision tantalizingly closer. Through Odina, Ella meets Callum, a magnetic and mysterious young man who promises her the world—for a price. What ensues is a dark tale that explores themes of poverty and power, vulnerability and exploitation. Ella, and her audience with her, learns the steep price of trust misplaced. The backdrop of mixed Scottish and Irish folkloric elements is muddy in contrast to the clarity and bite of the central themes, the worldbuilding a dilution of the rich traditions it borrows from. In contrast to the fictional Scottish setting, Odina is named as coming from a real Indigenous nation, the Mi'kmaq; Mi'kmaq culture and her experiences as a Native woman in predominantly White Eidyn Crag are not explored. Unusually for a fantasy world, birth control is raised as a concern. Troublingly, however, the efficacy of the calendar method is misleadingly overstated. Ella and Callum are cued as White.

Woven of many compelling threads, the final tapestry does not live up to the sum of its parts. (author's note) (Fantasy. 14-18)

DON'T LET IN THE COLD
Parrack, Keely
Sourcebooks Fire (320 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Sept. 6, 2022
978-1-72825-676-4

A Tahoe blizzard is the setting of Parrack's debut.

Seventeen-year-old Lottie, a White English girl who's been repeatedly let down by her flighty Mum, isn't happy about spending the night alone in a remote cabin with her quiet, nature-loving new stepsister, 15-year-old Black American Jade, while their parents go on their honeymoon. They've only met three times before and haven't exactly clicked. Then again, it's only one night. How bad could it be? Then the power goes out and the stranger arrives. Alex, described generically as Asian, is tall and charming and claims to have lost his way—he's just a boy walking his dog. However, his story is full of holes, and before long Lottie suspects he's hiding something. Just as she confronts him, a fire breaks out in the cabin, and Lottie, Jade, and Alex are forced out into the cold and snow with only each other to rely on; one night on their own turns into a dayslong struggle for survival. It's unfortunate that encounters with a bear, a mountain lion, and an avalanche are nothing compared to the human threat stalking them through the wild white wilderness. Lottie's first-person narration is generic, but the action is fast-paced, with just enough romantic tension between Lottie and Alex to keep it interesting, while the tentative nature of Lottie and Jade's new sister relationship fades quickly as they learn to rely on and appreciate each other.

Comfortingly familiar page-turning suspense. (Thriller. 13-17)

THE MAN OR THE MONSTER
Qureshi, Aamna
CamCat Books (320 pp.)
$24.99 | July 26, 2022
978-0-7443-0557-9
Series: The Marghazar Trials, 2

The sequel to The Lady or the Lion (2021) delivers drama, romance, and adventure as readers witness the end of this tale of choices and consequences. This duology closer returns to fictional Marghazar, a beautifully laid out world influenced by Islamic and Pakistani cultures, to reveal the fate of Asfandyar and the outcome of Durkhanai's decision. After making him choose between two doors, one of which leads to betrothal and one to a fatal attack by a lion, Durkhanai is driven to despair as Asfandyar, her forbidden love, is sent to marry her cousin. As a result, she loses not only his trust, but that of her family as well. When Durkhanai receives shocking news about her father, she is once again faced with a choice. Instead of being a pawn, Durkhanai realizes she must take matters into her own hands.
to ensure that everything and everyone she loves is protected. Qureshi pulls readers back into her culturally rich kingdom in which characters mature and develop through many emotional twists. The diversity and inclusivity of the first entry are continued and extended here. The action-oriented plot has a faster pace than the first novel, with lots of surprises as readers watch Durkhanai blossom into being the leader she was born to be.

Living up to the success of its predecessor, a fitting end to a saga of royal intrigue. (Historical fiction. 14-18)

TRAVELERS
Riley, Brett
Imbrifex Books (311 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 2, 2022
Series: Freaks, 2

Defeating a blood-sucking monster from another dimension turns out to be only the warm-up for a team of superpowered teens.

Their efforts to expand their newly acquired powers while keeping them secret and playing surveillance games with a hostile unit of government men enter a more active phase for the six self-dubbed Freaks with the sudden appearance of scores of eerily alert rabbits in their small Arkansas town. At the same time, the arrival of a new classmate, nonbinary Latinx Bec Villalobos, roils the hormonal waters for both White lesbian Christian and African American brainiac Jamie. Angry, traumatized Micah, who is White, falls under the sway of his sinister great-uncle Baltar—a stranger with a weirdly compelling voice and a murky but plainly evil agenda. All three developments prove hard challenges to the team’s already fragile cohesiveness. But a series of increasingly violent encounters (interspersed with Micah’s flashbacks to his mother’s dismemberment by a monster in the previous volume) culminate in a face-off with an ancient, powerful shape-shifting trickster out to wreak vengeance for the persecution of local Indigenous nations. Along with brutal scenes of torture and bloodshed (not to mention references to at least eight more lurking supernatural foes to feed future episodes), Riley weaves explorations of anger issues and budding romance as well as forthrightly confronted themes of racial, religious, and class conflict.

Adolescent issues compete for attention with monsters, not all nonhuman, in this grimdark sequel. (Horror fantasy. 14-16)

BLOOD LIKE FATE
Sambury, Liselle
McElderry (480 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-1-5344-6531-2
Series: Blood Like Magic, 2

A Black teenage witch deals with the fallout of past choices while trying to prevent future destruction.

Voya is facing the aftermath of the tough choices she made in Blood Like Magic (2021) in order to pass her Calling and acquire magical powers. Having received two gifts, Voya is now the youngest Matriarch ever to be crowned in her family. She finds that she has much to do to earn the respect of those around her—and possibly even those who came before her, since her ancestors have not answered any of her calls for guidance. The recent death of her grandmother—her family’s previous Matriarch—has caused new intrafamilial strain and enhanced existing stressors. Not only that, but Justin Tremblay, renowned tech magnate and sponsor father of Luc, Voya’s first love, is presumed dead, and Luc thinks Voya is responsible. As if her plate weren’t full enough, Voya experiences a vision that shows her the potential annihilation of her family and the wider Black witch community in Toronto. Now, to try and prevent the devastating future she foresaw, she has to work to overcome her insecurities as a Matriarch and convince the elders who also lack faith in her to unite. Thanks to Sambury’s fluid writing style and well-established storyline and characters, readers will easily be able to follow Voya and other supporting characters as their lives and challenges become more complicated.

A worthy follow-up to a stellar debut. (Fantasy. 14-18)

UNRETOUCHABLE
Szamosi, Sofia
Graphic Universe (152 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Sept. 6, 2022
978-1-72846-292-9

A young artist spends her summer after high school learning about the extent to which commercial photos are digitally altered.

Olive is headed for art school in the fall, and though she experiences some self-doubt, she understands that she’s lucky to be able to live rent-free at home in New York City with her mom so near her college. She doesn’t hesitate long before accepting an internship her magazine executive mom finds for her working with a photo tech retouching images for a fashion publication. Olive’s uneasiness with altering photos and even completely inventing digital models grows as her feelings about herself go into a tailspin, not helped by her complicated relationship with social media. This tale pairs bold, blocky, black-and-white art with text sharing Olive’s deeply introspective musings. With
A thoroughly enjoyable extension of the Peter Pan narrative that explores chosen family. (Graphic fantasy. 12-15)

NEVERLANDERS
Taylor, Tom
Illus. by Jon Sommariva
Razorbill/Penguin (192 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 30, 2022
978-0-593-35171-0

The last of the Lost Boys gambles the fate of Neverland on getting a ragtag group of young friends to enlist in a magical war.

Paco, the only surviving Lost Boy, travels to New York to find new recruits to help him fight a battle to save Neverland. He meets Bee and Luz when he saves their lives during a subway skirmish. Bee then invites him back to their trailer in a junkyard and introduces him to the rest of the crew. While some of them are initially suspicious of Paco, they ultimately agree to go with him to Neverland in hopes of a better life. Adults have built Otherland on the border of Neverland, and it’s a polluted place of greed and exploitation; now the residents and keeps them young. Paco is hoping that the fast-paced, adventure-filled storyline forms a well-constructed story that adapts elements from the original world of Peter Pan and includes touches of humor that will keep readers engaged. Cutlass-wielding Tink’s appearance channels KISS by way of David Bowie. The illustrations are bright and expressive, with creatively varied panels that draw readers’ eyes. Names and physical appearances highlight a racially diverse cast.

An appealing look at important issues through the lens of a privileged protagonist. (Graphic fiction. 12-18)
gives her the worst gift possible. After being hit on the head, Alice is thrown back a year and forced to live through the day her sister died, but there is a catch: If Alice can solve the mystery of who attacked Chloe, everything she changes during that night will remain, offering her a chance to save her sister. This book offers readers strong pacing that parallels that of slasher films, with a dash of mystery and a pinch of meta-horror, making it hard to put down. Main characters are White, and there is some diversity in race and sexuality in the supporting cast.

A delightfully twisted story. (Horror. 12-18)

THE LIES WE TELL
Zhao, Katie
Bloomsbury (352 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 9, 2022
978-1-5476-0399-2

An intrepid college freshman pushes past her comfort zone to investigate an unsolved murder.

Brookings University freshman Anna Xu, back home in Michigan after a whirlwind summer in Beijing with relatives, is on a mission. She hopes to discover who killed Melissa Hong, her childhood babysitter, who was a sophomore at Brookings 7 years ago. Her stealth investigation isn’t easy to carry out when she’s also making new friends, navigating the college social scene, and fielding sinister threats resulting from her sleuthing. Not to mention worrying about Sweetea, her immigrant parents’ struggling Chinese bakery, now that old family rivals the Lus have opened a bakery of their own nearby. Not only that, their son, Chris Lu, is a fellow student, and Anna isn’t sure how she feels about him: Is he a competitor, a friend, or perhaps something more? With the help of Chris and others, Anna edges closer to learning what happened to Melissa. But will she discover the truth in time to prevent more tragedies? Anna is realistically drawn—at times socially uncertain but relentless in her search for answers about Melissa’s murder. In addition to the fast-paced, well-crafted main plot, subthemes abound and are all given full play: anime geek culture, White male domination of the Asian studies field, anti-Asian hate, and the sexual fetishization of Asian women.

A complex and layered campus mystery that explores pernicious stereotypes. (Mystery. 14-18)
These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

**WHAT DO YOU DO?** by Everly Cade; illus. by Terri Einer .......... 151

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**GOBUMPIN**

Ross, Warren
Illus. by Jade Fang
Self (21 pp.)
$14.95 paper | May 1, 2022
978-0-9903086-5-2

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**FIVE THINGS ABOUT DRAGONFLIES**

*Children of the Glades Book 1*

Anne, L.B.
Self (133 pp.)
Feb. 26, 2022
978-1-73626-886-5
978-1-73626-885-8 paper

In this middle-grade novel, a girl learns about her Black Seminole heritage.

Mia Bryant isn’t quite sure where she’s going. Her mom and dad have put the 11-year-old and her best friend, Paisley, into the family car and are taking them on a surprise trip—despite the stormy South Florida weather. Mia and Paisley barely look up from their phones when the family arrives at a building in the middle of nowhere, but the world inside is captivating. The building houses a museum about Mia and her father’s ancestors, the Black Seminoles. The Native American tribe, based in Georgia and Florida, historically took in enslaved people on the run. Mia is a direct descendant of Talula (“one who leaps water”), the spirited daughter of an African American man and a Seminole woman, who lived with the tribe in Spanish Florida. Mia learns that Talula loved to chase dragonflies and spoke multiple languages but longed to trade her traditional female chores for those that involved riding horses and wielding a bow and arrow. As the War of 1812 began, the peace in Talula’s village was threatened—with her Black father a major target—and the girl’s adventurous warrior spirit was put to the ultimate test. Meanwhile, in the modern day, Mia is inspired by Talula’s story. But soon after Mia watches it on film, a natural disaster strikes and she must be braver than she ever imagined. Anne, a prolific author and Florida resident who is of African and Indigenous descent, presents a series opener that is both well researched and well written. The author engages the audience with a dual perspective narration that’s exciting, suspenseful, and socially conscious, though not preachy. Anne supplements the little-known history of the Black Seminoles depicted in the novel with a short glossary of terms and additional information on real-life people and events after the story concludes. Though Mia only appears at the tale’s beginning and end, she’s a relatable young girl who finds her inner strength. The bulk of the unique book belongs to Talula, whose heroic actions will inspire young and older readers.

