Under attack by the right wing, LGBTQ+ literature is still blossoming

Featuring Tegan and Sara Quin, Tillie Walden, Federico Erebia, Wesley G. Phelps, Johanna Hedva, and Norman Erikson Pasaribu
Charles Dickens was referring to Revolutionary France when he wrote the line “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” at the opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*, highlighting the wild extremes of that radical moment in history. But as we were putting together our fifth annual Pride Issue, it occurred to me that Dickens’ words might easily apply to the state of LGBTQ+ literature in the U.S. at our currently fraught moment.

I’ve been on the queer book beat since my days as an editor at *Out* magazine in the 1990s, and I can say with some confidence that there are more books—and more richly diverse books—about the LGBTQ+ experience being published than ever before. Already this year I’ve read and savored an absorbing novel about queer life and politics in Victorian England (*The New Life* by Tom Crewe), a nonfiction account of the vibrant San Francisco drag scene of the 1980s and ’90s (*Who Does That Bitch Think She Is?* by Craig Seligman), and a graphic novel about Filipino immigrants in 1920s