Riveting historical fiction that will enrich and delight the audience.
A Memoir

Breaux, Tracie

Deacon & Roth (204 pp.)

$12.99 e-book | July 1, 2022
978-1-73771-370-8

A victim of childhood abuse recounts tracing the roots of her father’s violence in this debut memoir.

This candid book’s fraught opening describes Breaux at 15 years old being chased through a forest by two men with a rope. She had recently fled her home, a decision made following years of abuse at the hands of her father. Born in Louisiana in 1971, the author describes how, as a young child, she witnessed him break her mother’s arm with a crack that “echoed across the room.” The violence was also directed at her siblings, with her brother, Bubba, being “smashed” into drywall at 10. Starting at 7, Breaux recalls, she was sexually abused, and her father would threaten her with a gun. The author explains the abandonment she felt when her mother failed to stand up for her. The volume tells of Breaux’s being placed in foster care and, in adulthood, deciding to take a DNA test, which led her to research her newly discovered relatives. The author unearthed a pattern of violence that ran through her family. This is a memoir about understanding how people are shaped by their predecessors and about finding liberation from the past. Breaux’s book opens with an acute sense of urgency, showcasing the author’s viscerally descriptive use of prose: “Behind me, the footpath was intense, and thundering, as two men pursued me. Blood pulsed through my head so fast it was like a wrecking ball banging around in my skull.”

Thoughtfully structured, the opening describes a girl desperate to outrun both her pursuers and her past. The account’s arc leads to a contrasting moment of closure and catharsis, with the author levelheadedly reflecting on her past from the perspective of “a strong woman who wants to spotlight and lay bare the evils of the world.” Some readers will recoil at Breaux’s detailed recollections of domestic violence directed at her mother: “Her face was distorted and bent in an odd way, and blood streamed from her nose and mouth.” But such descriptions serve to accurately communicate the unbearable horror of the author’s home life. This is a courageous, affecting, and cleverly conceived memoir that will have specific resonance with those who have suffered similar abuse.

A frank, sharply written account of hope and survival.
NOTES FROM A DEAD PLANET, 2022
*Please Prove Me Wrong*

Brown, Paul  
(132 pp.)  
$0.99 e-book | Feb. 17, 2022

A scientist warns of a pending ecological collapse in this nonfiction sequel.  
A neuroscience professor emeritus at West Virginia University, with advanced degrees from the University of Chicago and Cornell, Brown has spent more than a half-century dedicated to scientific inquiry. In this sequel to his 2006 book, *Notes From a Dying Planet, 2004-2006*, he calculates a dire projection that “life on Earth will come to an end by the end of this century.” Based on an abundance of scientific evidence that is cited in nearly every sentence, this work suggests that the world is plagued by three processes directly tied to human decisions: “Overpopulation, Mass extinction, and Global warming,” abbreviated throughout the volume as “OMG.” Published only in digital form, this book is described by Brown as “a living document” that will be updated and revised at his website, deadplanet.org. This format allows for the work’s citation method that offers readers an array of links to studies that provide overwhelming support for the author’s scientifically based claims. But despite the wealth of peer-reviewed references and his academic background, Brown assumes no prior scientific expertise on the part of readers, opening the volume with an introduction to the scientific method. Thus, while the book’s research methodology will satisfy scientifically minded readers, its jargon-free, accessible prose extends its reach to a general audience. This effort is complemented by an ample assortment of colorful graphs, charts, and photographs. At just over 100 pages, this concise work is an ideal primer on imminent global catastrophes that most scientists foresee but that have yet to meaningfully impact the decisions of the world’s corporations and governments. And while the volume’s ferocious attacks on the globe’s elites (as well as the “juvenilized adults” who make up much of the American public) may be off-putting to some readers, it is understandable how a scientist could become jaded in the face of overwhelming evidence that points to a coming disaster that the world blithely ignores.

A convincing work that predicts environmental devastation in this century.

WHAT DO YOU DO?  
*When the Life of a Loved One Has Come to an End*

Cade, Everly  
Illus. by Terri Einer  
Snapdragon Ink (34 pp.)  

A young crane seeks out ways to keep from forgetting a deceased brother in Cade’s series picture book about love, loss, and healing.

A mother, father, and child crane mourn the loss of Archie, the child’s sibling; the parents struggle to discuss what has happened. Finally, the child says, “I will miss him forever, but I am still here. / Don’t forget about me when I need you so near.” As the family comes together to remember their loved one, they focus on the good times, but the child worries about forgetting those memories. During a walk, the young crane asks Mr. Frog, Mrs. Bison, Mr. LeBron the dragonfly, Mrs. Beaver, and the bison’s companion birds how each remembers those they’ve lost. Cade’s smooth, simple rhymes go to the heart of the young crane’s grief without feeling overwhelming; the animals’ advice provides a new outlook to help young, grieving readers find ways to channel their emotions into empowerment. Einer’s mixed-media illustrations feature a painted blue background with cartoon animals; the realistic landscapes and somewhat realistic animals with human accessories (boots, bags, skateboards) bring the situations to life in a kid-friendly way. The sympathetic words and comforting images create a safe space for children to sit with grief and for parents to begin healing conversations.

A poignant work about seeking and finding comfort.

ALL GOOD TOVA GOODMAN  
*Carter, Mary E.*  
Toval Miriam (178 pp.)  
$15.00 paper | Feb. 21, 2022

An old woman ponders good and evil as the world goes to hell in this rumina
tive post-apocalyptic novel.  
Following up on *I, Sarah Steinway* (2018), Carter’s tale is set in a near future after rising seas touch off a catastrophe so chaotic—mega-droughts, bee die-offs, crop failures, man-eating plants, intelligent killer viruses, roving bands of psychotic raiders—that baffled survivors name it “the Whatchamacallit.” Among those survivors is Tova Goodman, a remarkably vigorous centenarian living in Placitas, New Mexico—now located on the Pacific coast—who weather the upheaval thanks to a rich diet of fish and bugs, the protection of the local retirees’ militia, and the help of her neighbor Emanuel Epps, a spry, 103-year-old builder who’s doing an arty rehab of the town...
Tova climbed under the covers to just lie next to him during a quest finally takes shape when Tova, Emanuel, and Emanuel’s elderly buddy Jerry Sterns set sail on a barge to find Sarah Stein, a woman whom Emanuel and Jerry both love. They last saw her decades before when she was living in a treehouse in the middle of the sea—where San Francisco used to be.

Carter’s yarn hops between decades and various characters’ points of view in a meandering, sometimes-disjointed narrative. Her scenes of civilizational ruin are rendered with sharp, evocative realism: “Plastic. Heaps. Mounds. Sprawl...Nothing edible. Just weird floating reefs of it. Dead things clinging. Carcasses, some human by-god... Just weird stunted plants; a single palm tree, Hollywood boulevard type, but fruitless.” But these tableaux don’t have much dramatic force; her world doesn’t feel very apocalyptic given how comfortably the characters get along while building drones and doing philosophical investigations. There’s a sense of loss and desolation in the novel, but no more than one would normally expect in a story of characters in the winter of life. Carter’s prose is most affecting when she writes of the ordinary sorrows of the pre-flood era, like just before the death of Tova’s husband: “Tova climbed under the covers to just lie next to him during his opioid stupor. Would it be now? Or now? Or now? She drew him toward her, back to living, pulled him back for a few more moments, and a few more, and just one more moment; not now, not yet.” It’s these moments of emotional anguish, more than her conjuring of a richly imagined speculative future, that will stick with readers.

A vivid, unfocused, vision of a broken world rendered in gorgeous, haunting prose.

**THE FAITHFUL DOG**

_Caruthers, Terry Lee_

Black Rose Writing (166 pp.)

$5.99 e-book | July 7, 2022

Inspired by a Civil War newspaper article, this middle-grade historical novel tells the story of a devoted dog who accompanies his owner to the battlefield.

It is December 1861, in Chicago, and Bärchen, a large black pointer, is enjoying the warmth of the fireplace when he becomes aware of tension in the family. Louis W. Pfeif has reenlisted in the Union Army, much to the chagrin of his wife, Elizabeth, and their 5-year-old daughter, Louisa. Elizabeth’s father and uncle have raised funds to form a new regiment, and Louis is given the rank of second lieutenant. But once Louis has bid his family farewell and departed the house, Bärchen leaps up and charges the door. He barks “furiously, hurling himself against it again and again.” He insists on joining Louis. And so the fiercely loyal canine heads off to war as a member of the 58th Regiment. His self-appointed mission is to protect his beloved Louis. Caruthers’ Civil War tale follows the 58th from its training in Illinois until April 1862, when it arrives in Tennessee and engages in the brutal Battle of Shiloh. Bärchen quickly endears himself to the young soldiers when he performs his showstopping mock salute: At Louis’ command, he rears up on his hind legs, raising his right paw to his eyebrow. He also gets himself into a variety of scrapes. Without anthropomorphizing the dog, the novel successfully develops Bärchen into a full-fledged central character who expresses himself, as canines do, through movements of his ears, an assortment of vocalizations, and deep sighs of contentment as he settles down beside Louis. The dog’s antics lighten the drama with humorous episodes, but there are also passages that are quite poignant. Caruthers has done her research and creates a vivid portrait of the confusion and violence of the war—the faulty weaponry, changing orders, frequent troop desertions, and lack of food. When the 58th reaches Tennessee, skirmishes with the Confederates add violence to the story. But nothing will prepare young readers for the tragedy that befalls Bärchen in the Battle of Shiloh.

An engaging, touching, and heartbreaking adventure.

**STRESS TEST**

_How Donald Trump Still Threatens American Democracy_

_Cooper, William_

Eyewear Publishing (145 pp.)

$26.99 | July 1, 2022

978-1-913606-68-8

A veteran columnist assesses the state of American democracy in this debut collection.

Donald Trump’s “words, deeds and basic instincts,” this book asserts, “are fundamentally at odds with America’s long-held essential ideals.” And while “American democracy withstood the Trump presidency,” which served as the nation’s titular “stress test,” the United States is not out of the woods given his sustained popularity on the right and the rise of sycophants who follow in his political footsteps. An attorney, Cooper is also an active columnist whose writings have appeared in more than 100 publications. This volume, a compilation of select columns from 2019 through “the first few months of 2022,” argues that Trump represents a dangerous trend in American politics that disregards the rule of law and fundamental constitutional principles; “openly and unapologetically” challenges the outcomes of fair and free elections; and has “descended into a whirlpool of lies, false narratives and abhorrent stupidities.” And while adamant that Trump
“Dawson’s book is a mesmerizing biography, full of drama and subtlety, and an intriguing slice of Canadian history.”

Swindler

A compelling and sensible overview of America’s emerging democratic crisis.

ATONEMENT CAMP FOR UNREPENTANT HOMOPHOBES

Corbin, Evan J.

Self (354 pp.)

$9.99 paper | Sept. 2, 2020

978-1-73543-850-4

In Corbin’s debut satire, a pastor feels lost in a world that accepts all sexual orientations.

At the opening of Corbin’s novel, a stunning archaeological discovery in Syria has upended religion and culture all around the world: The oldest copy of the Gospel of Mark reveals that Jesus ministered to a gay man and declared him “blessed among all people.” However, amid a wave of coming-out stories, Rick Harris of Hickory, North Carolina, takes after his gruff father—who was pastor of their church before him—and delivers a fire-and-brimstone warning against anyone believing in this so-called “New Revelation.” But his elders inform him that times have changed, and Rick either has to attend an “atonement camp” in Virginia or lose his job. There to greet him at the airport are drag performer counselors Marilyn Man Hoe and the “indelible” Eileen Right, who pop champagne in the car as they welcome the square, disgusted Rick.

An outlandish novel that delivers wonderful laughs.

SWINDLER

A.E. Dawson and the Canadian Problem

Dawson, Leslie Y.

FriesenPress (234 pp.)


Feb. 11, 2022

978-1-03-911839-3

978-1-03-911838-6 paper

A woman investigates her grandfather’s descent from a successful businessman to white-collar criminal in this biography.

Dawson grew up thinking of her grandfather Alfred Ernest as a “slightly romantic figure, perhaps a Robin Hood sort of guy,” an audacious man who embraced adventure and landed in some kind of legal trouble. After his death, she came into possession of a trunk brimming with his personal papers, and the author set out to determine the truth her own father had refused to disclose. Ernest left his native England for Canada in 1905 with little more than a “restless, risk-taking spirit” in order to escape poverty, the hole left by an absentee father, and the neglect of a “wicked stepmother.” He found astonishing success as an insurance salesman and eventually became “one of Canada’s most prominent corporate leaders and financiers.” But he was wiped out by the stock market crash of 1929. He inexplicably turned
to selling mining stock, peddling ownership in “worthless shell companies”—fictitious companies that he had recently invented out of whole cloth.” Dawson sifts through the evidence with admirable diligence—it comes as no surprise that she is a journalist. She reconstructs not only the facts of the matter—Ernest was arrested in 1942 and spent years in prison while his relatives “told their friends and neighbours” that he was in the army—but also the complex psychology of a formerly upright citizen who ruined the lives of ordinary people for financial gain. The author offers no facile closure on this score but rather a series of impressions: Ernest was an ambitious man who loved to gamble and had a deep romantic streak that expressed itself in his literary aspirations. It does not at all seem a contradiction that Dawson concludes that Ernest died a “broken old man” who also “lived a full life, with generous measures of love, despair, art, and adventure.” This is a mesmerizing biography, full of drama and subtlety, and an intriguing slice of Canadian history.

A rigorously researched account that’s filled with keen insights about a financier and swindler.

**THE DREAMER AND THE MARKED**

*Penn, Airic*

Self (452 pp.)
$20.00 paper | April 30, 2022
978-0-578-38842-7

In this debut fantasy, a young woman dreams of a magical realm and learns about her connection to it.

Krystal Monarain is an amateur photographer who works at Dahlia’s Tea and Book Shoppe in Colorado. Lately, she’s been dreaming of a manor filled with fantastical individuals who are unable to see her. One night, a man with half of his face badly scarred does spot her. This is Draqa, loyal employee to Gov. Sius Mavell Evi. Draqa explains to Krystal that she’s “soul-traveling” to the fae world of Arai and that she must be half fae. Krystal is stunned because she does indeed have pointed ears that she hides beneath her hair. As they enjoy each other’s company, Draqa suggests visiting her world of Tavelear one day—just before an alarm clock wakes her. Krystal resumes her humdrum life until one day, at a outdoor market, she encounters Draqa. He’s arrived via a secret forest Gate. She learns more from him, including that she shares her surname with a minister who was assassinated 24 years ago. More information whets Krystal’s appetite for adventure, but Draqa is forbidden from bringing anyone through the Gate. When she sneaks through after him, Krystal discovers entanglements of which she’s never dreamed.

Penn’s fantasy series opener adds pleasant twists to several genre tropes, including that Arai is not a medieval world but is on pace technologically with Tavelear. There are, for example, solar panel devices known as sonnes and personal communication devices called aspectacasters. Unfortunately, Arai also features prejudice against groups like the “yilura,” who can be jailed for “shapeshifting without a permit.” Casual readers may feel inundated by the narrative’s political aspects, which arrive in force early on. Patience is needed as the story arc of Ambassador Javis Zevos slowly intertwines with that of the protagonists. Krystal’s relationship with Javis changes as she begins dreaming of his tragic past, which reveals a battered soul. And while Draqa is often appalling, as when he says, “A random child is not that important,” the author carefully redeems him. A surprising epilogue foreshadows darker happenings in the sequel.

A crafty, twist-laden tale that effectively introduces a complex fantasy series.

**WE’VE GOT TO STOP MEETING LIKE THIS**

*A Memoir of Missed Connections*

*Ferris, Donna Y.*

Bowker (299 pp.)
978-1-73675-790-1

A wife and mother with a career in finance recounts turning to yoga when her life began to fall apart in this debut memoir.

In the opening of her book, Ferris describes her husband, Jim, waking her to watch the sunrise with their children on New Year’s Day. The author, a successful financial saleswoman with a condo on the Jersey shore, had what appeared to many to be a perfect existence. Yet Ferris acknowledges that she had a “spiritual hole” in her life left by the death of her preacher father some 30 years ago. Her marriage also was strained, a result of “years of misconception.” When a friend suggested a yoga retreat in the Berkshires, the author was skeptical, anxious that all the attendees would be “thinner and hipper” than she was and that reiki and crystal yoga classes were a little “woo woo” for her tastes. Yet during one yoga session, Ferris experienced an “in-and-out-of-body experience” that made her rethink her preconceptions. The author’s life was then thrown into turmoil when she discovered her husband had been cheating on her. The memoir charts Ferris’ facing divorce proceedings, coping with parenthood, reentering the dating world, and coming to terms with the verbal and physical abuse she had faced as a child at the hands of her mother. The book is also about finding new love, dealing with loss, and recognizing the many ways the universe reconnects people to those with whom they share a bond. Ferris recalls her spiritual journey, including entering yoga teacher training, in her quest for inner peace.

The author has a keen descriptive eye that allows her to vividly capture her heightened sense of awareness: “When she cued us to stand in mountain pose, my gaze drifted outside. The sun was rising. Large feathery flakes fell through treebranch veins. It was mesmerizing. Had snow always looked like this?” But her writing rarely lingers on the abstract and can be cutting when necessary: “Her spicy perfume gave me an instant headache.” The frank memoir adopts a thoughtful four-part structure—opening with *Avidya* (Love), *Duhkha* (Pain), *Ignorance*, and moving through *Bhakti* (Loving) and *Shanti* (Embracing)
“Gibbs’ teen thriller has smart, relevant social commentary bubbling under its surface.”

BARDO BY THE SEA

(Peace) to represent Ferris’ odyssey. She cleverly opens and closes the book with a sunrise, encouraging readers to reflect on how the significance of the event changed through the passage of time and experience. The volume often includes flashbacks to the author’s childhood, such as observing her father at the pulpit as a 4-year-old girl. These passages are too short, and the shift between past and present can feel unnecessarily erratic and distracting. Yet this minor flaw does not largely detract from a well-crafted memoir that shares pithy wisdom about yoga that sticks in the mind. “If we want to make changes in our lives, the mat is the place to practice. It is where transformation begins.” Written from the perspective of a former reiki skeptic, Ferris’ journey is an enlightening one that may offer hope and inspiration to those facing similar challenges.

A sharp, stirring account with emotionally and spiritually informative writing.

ALL’S FAIR AND OTHER CALIFORNIA STORIES

Feyder, Linda

She Writes Press (160 pp.)


978-1-94744-199-1

A debut set of 13 stories that largely portray the struggles of people pursuing optimistic promises of life in Southern California.

In these richly evocative tales, Feyder’s various protagonists confront their own lack of control over their lives. The author skillfully centers each story on the exact moment in which dreams and hopes are crushed. She sketches her characters—of different ages, genders, and classes—with pitch-perfect honesty. Older women reassess and reshape their identities, particularly in “All’s Fair,” about a woman with an ill husband who befriends a boy with albinism, as well as “Robbie Released,” about a small-town manicurist whose troubled brother comes to retrieve a family heirloom. Children must reevaluate their parents in “Joint Custody” and “Grace,” in each case painfully realizing that their hopes for a functional family life are unachievable. Feyder is particularly deft in her portrayal of teenage girls searching for answers and escape plans in “Engaged” and “Horse, Rope, Mud, Rain.” Not all is bleak, however; a wary hope arises in the stories in which characters directly face the disconcerting fragility of life or of themselves. In “White Shoes,” for example, a young girl realizes how precious her family is after witnessing the effects of her mother’s estrangement from her long-absent brother; suddenly aware of her parents’ foibles, Gloria feels newly bound to her loved ones. “Blind Date” shares the story of an awkward man’s search for romantic connection after he feels he’s missed his chance at love. In “T-Zone,” one of the collection’s strongest pieces, a dismissed U.S. Navy officer deals with his idolatry of—and attraction to—his brother-in-law. Overall, an aching sense of loss permeates this collection, which is heightened by the way in which it contrasts with the expansive natural beauty of the Pacific Ocean and the thriving orchards along its coastline: “The ocean sparkles at its points of height, as if the crests of swells hold blinking lanterns.” In the end, Feyder effectively captures what it’s like to be emotionally bereft in a land of plenty.

A beautifully rendered collection from a writer to watch.

BARDO BY THE SEA

Gibbs, Chad Alan

Borne Back Books (300 pp.)

$3.99 e-book | May 17, 2022

A 16-year-old investigates her new high school’s murderous secrets in Gibbs’ YA novel.

Izzy Brown and her twin brother, Axl, are living in a trailer with their mother in Dandridge, Florida, when Axl’s football talents earn them both a wealthy and powerful benefactor. Real estate mogul Dalton Wolfe moves the twins to the exclusive Bardo Academy, named after its neighboring “laboratory-developed beach community,” as Izzy calls it. Axl quickly feels at home there as the star jock, but Izzy’s feisty comebacks and thoughtful nature make it harder for her to feel at ease with kids whose houses look “like the set of a drug lord film.” Still, she finds her place on the staff of the Bardo Breeze, the school newspaper, and befriends Elton Jones-Davies, a nice boy with Asperger syndrome who loves editing Wikipedia entries. Wanting to become an investigative journalist on a par with Nellie Bly, Izzy, with Elton’s help, starts digging into the unsolved 1983 murder of Ricky Lee, another star football player who was attending Bardo on a scholarship. As adults who remember Ricky become skittish around the investigation, Izzy finds herself turning to prescription drugs to numb the stress of trying to untangle dark secrets. Set in 2008, months before that year’s financial crisis and at the beginning of the opioid crisis, Gibbs’ teen thriller has smart, relevant social commentary bubbling under its surface. Izzy is capable and smart but also relatably flawed and critical of herself, and flashbacks to 1983 reveal Ricky’s status as an outsider at Bardo in multiple ways. The parallel stories reinforce the book’s complex perspective on privilege, otherness, and Florida in general while leading up to an outlandish twist.

A fun mystery with a clever hero that offers sharp, surprising takes on big issues.
In this debut memoir, Gustaitis recalls her family’s flight from Eastern Europe during World War II and her father’s disappearance.

The author, a former reporter for the *Washington Post*, writes that she enjoyed a “peaceful and comfortable childhood” in Kaunas, Lithuania, until the fateful day in 1940 when she learned that Russian forces had invaded her country. Her father, Antanas, was a brigadier general and chief of the Lithuanian air force; he devised a plan for the family to escape to Argentina via Poland and Germany, but when they left the country, he stayed behind, planning to rejoin them later. The author fled with her mother, Bronislava, and never saw her father again. Before this, the author says, she was “oblivious” to the war’s impact on her part of the world, but no longer; although they barely escaped to Germany, they soon returned to Lithuania to try to find Antanas, to no avail. They lived under Nazi occupation there for nearly four years and then had to leave again when Russian forces returned at the war’s conclusion. She longed for a return to what her mother called “The Time Before”—an aching desire that Gustaitis depicts in heartbreaking, poignant terms: “Of course, I thought, the war would soon end. Then the Russians would leave our country; Lithuania would again be free. And then my father would return…he would find his way back, and so would we.” Decades later, once the Soviet Union crumbled, the author returned to Lithuania to learn the tragic fate of her father at the hands of the Soviet secret police. This is a rare book, written by a gifted author: a thoughtful and rigorous rendering of history and a deeply candid recollection of survival against formidable odds. Over the course of this work, Gustaitis conveys, in affecting, elegiac language, not only the plight of her own family, but of an entire country in turmoil. In addition, the work serves as a beautiful homage to the author’s mother, who repeatedly proved to be both “resourceful and brave” throughout their journeys.

An extraordinary mix of wartime history and personal remembrance.

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**FLIGHT**

*A Memoir of Loss and Discovery by an Aviator’s Daughter*

Gustaitis, Rasa

Self (306 pp.)


In this debut memoir, Gustaitis recalls her family’s flight from Eastern Europe during World War II and her father’s disappearance.

The author, a former reporter for the *Washington Post*, writes that she enjoyed a “peaceful and comfortable childhood” in Kaunas, Lithuania, until the fateful day in 1940 when she learned that Russian forces had invaded her country. Her father, Antanas, was a brigadier general and chief of the Lithuanian air force; he devised a plan for the family to escape to Argentina via Poland and Germany, but when they left the country, he stayed behind, planning to rejoin them later. The author fled with her mother, Bronislava, and never saw her father again. Before this, the author says, she was “oblivious” to the war’s impact on her part of the world, but no longer; although they briefly escaped to Germany, they soon returned to Lithuania to try to find Antanas, to no avail. They lived under Nazi occupation there for nearly four years and then had to leave again when Russian forces returned at the war’s conclusion. She longed for a return to what her mother called “The Time Before”—an aching desire that Gustaitis depicts in heartbreaking, poignant terms: “Of course, I thought, the war would soon end. Then the Russians would leave our country; Lithuania would again be free. And then my father would return...he would find his way back, and so would we.” Decades later, once the Soviet Union crumbled, the author returned to Lithuania to learn the tragic fate of her father at the hands of the Soviet secret police. This is a rare book, written by a gifted author: a thoughtful and rigorous rendering of history and a deeply candid recollection of survival against formidable odds. Over the course of this work, Gustaitis conveys, in affecting, elegiac language, not only the plight of her own family, but of an entire country in turmoil. In addition, the work serves as a beautiful homage to the author’s mother, who repeatedly proved to be both “resourceful and brave” throughout their journeys.

An extraordinary mix of wartime history and personal remembrance.

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**FIRST STRIKE**

*Keeper’s Universe*

Haas, Angela

Spotted Owl Publishing (363 pp.)

978-1-7361962-0-5

In Haas’ debut SF novel, a New York City doctor is abducted by aliens and learns that she belongs to a mystical bloodline.

It’s 2019, and Dr. Stella Jayne Walsh, a fun-loving guy who the aliens believe is a warrior because he appeared on the TV game show *American Ninja Warrior*, to mate and settle on a new colony world. She declines this offer and then finds out that her long-missing mother, Kate, was secretly in an order of healing “Keepers” who dispersed after a war against evil aliens known as the Zuldari. Now the Zuldari are returning, allied with pink-clad human inventor/entrepreneur Kandi Shook, who wants to get her hands on a Keeper and exploit their restorative powers for commercial gain and influence. Kandi’s chief weapon is Ryder, a fearsome cyborg who’s being blackmailed into doing mercenary work. Further kidnappings, escapes, betrayals, reunions, and surprise alliances ensue at a brisk pace over the course of the novel. Haas’ neat storytelling style is reminiscent of that of genre master Alan Dean Foster; the tale never takes itself too seriously, and it’s fast-moving enough to distract readers from asking too many questions. Readers may also be reminded of the Marvel film *Guardians of the Galaxy* and other seriocomic cosmic capers. Kandi makes for an especially effective villain—although, after outsmarting the heroes repeatedly, she fails to perceive the disadvantages of bringing such power beings to her lair. Sequels are planned, but this one can be read as a stand-alone.

A deft, slightly tongue-in-cheek escapade among the stars.

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**POLITICS AND THE MEDIA**

*Intersections and New Directions*

Hall, Jane

CQ Press (400 pp.)

$68.24 paper | $60.32 e-book | Aug. 10, 2021 978-1-5443-8514-3

In this book, a scholar examines the complex relationship between politics and the media in the United States. A former media correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* and current associate professor in the
School of Communication at American University, Hall is a frequent commentator in some of the U.S.’s most influential newspapers and television news outlets. In addition to this impressive resume, the author has taught a course entitled “Politics and the Media” for years. This tour de force, described by Hall as “a culmination of my professional, scholarly, and teaching experience,” is a timely addition to national and academic debates on the media’s role in shaping political discourse. From the rise of “fake news” and social media disinformation campaigns to the rejections by millions of Americans of the 2020 election results and the Covid-19 scientific consensus, the author writes, “major news organizations have seen attacks on their credibility and even their right to report.” Despite growing public skepticism toward the media, Hall notes, most Americans still believe in its pivotal role as a watchdog institution. And even with the attacks in recent years, the media continue to play a central role in shaping and directing national political conversations. In this well-researched, convincingly argued work, the author explores “how we got here, what is happening today, and what may be future directions” of the politics and media relationship.

Divided into eight chapters, the book provides an overview and historical contextualization of the current media and political landscape in the first four sections. They also offer expert analysis on the modern media’s theoretical and ethical underpinnings and the evolution of political advertising in presidential elections since World War II. The volume’s second half takes a more thematic approach, with chapters that focus on in-depth coverage of social media, race, immigration, women, and media globalization. Combined, the work’s chapters provide sound analysis on important topics related to the future of democratic politics and the media, including the impact of the deregulation and consolidation of news outlets, ethical debates regarding bias in reporting, and media narratives about race, gender, and civil rights. The book is well versed in the scholarly literature as well as pop-culture references found in contemporary television shows and movies. But what stands out in the volume’s research is its utilization of interviews conducted by the author that provide a range of perspectives on the media and politics from the vantage points of U.S. senators, journalists, critics, and activists. Reflecting Hall’s experiences in engaging with the general public, the book is written in a jargon-free style with ample subheadings that make for an accessible read beyond academia. This endeavor is complemented by a generous array of photographs from various sources, diagrams, timelines, textbook vignettes, and other visual aids. After the introductory section, each of the work’s chapters follows a format that includes a revelatory case study, a summary, and an “End-of-Chapter Assignment” for research and discussion by readers, turning this into an ideal classroom text. At 400 pages, the volume does sacrifice brevity for breadth. While the bulky material requires a significant time commitment from readers, the book’s comprehensive nature makes this a definitive resource on politics and the media for years to come.

An important, balanced survey of the intersection of politics and the media.

“A leadership consultant explains how certain conversations can transform a business.

Hawkes uses an unusual but apropos word to define the constant change that most business leaders face: “the Swirl.” The term acts as an anchor in an absorbing business book that brilliantly addresses how to cope with the turbulence of change, culminating in “seven crucial conversations” that lead to organizational transformation. Before enumerating and explaining these, the author logically lays the groundwork by first “Framing the Conversation” in Part 1 and then exploring “The Evolution of an Enterprise” in Part 2. Hawkes urges readers not to jump ahead to the conversations themselves in Part 3; this is good advice, because the initial sections provide a solid foundation for understanding later ideas. The first offers an excellent overview of the business organization, with an emphasis on the underappreciated notion that “teams and organizations are complex, adaptive, social systems.” Hawkes aptly demonstrates how a drive toward “alignment” can help keep Swirl to a minimum in such systems. He neatly notes how every business has three basic elements, depicted in a triangle: “Develop, Sell, and Deliver.” Hawkes also postulates that business growth occurs in “three domains” related to transformational change: “Leadership and Culture,” “Capabilities and Roles,” and “Strategies and Customer Experience.” The book’s second part concentrates on how an enterprise evolves, covering four stages of this evolution in considerable detail. The most engaging aspect is his assertion that these stages revolve around both individual and collective actions within an organization, from “Independent Contributors” in Stage 1 to “Leaders Leading Leaders” in Stage 4. The author clearly describes each of these stages and supplements them with examples.

Parts 1 and 2 are so detailed and relevant to modern organizational leadership that they could easily stand on their own, but Part 3 is the heart of the book. Hawkes introduces it by noting that “Organizations evolve at the speed of conversation.” He then devotes a chapter to each of the “Seven Crucial Conversations,” involving such concepts as “Activating Purpose,” “Shifting Mindset,” and “Aligning Strategies.” He elegantly describes each of these in broad terms to avoid overwhelming readers, but he also provides enough detail to give his insights some impact. For example, for “Activating Purpose,” he provides readers with a series of questions, including “Does this team have a leader willing and able to activate a shared team purpose? How will decisions be made in this team? What is the shared purpose of the team? Are the needs of the customers and stakeholders whom we serve clear?” Useful sidebars highlight specific examples and key terms. Hawkes deftly concludes the book by restating what he promised in the introduction: “an operating
system” for business transformation, which he sees as “both a human journey and a shared journey.” The author succeeds at this goal, skillfully exposing the complexities of organizations without minimizing uncomfortable realities. Overall, the book provides a fresh perspective on how to provide effective leadership even in challenging circumstances.

Valuable and actionable counsel for forward-thinking business leaders.

**LIVING GRIEVING**

*Using Energy Medicine To Alchemize Grief and Loss*

*Johnson, Karen V.*

Hay House (192 pp.)


978-1-4019-6344-6

Death can be the start of a rejuvenated life for survivors according to this heartfelt primer on mourning.

Debut author Johnon bases her exploration of grief on her own experiences after her 27-year-old son, Ben, died of a heroin overdose in 2014. The loss left her feeling sad, numb, and suicidal, she writes, but it also inducted a close relationship with his spirit, which she says she could sense hovering beside her. A medium conveyed to her that Ben’s death was an accident, and Johnson’s daughter said that she received a message from him expressing regret for that Ben’s death was an accident, and Johnson’s daughter said that she received a message from him expressing regret for

Author Kent performs a sort of ventriloquism act in these pages, mimicking the language of various documents and characters, although when he narrates as his fictional persona, he tends to take on a baroque theatricality that is reminiscent of the works of Jorge Luis Borges or H.P. Lovecraft: “time capsules often take the form of bitter pills,” he warns the reader. As you digest this one, explore the contours of your resolve and ruminate on what they mean for your life, beliefs, and actions, for these may be about to change.”

The work that follows is more of a linked collection of stories than a proper novel, and the connections between the various pieces are not always obvious. Readers may also find the final puzzle to be somewhat of a letdown, if only because the author works so hard to stoke the reader’s expectations along the way. Even so, the individual chapters are each enjoyable in their own right, as Kent has a way of capturing contemporary concerns, such as income inequality, in grand, gothic terms. Furthermore, the inclusion of real-world phenomena, such as the early-20th-century John Frum cult and the 2014 disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370, to say nothing of Kent’s fictional twin, lends the novel a charming aura of verisimilitude. Fans of Mark Z. Danielewski’s novel *House of Leaves* (2000) and similar metafictional mysteries will likely enjoy this addition to the genre.

A layered, paranoiac puzzle book with an impressive sense of atmosphere.
“King excels at portraying how innovation, when taken to an extreme, can take a heavy toll on human relationships.”

BLUE HAVEN

Blue Haven

Kerr, Elissa

Illus. by Zoe Saunders

Scenic Route Publishing (34 pp.)


978-1-73523-635-3

978-1-73523-634-6 paper

A father and child harvest honey from their family’s beehives in this picture book about collecting the treat.

A dark-haired, rosy-cheeked White kid loves honey and imagines what bees must look like when they produce it: “Do all the bees wear tiny goggles? / All lined up, filling bear shaped bottles.” When the child gets to help harvest the honey, first donning a beekeeper suit, the process is surprising. The hive is just a wooden box with slats. But the father explains that the slats are where bees store honey. Together, they pull a few slats (not too many, or the hive will suffer), take them to the extractor, spin the honey, and bottle it to share with friends. Kerr’s rhymes deftly describe each step of the honey harvesting process, giving young readers a sense of where this sweet originates and how it gets to their tables. The lines are occasionally shorter than the established pattern, with the vocabulary accessible to independent readers. Saunders’s soft-lined cartoon illustrations are mostly realistic representations (with the exception of the narrator’s imagined honey factory). A curious skunk appears in several images, inviting young readers to spot the animal throughout. The White family’s neighbors in the final image show some variety in skin tone.

A strong introduction to beekeeping from a kid’s perspective.

Honey Harvest

Kerr, Elissa

Illus. by Zoe Saunders

Scenic Route Publishing (34 pp.)


978-1-73523-635-3

978-1-73523-634-6 paper

In King’s suspense novel, a newly wealthy woman buys a condo at an exclusive overseas development only to find that her new home is hiding troubling secrets. Aloe Malone had a challenging early life, including abandonment by her mother, time in foster homes, and work at her aunt’s dingy diner. Things changed when she won the lottery and bought a place in Blue Haven, the world’s most exclusive beachside housing development. The experience of moving, however, was rather odd: She was rendered unconscious while traveling there, to keep its location secret, and upon arrival, she finds only five other residents. Although Blue Haven boasts the world’s tallest skyscraper, it's a ghost town. Her concierge, Amir, is welcoming, though, and the other residents are also happy to see her; they include an eccentric retired couple, a muscled 25-year-old named Westley, and a former opera singer named Bibs. They have amazing dinners on the beach: “Aloe loved the ambiance, cast somewhere between Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream and an episode of Sør Røtter.” But when she tries phoning her grandmother and others, no one picks up. A diary she finds under her bed, written by a former resident, tells a chilling story that suggests something at Blue Haven is terribly amiss. King’s smart thriller starts as an enticing trouble-in-paradise drama, but it soon blossoms into something more complex—an unexpectedly engaging psychological quagmire with SF elements. As Aloe’s mental state deteriorates, more is revealed about her identity and about Blue Haven, leading to a twist that the author handles with dexterity and which makes the story’s scientific aspects hard to resist. King also excels at portraying how innovation, when taken to an extreme, can take a heavy toll on human relationships. Along the way, the work also touches on intriguing ethical issues.

A psychological thriller that’s full of surprises and confronts the dangers of artificial happiness.

Blue Haven

King, Lisa

The Story Plant (336 pp.)

$26.95 | $7.49 e-book | May 31, 2022

978-1-61188-320-6

978-1-73523-635-3

978-1-73523-634-6 paper

A young girl longs to see whales on her birthday in Klein’s rhyming picture book. Abby is thrilled when her father says he’ll be taking her whale watching for her birthday. “Will we see whales?” she wonders in a repeated refrain. She knows that she may only see a few fins, and the foggy weather makes her wonder if she’ll be able to see anything at all. Soon, Abby, her dad, the boat captain, and three older students voyage out to sea. When one student spots a whole group of whales, the fun begins: “One, two, three fins we saw / Four, five, six galore.” The captain lowers a microphone into the water, and Abby believes the whales are singing her a birthday song. Klein offers Abby’s first-person perspective, weaving in notes about endangered species and human pollution. The scansion is sometimes uneven, and a few lines lack rhymes. However, the overall readability of the text and educational material at the end make it well suited for classrooms. Weber’s full-color illustrations have an almost photographic quality, but the real stars are the realistic whales, especially in a beautiful two-page spread set underwater.

An often engaging and informative tale with a conservationist message.

Will Abby See Whales Today?

Klein, Laurie Schulsinger

Illus. by Penny Weber

Manuscript (23 pp.)

WILL ABBEY SEE WHALES TODAY?

A Birthday Adventure

Klein, Laurie Schulsinger

Illus. by Penny Weber

Manuscript (23 pp.)
In this paranormal thriller, a woman with newly awakened magic discovers romance, comrades, and sinister forces in New York City.

Twenty-seven-year-old Katie Riley's intense psychic dream unsettles her. Since this shakes her focus as a criminal defense attorney, she takes the day off and seeks solace at her favorite local shop, Circles and Spirals. She's long been a believer in magic, as her few friends growing up were mostly Wiccans. But Katie has no idea what she's capable of until she opens herself up to magic thanks to a spell she conjures. It turns out that she's an Amdri—a time sorcerer who can open portals for traveling through space and dimensions. Ian Spencer, who works at Circle and Spirals, invites her to the bimonthly meeting of people with magical abilities like his and Katie's. This group helps New York citizens with such problems as malevolent spirit possessions. Katie learns that the city teems with supernatural entities. Some are relatively harmless, but others are dangerous, like The Wolves, shape-shifters who, for an unknown reason, have put Ian in their crosshairs. But Katie has even more to absorb about herself. She discovers additional abilities and finds that her new “higher self” came about from her collective past lives, though memories of those journeys are initially elusive. Meanwhile, the biggest threat that Katie and her allies face may be the satanic cult Fire’s Light, which many connect to a “rising darkness” in the city. And it’s not long before Fire’s Light turns its malice against Katie’s magical group.

Lonigan aptly blends supernatural elements with everyday life. Katie's Roman Catholic family, for example, condemns her for living in the big city and having no children. Her relatives certainly won't approve if they learn she's a Christmas party. In contrast, Katie's remarkable ability to solve problems as a criminal defense attorney, and as a lawyer with a keen sense of justice, helps her to navigate the challenges of her new magical abilities. The extensive cast is initially overwhelming, though where the players are and their alliances (kingdoms and unions) are always clear. Similarly, well-defined class distinctions elevate this series opener; for example, aspiring warrior Karna, as a “lowborn” Resht, endures bigotry. While the brewing conflict drives the lengthy narrative, there are hints of probable series arcs. For example, the godly Daevas, or Children of Light, play a minor but significant part; they're powerful mythical beings who some believe died long ago. Mohanty's pithy writing delivers such lucid details as the airy fragrance of "almonds and lemons" and sunlight glinting off "gilded spurs and bright steel.” The author sets a deliberate pace to decipher a cryptic prophecy in which the appearance of a mysterious “Son of Darkness” is a sign of utter destruction. A battle in the Riverlands, it seems, is inevitable. Mohanty's vibrant reimagining of the ancient Indian epic Mahabharata deftly puts familiar characters into an entirely new world. The extensive cast is initially overwhelming, though where the players are and their alliances (kingdoms and unions) are always clear. Similarly, well-defined class distinctions elevate this series opener; for example, aspiring warrior Karna, as a “lowborn” Resht, endures bigotry. While the brewing conflict drives the lengthy narrative, there are hints of probable series arcs. For example, the godly Daevas, or Children of Light, play a minor but significant part; they're powerful mythical beings who some believe died long ago. Mohanty's pithy writing delivers such lucid details as the airy fragrance of "almonds and lemons” and sunlight glinting off “gilded spurs and bright steel.” The author sets a deliberate pace that effectively builds to a massive battle scene, electrifying the final act.

Remarkable characterization and vivid worldbuilding bolster this riveting epic fantasy.
A complicated relationship with her father saw her enroll in Alzheimer's: The effort involves serious challenges, but "if you gesture at nursing home, grew worse and required hospitalization, and as recognizing the warning signs of Alzheimer's, communicating and traveling with someone who has it, making sure you have the needed legal documents, and finding end-of-life care. Some of her advice will be familiar to people who've read other books on the disease ("Tell people how to help you"); "Rest is important"). But Moreland's personal stories add a unique and valuable dimension—especially her harrowing account of what happened after her mother tested positive for Covid-19 while in a nursing home, grew worse and required hospitalization, and the home then wouldn't let her return until she'd tested negative for 14 days. Moreland's mother, Jane P. Moreland, was a gifted poet, and her fine poems, interspersed throughout the text, further distinguish the book.


A SKY OF INFINITE BLUE
A Japanese Immigrant's Search for Home and Self
O'Connor, Kyomi
She Writes Press (312 pp.)
$17.95 paper | $9.95 e-book | Sept. 6, 2022
978-1-64742-227-1

A Japanese immigrant recalls her troubled past, her relocation to America, and the loss of her husband in this debut memoir.

O'Connor's childhood in Japan was punctuated by emotional trauma. She recounts that during this time, her parents made a point of demonstrating that they did not like her. She was often given gifts that were "lesser" than those presented to her sister. This was due to Japanese customs that favor the elder child and to "toxic" family dynamics. The author in turn developed emotional "armor" that shielded her but became a burdensome weight in her later life. A complicated relationship with her father saw her enroll in dental school when she actually dreamed of being a journalist. Desperately unfulfilled by her professional and romantic life, O'Connor came close to choosing suicide. The memoir tells of her bold decision to move to America to work as a researcher at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. There, she met her future husband, Patrick, a fellow researcher. The couple devoted themselves to Buddhism and relocated to San Diego. Patrick's untimely death after being diagnosed with cancer led the author to face her grief and revaluate her past suffering. O'Connor is an author that writes with clarity and precision and can deftly pinpoint situations and emotions: "In Japan, I'd felt as dry as the desert. Now, I felt like a sponge. I wanted to absorb everything." The author's approach can be laconic at times but succeeds in delivering an accessibly plain explanation of how Buddhism shed light on her dilemmas: "When I reflected a situation with no emotions, only fairness and clarity, I could see the answer." Some readers may struggle with O'Connor's short, concise sentences and paragraphs and mistake her approach as coolly understated. But the author is capable of vivid descriptions: Papa's "voice became a weapon—sharp and impactful, as if he wanted to cut me." Furthermore, the memoir's prologue, which describes Patrick's final moments, is powerfully stirring, communicating the deepest intimacies of loss: "He'd been my home. He'd been my savior." O'Connor's book offers a profound reflection on facing adversity and will be of particular interest to practicing Buddhists or those interested in the religion's principles.

An engaging and poignant immigrant account with sharp, sincere, and tenderly insightful writing.

GRIT AND GRACE
Gordon Parks
Parr, Ann
WriteOn Publications (302 pp.)
978-8-9854440-0-1

A biography in verse of one of the 20th century's most versatile artists.

Gordon Parks (1912-2006) and his decadeslong legacy in photography, film, and literature might seem too vast and sprawling a topic to convey within a traditional biography. So Parr, a nonfiction and children's book author, instead threads hours of research and interviews with Parks and his family into poems that traverse all 94 years of his life, from his birth in Jim Crow Kansas to his success creating photo essays for Life magazine, directing films such as Shaft (1971), and developing his writing career. The poems cover such topics as Parks falling in love with his first and second wives; traveling to Brazil on assignment; meeting Malcolm X; and ultimately "blossoming from an old shadow / into the light of being a photographer." Curiously, Parr makes Parks the speaker in these works, which gives them a sense of whimsy that undercuts the racism he faced as a Black man and the "deadly sadness" he experienced throughout his life. The author deftly conveys yearslong spans in relatively
short poems and mindfully curbs abstraction to avoid opacity. Her sense of care in these 50-odd poems is palpable, as is the friendship she had with Parks. The strongest poems are those that lyrically interpret his experiences, such as “Yoo Hoo: Piano Concerto Calls Me.” “My lover—music—showed up for a long, overdue visit. / A musical line about flashing red capes and a gored matador / made its way into my restless fingers.” Others read more like biographical prose and thus have less emotional weight. The poems include slurs, such as the N-word, when chronicling moments in Parks’ segregated upbringing; some works make awkward references to Black skin: “If I hadn’t been Black, / he would have seen me turn red from embarrassment.”

An often transporting, uneven, elegy for a man who eluded easy categorization.

**GOBUMPIN**

Ross, Warren  
Illus. by Jade Fang  
Self (21 pp.)  
$14.95 paper | May 1, 2022  
978-0-9903086-5-2

In this picture book, the team behind *A Whole Nuther Thing* (2016) offers an original fairy tale set in medieval times and featuring wordplay and adventure.

The tiny White knight Gobumpin and his “peewee pony,” Poppy-Pop-Pop-Popper (called Poppy), aren’t sure about their purpose in life. Everyone loves them, including nonbinary ruler Quing-Ling-Bing-Bing-Bing. But Gobumpin believes he must have a greater mission. “I feel like something is missing,” he tells Poppy. “What else can I do?” Though he ignores a mouse who may have helpful advice, an escape takes Gobumpin beyond the castle walls, where Goosey Gabblegeeble repeats a refrain from the villagers: “Gobumpin, Gobumpin, Gobumpin the Knight!” Later, the knight realizes he “can go BUMP in the night.” In modern times, a child scared of a nighttime noise is told a story—presumably about Gobumpin—to allay any fears. While a few hooks, such as the mouse’s thoughts, are left hanging, the concept of a small knight and a cast of characters with absurdly long names makes for a fun fantasy tale that may hold kids’ nocturnal worries at bay. Ross’ ideas dabble in the silly (the cobbler makes cream-cheese horseshoes for Poppy so she won’t wake the pea-cocks) without losing the story’s thread. Independent readers will find invented words and challenging dictionary vocabulary (*travertine, frites-fryer*), and younger ones can echo the repeated phrases. Fang’s vivid, soft-edged cartoon illustrations deftly capture the action and wackiness in the diverse kingdom.

A clever, inclusive story with plenty of tongue twisters and striking images.

**THE BONDS BETWEEN US**

Book One of the Web of Wyrd Trilogy

Ruhl, Emily  
Atmosphere Press (252 pp.)  
978-1-77751-399-3

A woman with elemental powers finds love while taking on the devil in this debut romantic fantasy.

Writer Katya Anders moved to Venice, Italy, three years ago. She lives with her best friend, Nina, and after a tragic upbringing in the United States, Kat finally feels as if she belongs. But while researching local myths for her next book, she gets the sense that Venice hides something. “People were afraid,” she notices, “and they obviously had been for a very long time.”

One day, she bumps into a musician named Matteo with “expressive chocolate eyes.” She feels instantly bonded with him, and they agree to meet the next day at the San Nicolò festival. At home, she discovers a tattoo-like mark on her wrist with red and blue strands intertwined. This is a “soulmark,” which should be impossible for her to possess. Kat is secretly a Daski, born to a human and a frost jotun from Norse myth. Her people have been denied soul mates by the fate-controlling Norns. Nina, a hopeless romantic and an Undine (water elemental), helps Kat prepare for the date nevertheless. Matteo woos Kat with a lovely night out and also possesses the soulmark. Then, near a stone bridge on the island of Torcello, a portal opens. The devil emerges, demanding the souls of seven children. Ruhl’s series opener focuses on Kat and Matteo’s romance while offering a detailed fantasy backdrop featuring the Vaettir, or Norse supernatural beings. Research helps the couple and their cohorts, including Matteo’s hotheaded brother, Leo, learn about a woman’s deal with the devil two centuries ago that still haunts Venice. Tension builds as readers wait for Kat’s special “kedja” necklace to break, which will unlock her dangerous ice powers. That Matteo is a fire-powered “Salamander” adds to the impossible odds of their happiness together. The cast expands to include arrow-shooting twins Arun and Janara and even Hela, “godess of the Underworld,” who promises to cause the protagonist and her circle further trouble. Kat and Matteo’s romance is explored with the youthful enthusiasm inherent to new love. The audience will be interested to see if the author rocks their boat in the sequel.

A well-crafted fantasy marked by tenderness and optimism.

**UNTIL IT SHIMMERS**

Scott, Alec  
AOS Publishing (259 pp.)  
July 1, 2022  
978-1-77751-399-3

A Canadian man wrestles with his family heritage and his adult life as a gay man in this debut novel.

Ned Baldwin, the lead character in Scott’s dynamic story, has graduated
from Trinity, the Canadian college where he’s spent the last half-decade unraveling the mysteries of English literature, his future, and varying aspects of himself. With his college years behind him, Ned swiftly moves to London to get out from under his family’s thumb. It’s the mid-1980s, and he knows there’s work to do on himself, particularly accepting his sexuality in positive terms since he has self-loathingly admitted: “I wake up and it’s the first thing I think of, the last thing before I go to bed, that I’m this...faggot. That I’ll always be this faggot.” At a post-graduation “last supper,” he comes out to his best friend, Daniel. The scene is stiff and subdued, but nothing compares to Ned’s ordeal of revealing his sexuality to his upper-crust parents right after a car accident. Though London is enticing to Ned, it also harbors the potential to be lonely. Luckily, his bohemian aunt Cordelia is nearby, as is a wide rainbow of gay nightclubs and drag shows Ned ventures into. As he spreads his wings in the urban playground, he starts to fully acknowledge his gay feelings and separate himself from his privileged youth growing up in the stiflingly conservative and religiously pious confines of a wealthy family. He instantly embraces the city’s eccentric artist culture, an environment affording him numerous opportunities for diverse friendships and, as with the seductive Italian Luca, a first chance at sex and love. But Ned’s new life isn’t without darkness; a suicide attempt and the specter of AIDS hang over his yearlong exploration of London.

Scott is a clever writer, luxuriating in the meticulous details of his characters and elaborating on the wisps of gossip overheard at dinner parties. While maintaining the book’s brisk pacing and solid focus on its compelling protagonist, the author allows Ned to share the narrative stage with other characters who will draw readers in with their great impact on the hero’s life and future. Ned’s mother, Helena, is portrayed as a confidante who loves her son but remains at odds with his life choices, and his father, Oliver, just wants better things for him, the kind not found in the gay community in London. Ned is also haunted by the voice of an internal saboteur who “sometimes adopted his mother’s arguments, but gave them its own nasty twist.” Fond references to the works of Evelyn Waugh, Oscar Wilde, and others lend the narrative an acute sense of literary sophistication. Ultimately, Scott’s novel paints a vivid portrait of a man riding the first big wave of self-awareness based not on the legends of those tortured souls of the past but on the thrilling potential of what lies ahead. Readers of any sexual orientation will find Ned’s voyage of discovery a vibrant reminder of life’s multi-colored bounty.

A potent, vigorous coming-of-age tale featuring themes of identity, sexual liberation, and introspection.

“Overall, Seow’s prose is accessible and his research soundly delivered.”

CARBON TECHNOCRACY

An exploration of the effects of intensive coal mining on the evolution of East Asian energy systems.

In his debut book, Seow, a historian and assistant professor at Harvard University, examines the effects of fossil fuel energy on global Chinese and Japanese markets in the early to mid-20th century. His analysis of Japan’s modern industrialization centers specifically on a “colossal open pit” in Fushun, China—a locale the author repeatedly visited—which was the former site of East Asia’s largest coal-mining operation. His extensive research probes the rise of fossil fuel use in East Asia and globally, showing how it was used to realize industrialization goals; he also argues that it was used as a means to strengthen socialist states. Seow sees the steep increase in coal-mining operations as related to a trio of modern industrialization objectives: the technological taming of nature, the mechanization of labor, and the voracious pursuit of production. He also assesses why the fossil fuel transition occurred and how our increasing dependency on this type of energy comes with numerous societal and environmental ramifications, including regional ecological deterioration and terrible labor conditions. Seow builds his thesis with extensive source materials, including illustrations, travelogues, coal miners’ oral histories, mining engineers’ testimonials, and company records. Impressive in scope, the book begins in 1927 and concludes with Seow’s analysis in the 1960s at the height of Communist China’s Great Leap Forward, in which industrial and economic stimulation came at the expense of the health, safety, and longevity of citizens. Overall, Seow’s prose is accessible and his research soundly delivered. However, the book is not a casual read; although it’s immensely informative and comprehensive, it’s essentially an academic text, dense with statistical data, cultural and geopolitical analysis, historical examination, and industry analysis. Still, the book is not only an erudite history; but also—perhaps most critically—an urgent call for environmental intervention, as when Seow laments that “unless radical transformations take place,” his offspring’s generation will inherit the “world that carbon made, so deeply despoiled and unjust.”

An ambitious, scholarly study of the societal complications of energy extraction.
SMART SOURDOUGH
Shepard, Mark
Shepard Publications (204 pp.)
$26.65 | $16.00 paper | $3.99 e-book
Nov 1, 2021
978-1-62035-610-4
978-1-62035-605-0 paper

A guidebook that introduces a quicker, easier, and more modern method to creating homemade sourdough bread.

Journalist and author Shepard expands on his former cookbook Simple Sourdough (2017) in this technique-driven guide that effectively simplifies making sourdough items with instructional recipes, tips, and tricks. His straightforward strategy is particularly notable in that it takes less than a day and doesn’t use a starter. The book is accessibly organized into sections covering the method’s various techniques. An opening chapter quickly dispels some common misconceptions about the sourdough process (such as what frothy starter bubbles really mean and the necessity of salt) and moves on to discuss the four basic ingredients one needs to create his version of a four-cycle sourdough. The author also examines and rates warming devices and proofing equipment for dexterity, reliability, and proven effectiveness in making quality bread, making the work a useful product guide. Shepard knowledgeably discusses salinity and aeration when starting a yeast cycle and proudly touts his revolutionary “no-waste” fermentation method; the use of modern temperature controls, he points out, can help one create a sourdough batch from fermented flour by adopting leavening principles used in larger bakeries. Easy-to-follow instructions emphasize the importance of quality ingredients, manual kneading, and the proper conditions for dough to ferment, rise, and bake properly. The author helpfully recognizes that his readers have many different preferences, so he provides useful chapters spotlighting how bakers can customize dough formation and taste variations based on loaf size, sourness level, and flavor diversifications; methods for rye, buckwheat, tomato basil, chocolate cherry, and other loaves are included as well as sections on bread bowls, pizza crusts, and pancakes. Any nagging questions that readers may have are succinctly addressed in an illuminating final chapter that tackles common bread-baking issues. The book is also generously illustrated with charts, illustrations, and photographs by the author. Overall, Shepard’s book will encourage home bakers of any skill level to embark on a new, quicker, and easier way to make their own bread.

A splendid and novel approach that takes the mystery out of a formerly time-consuming process.

DUNGEON JEST
The Ruby of Power
Snook, Andrew
Illus. by Jeff Fowler
FriesenPress (246 pp.)
Feb. 2, 2022
978-1-03-912973-3
978-1-03-912972-6 paper

Snook takes the reader into a sword-and-sorcery labyrinth in this dice-rolling interactive fantasy novel.

You, Stultus Insanis Rusticus, better known as Stulty, serve as a jester for the royal family of the Kingdom of Opulentos. Up until now, your main job has just been making people laugh, but after offending the court, you’re forced to atone for your sins by going on a dangerous mission. You must brave the dangerous Labyrinth of the Minotaur and retrieve the legendary Ruby of Power that supposedly waits at the end of it: “You will need to be well equipped if you are to survive your journey and bring back the fabled Ruby of Power,” the Merlin-like court wizard tells you. “I have enchanted these sacks and filled them each with items that can assist you on your quest. You may choose only one for your journey, so choose wisely.” With your items in hand, you go off to do battle against a menagerie of centaurs, zombies, faeries, and lizardmen, with little more than your jester wit to keep you alive. Can you find the Ruby of Power and bring it back to King and Queen Opulentos? Only if you choose the right path. In classic choose-your-own-adventure fashion, readers shape Stulty’s journey based on their own whims and dispositions; the first fork in the road, for example, forces the reader to respond either politely or rudely to a lady of the court. Once in the labyrinth, Stulty’s fate is also determined in part by chance, as the reader must win Dungeons & Dragons–style dice matches against the many monsters that populate the book’s pages. Befitting the protagonist’s profession, Snook’s writing is comical and sometimes raunchy, as in a sophomoric aside regarding Stulty’s distaste for wizards: “Wizards doth sucketh the heftiest of donkey parts.” Fowler’s black-and-white line drawings of various characters and objects are evocative, and the book’s assimilation of dice (which readers must provide) into the familiar format adds an extra layer of complexity to the reading experience. It’s a book that should provide some fantasy fans with an afternoon’s entertainment.

A well-crafted game book of battles and misadventures.
Detroit get even more complicated. Warrant officers suddenly chase Kim, suspecting him of a crime so abominable they'd just as soon shoot him in the street. Kim lies low with help from his refugee adviser and werewolf. But things in present-day Chicago are not just for werewolves, but for other extra-human creatures (or “extras”) like vampires as well. Kim isn't an extra but his partner is—Sergei, a 7-foot Russian ghost bear. The private investigators' latest job takes them to Detroit's Wolftown, where Kim's old Army captain wants to know if his wife is having an affair. Seems like a simple gig, except that Czoltan, Kim's ex, lives there. They fell in love years ago when Army liaison Kim worked in Germany with Czoltan, a refugee adviser and werewolf. But things in present-day Detroit get even more complicated. Warrant officers suddenly chase Kim, suspecting him of a crime so abominable they'd just as soon shoot him in the street. Kim lies low with help from his ex and his ghostly partner, but someone in unexpected danger may take precedence over his own safety. Susman's engrossing detective story centers on the cast. The extras in this book are predominantly werewolves, who come across as regular people with abundant fur. This opens up effective parallelisms involving discrimination; some callously deem werewolves as monsters, not unlike the bigotry that Kim has seen in his life. The author digs deep into bonds, from the working relationship of Kim and Sergei (bound together by a spell that makes the ghost a helpful partner) to the romance of Kim and Czoltan, whose meet-cute and breakup both eventually come to light. The story nevertheless boasts tight action scenes, such as the innocent Kim sprinting from trigger-happy, lycanthrope warrant officers. Instances of humor are likewise abundant, largely from relentlessly cynical but still endearing Sergei. There's plenty of material for a potential series, including other extras, like kumiho, Korean nine-tailed fox spirits.

A keen, absorbing, character-driven tale of a sleuth and his remarkable supernatural allies.

**UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

*Susman, Tim*  
Argyll Productions (246 pp.)  
$17.95 paper | $4.99 e-book | July 5, 2022  
978-1-61450-559-4

A business executive focuses on personal development in this debut guide.

An epiphany about his own direction in life led Thurgood to create “REACH,” which he describes as “an intentional, purpose-driven personal growth and development framework.” The author’s concept includes “Five Focus Areas”: “Relationships, Career & Finances, Health & Fitness, Intellectual & Spiritual, and Service.” Curiously, Thurgood chose to devote a single chapter to an overview of these five areas and then append at the end of the book detailed descriptions of each one. Despite this somewhat odd organizational construct, the overview chapter clearly defines the areas in a concise text accompanied by helpful, bulleted sidebars. The descriptions at the end of the work do a very good job of elaborating on each area, providing proactive, if obvious, suggestions, such as “Connect with Your Colleagues” (Relationships), “Keep a Budget” (Career & Finances), and “Reduce Stress” (Health & Fitness). One intriguing technique Thurgood explains is “Bursting,” in which an individual aggressively pursues a major objective “that might have otherwise taken far longer or that you may have never achieved at all.” Another creative idea the author proposes is gamification. Thurgood suggests that making a game out of achieving goals and adding “rewards, punishments, and visual trackers” could prove to be motivational. Noting the importance of peer relationships, the author devotes two chapters to the formation and management of a “REACH group.” This aspect of the REACH framework is critical, in Thurgood’s view, so he shares a handy, eight-step process for selecting group partners and also discusses how best to manage the band. While some readers may find the idea of “weekly check-ins,” “monthly meetups,” “REACH Retreats,” and “one-on-one meetups” to be overly intense, the REACH group concept seems generally sensible and well thought out. The “Additional Materials” section after the final chapter is unusually comprehensive. Along with the descriptions of the five areas, the segment includes a valuable self-assessment, goal planning worksheet, quarterly report, group overview, and sample REACH Retreat agenda. All of these items enrich the book’s content.

An intriguing and useful, if not entirely original, self-improvement system.

**REACH**

*Maximize Your Potential and Live Your Best Life*  
Thurgood, Nate  
Ledgefork Media (164 pp.)  
$15.99 | $8.99 paper | $0.99 e-book  
May 15, 2022  
979-8-9855039-1-3  
979-8-9855039-0-6

**Live Your Best Life**

A keen, absorbing, character-driven tale of a sleuth and his remarkable supernatural allies.

**UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

*Susman, Tim*  
Argyll Productions (246 pp.)  
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978-1-61450-559-4

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An intriguing and useful, if not entirely original, self-improvement system.
THE ALL-WEATHER RETIREMENT PORTFOLIO
Your Post-Retirement Investment Guide to a Worry-Free Income for Life
Thurman, Randy L.
ForbesBooks (248 pp.)
$24.99 | May 3, 2022
978-1-950863-53-2

A comprehensive manual on saving and planning for retirement.
Thurman, the CEO of Retirement Investment Advisors, clarifies at the outset of this second edition of his 2015 book that it stands on the shoulders of the first, looking at far more data over a larger span of time to offer the most information he can in 248 pages. Since the appearance of the first edition, he notes, a company called Global Financial Data has drawn together data on “the performance of every major asset class offered in the financial markets,” going all the way back to 1930. Using this and a wide array of other sources, he takes readers through a bar graph of things to consider as they look at retirement, including whether they’re really ready to retire in the first place. The key focus of the book is reflected in its title, as Thurman concerns himself not with projecting sunny or even standard retirement conditions but rather with anticipating the worst—the kind of financial “perfect storm” that can upset even the sturdiest plans: “This is your retirement income we’re talking about,” he writes. “There are no do-overs, and little margin for error.” He points out that a solid framework for retirement finances covers a 40-year time span and has enough flexibility to allow retirees not only to do plenty of things while still active, but also to keep enough funds in reserve to handle mounting costs in later years.

The most prominent aspect of the author’s approach is how it aims to help readers take stock of their individual situations: There are simple questions and simple answers about everything from income sources to equity, fixed investments, stock market speculation, annuities, and the Byzantine complexities of the American social safety net. He opens the book by striking a pitch-perfect balance between the personal (recounting a touching story about his father) and the briskly professional. He never concedes to his readers, and at no point does he ever gild the lily; the book feels like a long, friendly, but no-nonsense visit from a trusted financial adviser. He demystifies all the various investment options and empirically demonstrates how some things that initially look enticing can prove poor choices in the long run. He combines plenty of charts and numerous, personalized anecdotes, always with an eye toward clarity and concision. His program is designed to help readers make the shift from “dollard cost averaging”—the kind of money-into-the-pot saving they’ve been doing all their working lives—to “reverse dollar cost averaging,” involving the smartest, most practical ways of taking that money out. He leads readers smoothly and confidently into a discussion of the value of diversifying one’s holdings, which he notes is a key to surviving unstable markets and lean years. At every turn, Thurman tends to advise a conservative, old-school approach to money management (“prudent and practical,” he calls it), foregoing flashier tactics with higher immediate yields for solid portfolios and strategies.

A firm, friendly must-read for readers in their later years.
change.” The framework consists of three phases, “Energize, Redesign, and Gel (ERG),” each of which is further discussed and explored throughout the volume. The author builds a firm foundation for his framework by citing research-based examples and appending extensive references to each of the three chapters in the first part. While the writing style borders on the scholarly, the manual includes two particularly helpful sections, a “Lead-in” to stimulate interest in the chapter and “Summary propositions,” a bulleted segment that recaps the main takeaways. The content strongly reinforces the ERG framework, concluding with the third chapter that focuses on organization development consulting. Here, Tkaczyk precisely describes the global market, providing a statistical overview of consulting in specific countries and regions. Perhaps more intriguing is the comprehensive case study of a Middle Eastern insurance company in which the author discusses how “positive strategic transformation” was achieved via the ERG strategy. Tkaczyk takes pains to describe actions the company took that were related to each of the three phases, but he notes that they should be viewed in the context of a “dynamic continuous and concurrent process.” The case itself is invaluable in illustrating the application of the ERG method.

Part 2 of the book is a unique “ToolBox” divided into three “WorkBoxes,” one for each of the three phases. Ten highly useful interactive tools, drawn from the author’s knowledge of projects from around the world, are included in each WorkBox. For example, the Energize WorkBox begins with the “ERG organizational change scorecard,” a tool designed to assess leadership performance. An especially creative tool in this WorkBox centers on crafting a story about an organization that mirrors a neuron and “F.I.R.E.S. (Fresh, Informative, Related, Energizing/Evangelical, Strategic).” In the Redesign WorkBox are several imaginative tools, such as the “Innovation booster,” a matrix of numerous terms associated with the categories “Benefits,” “Needs,” “Positive feelings,” and “Action.” Tkaczyk includes pertinent questions to guide an organizational leader in the use of this tool. The Gel WorkBox is the culmination of the volume; here readers will find a tool that helps in developing reward strategies for employee teams as well as one to encourage “continuing executive development.” As a whole, the all-inclusive ToolBox is the equivalent of a consultant in a box. It is likely that the exceptional value of the 30 tools generously shared by the author in Part 2 will far exceed the cost of the manual. As Tkaczyk accurately observes, his framework appears to be a “straightforward, effective, action-oriented, designerly, collaborative approach” to “organizational renewal.”

Ingenious, carefully researched, and impressively detailed; both a hands-on workbook and a leadership guide.

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**CHILDREN AT RISK**

Van Rheenen, Karen

FriesenPress (121 pp.)


978-1-03-914335-7 paper

978-1-03-914336-4

In this novel, a social worker investigates a single father’s treatment of his daughters and begins to suspect he murdered his wife.

Lillian Crocker is a 45-year-old social worker still grappling with the death of her husband, Chuck, four years ago. She’s asked to investigate a peculiar man who seems to be the sole custodian of two young daughters—they almost never leave the house, and often the sounds of the children whimpering as if in pain or distress can be heard. Lillian pays the home a visit and discovers an odd family arrangement—a father, Paul Ruddy, cares for twins Rachel and Naomi. While they seem like happy children, they are also suffering from obvious disabilities; both are likely deaf, and they are covered in some sort of rash. Lillian is the girls’ girl friend, but Paul refuses on religious grounds—he’s a devout Christian Scientist who believes sickness is an “illusion.”

Paul claims the mother of the twins, Mary, left them years ago, but Lillian discovers that the woman is difficult to track down. A previous wife of Paul’s, Ellie, was violently murdered, a crime Lillian cannot help but suspect he committed. Van Rheenen artfully builds an atmosphere filled with suspense—while Lillian digs deeper into Paul’s life, she contends with a mystery of her own. She finds her garden vandalized and money stolen from her home. In addition, a monstrously obscene message is left on her voicemail anonymously. The author’s prose is deceptively foursquare—it is so shorn of embellishment that it almost seems unliterary. But there is a power embedded in the writing’s simplicity, one that permits the story to unfold plausibly and grippingly. This is a crime drama, first and foremost, one conveyed with impressive skill and restraint. For those readers in search of a deftly constructed mystery, this novel is an alluring option.

A riveting crime tale without literary gimmicks.

**CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE**

How Nonprofits and a Foundation Are Helping Shape Vermont’s Future

Wilhelm, Doug

Rootstock Publishing (310 pp.)


978-1-57869-082-4

978-1-57869-063-3 paper

A study of how various nonprofits have brought about progressive change in the state of Vermont, as told through the story of a former nurse and foundation founder.
Wilhelm anchors his account of the varied work of Vermont foundations and other nonprofit organizations by focusing on the inspiring story of Claire Lintilhac. She moved to the state in 1958 after having received training as a nurse providing various maternity services for poor people in China. She brought this hard-won experience to Fletcher Allen Health Care, Vermont’s largest hospital at the time, and her later creation, the Lintilhac Foundation, which focuses on a range of health and environmental issues. She went on to work with other nonprofits on causes involving land conservation, responsible journalism, and many other topics—including, most centrally, maternity and child health care concerns. Wilhelm goes into granular detail about the history of the foundation’s early years and personal stories of those associated with it; he also shades in Lintilhac’s own personality, giving the book a prominent emotional element: “There was something radiant about her,” says Mary Gibson, a nurse who worked with her. “She just emanated compassion and kindness.” The narrative broadens to chronicle the spread of natural-childbirth advocacy in Vermont, among other issues. Although Wilhelm spends a bit too much time on Lintilhac’s personal story, he makes the rest of the book feel winningly personal, with engaging profiles and affecting black-and-white photos from various sources. Wilhelm also does a smooth, confident job of extending his story into unlikely corners of state history, as when he provides an account of Benedict Arnold’s lost gunboats.

An entertaining and warmly human history.

A collection offers short stories that blend truth and fiction.

In a prefatory note, Zevy warns readers of his tendency toward literary embellishment, the untidy merger of remembrance and invention, resulting in tales “of both imagination and lived experiences mixed together to delight and entertain.” Sometimes, a flight of fancy is obvious—for example, in two stories the Angel of Death is a principal character, described in a gamesomely comic manner that typifies the author’s style throughout this volume: “He has the requisite goatee and a cowlick which looks like it is held down by gel. He is wearing khakis and a button-down shirt. If I didn’t know he was the Angel of Death I would have guessed he was an assistant manager at Whole Foods.” When the Angel of Death unexpectedly shows up for dinner and allows the narrator to resurrect someone, the man randomly blurts out the name of Italo Svevo, the Italian novelist. Zevy’s signature devices are the hazy amalgamation of fact and fantasy and the extraordinary exists within the ordinary. Readers will be drawn into these largely brief vignettes, and the line of demarcation between the real and the imagined will cease to matter. In fact, the audience will learn to embrace the messy mixture.

Zevy is a keen observer of others; one of the most memorable depictions here is of his father, an intellectually gifted man with depths that cannot be fully plumbed. During a youthful soccer game, he pulls a coach aside and renders him counsel that leads to a victory. When asked what advice he offered, he replies: “The internet has taken a little mystique out of conveniences.” Zevy is a keen observer of others; one of the most memorable depictions here is of his father, an intellectually gifted man with depths that cannot be fully plumbed. During a youthful soccer game, he pulls a coach aside and renders him counsel that leads to a victory. When asked what advice he offered, he replies: “The internet has taken a little mystique out of conveniences.” Zevy is a keen observer of others; one of the most memorable depictions here is of his father, an intellectually gifted man with depths that cannot be fully plumbed. During a youthful soccer game, he pulls a coach aside and renders him counsel that leads to a victory. When asked what advice he offered, he replies: “The internet has taken a little mystique out of conveniences.” Zevy is a keen observer of others; one of the most memorable depictions here is of his father, an intellectually gifted man with depths that cannot be fully plumbed. During a youthful soccer game, he pulls a coach aside and renders him counsel that leads to a victory. When asked what advice he offered, he replies: “The internet has taken a little mystique out of conveniences.” Zevy is a keen observer of others; one of the most memorable depictions here is of his father, an intellectually gifted man with depths that cannot be fully plumbed. During a youthful soccer game, he pulls a coach aside and renders him counsel that leads to a victory. When asked what advice he offered, he replies: “The internet has taken a little mystique out of conveniences.” Zevy is a keen observer of others; one of the most memorable depictions here is of his father, an intellectually gifted man with depths that cannot be fully plumbed. During a youthful soccer game, he pulls a coach aside and renders him counsel that leads to a victory. When asked what advice he offered, he replies: “The internet has taken a little mystique out of conveniences.”
INDIE
Books of the Month

THE ART OF FALLING
Julia Wendell
Strikingly imagistic and contemplative poetry that will live on in memory.

UNSTOPPABLE
Ellen Weir Casey
An emotional and educational account of one woman's journey toward motherhood.

MY TRAVEL ALPHABET
A.K. Ratti
Illus. by Claudie C. Bergeron
This tale's gorgeous images and graceful poetry should inspire travelers to see the world's beauty.

THE WAYMAKERS
Tara Jaye Frank
A timely and profound dissertation on equity and leadership.

IVY LODGE
Linda Murphy Marshall
A moving, courageously frank, and sharply intuitive account about a manor filled with memories.

A LONG ROAD TO JUSTICE
Sylvia Yu Friedman
A searing but ultimately hopeful indictment of sexual exploitation.
In The News

A TIMELINE OF LGBTQ+ BOOK BANS IN 2022 SO FAR

BY MICHAEL SCHaub

Over the past several months, would-be censors on school boards and in legislatures have mounted a series of challenges to books in classrooms and libraries across the country. The nonprofit group PEN America found that from July 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022, nearly 1,600 books have been banned following complaints from parents, politicians, and community members. Books with LGBTQ+ themes have been disproportionately affected. Here’s a partial recap of incidents—and responses—this year so far.

Jan. 13: An appeal committee for the school board in Loudoun County, Virginia, upheld a decision by the board’s superintendent to remove nonbinary author Maia Kobabe’s graphic memoir, Gender Queer, from the district’s high school libraries.

Jan. 20: The Wentzville School Board in Missouri voted to remove four books from its high school libraries, including Alison Bechdel’s memoir Fun Home, about her life with a closeted gay father and her own coming out as a lesbian, and George M. Johnson’s All Boys Aren’t Blue, a memoir about growing up Black and queer.

Jan. 27: The school district in Granbury, Texas, confirmed it temporarily removed 130 books from its libraries while they undergo review by officials. An analysis by the Texas Tribune and ProPublica found that about 94 of the removed books had LGBTQ+ themes. A recording of a meeting revealed that the district’s superintendent, Jeremy Glenn, targeted “the transgender, LGBTQ and the sex—sexuality—in books.”

Feb. 15: Trans author Kyle Lukoff wrote an essay for Kirkus about what it was like to have his children’s book Call Me Max challenged in schools. “When I watch these school board meetings or read the bills introduced to penalize librarians for their collections, I see bloodlust barely disguised as civility,” Lukoff wrote. “I see the veneer of due process peeling around the edges of genocidal fantasies.”

Feb. 28: The school board in Indian River County, Florida, removed five books from school libraries, including two with LGBTQ+ characters: Ellen Hopkins’ Triangles and Julie Anne Peters’ grl2grl. The board declined to ban 151 other books that were challenged by a group called Moms for Liberty.


March 28: Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed into law the state’s controversial Parental Rights in Education bill, which critics dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay” bill. After it became law, the superintendent of the Palm Beach County school district announced that he was removing two children’s books that feature transgender characters: Kyle Lukoff’s Call Me Max and Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings’ I Am Jazz.

April 4: The American Library Association released its annual list of the most challenged and banned books in the country. Of the 10 books on the list, five contained LGBTQ+ content, including the top three: Gender Queer, Jonathan Evison’s Lawn Boy, and All Boys Aren’t Blue. Coming in at No. 9 and No. 10, respectively, were Juno Dawson’s This Book Is Gay and Susan Kuklin’s Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out.

April 7: PEN America published an index of books banned in public schools from July 2021 through March 2022. Four of the six most frequently challenged books deal with LGBTQ+ themes: Gender Queer, All Boys Aren’t Blue, Lawn Boy, and Beyond Magenta.

May 11: WAVY-TV obtained an undated letter from Carolyn Rye, chair of the Virginia Beach, Virginia, school board, in which she announced that she was pulling Gender Queer from school library shelves.

Michael Schaub, a journalist and regular contributor to NPR, lives near Austin, Texas.
CHALLENGED IDENTITY
by Damian Alexander

When I grew up I made my own book about the challenges I had faced. A book I would have loved to give little me.

There are more LGBTQ+ books coming out and proud now. More than I could have imagined as a kid. For a moment it made me feel...normal.

With this increase in LGBTQ+ books came an increase in LGBTQ+ books being challenged and banned. Many of them were memoirs about people’s lived experiences, and I worry if mine will be next.

During the virtual school visits I’ve done this year I’ve heard from many LGBTQ+ middle schoolers. While a lot of things have changed for the better since I was their age, many of them are still bullied or feel isolated.

Do you have any tips for dealing with bullies who are grown-ups?

I worry that seeing books about people like them being challenged will affect them the same way that it had affected me...

For LGBTQ+ people it doesn’t feel like just books are being challenged. It’s as if our whole identity is.

Sigh...

Banned
Invalid
Void
Challenged
Prohibited
Discard

Damian Alexander is the author & illustrator of Other Boys, a graphic memoir from First Second.
A touching story about friendship and the courage it takes to share your feelings.

“A perfect celebration of courage and queerness.”
—Kirkus Reviews, starred review

Meet Miss Rita in this heartwarming picture book celebrating drag queens, reading, and self-acceptance.

“Vivid, expressive, and energetic illustrations catch just the right over-the-top tone.”
—Booklist, starred review

From the acclaimed author of For Black Girls Like Me, comes a middle-grade novel about first love, loss, and letting go.

“A touching portrayal of young queer love ... Vivid writing and relatable characters make this a worthwhile read.”
—Kirkus Reviews, starred review

A moving middle-grade graphic memoir about bullying, the death of a mother, and coming out.

“A sweet, touching and at-times scary memoir of grief and loss and coming out (mostly to himself) . . . An excellent, important debut.”
—Kirkus Reviews, starred review

A modern love story, perfect for fans of The Poet X, Darius the Great Is Not Okay, and Aristotle and Dante Discover the Universe.

“A beautifully written novel in verse about self-discovery and first love ... A stunning YA debut.”
—School Library Journal, starred review

Two non-binary teens are pulled into a magical world under a lake—but can they keep their worlds above water intact?

“An astonishingly beautiful love letter to neurodivergent and nonbinary teens.”
—Booklist, starred review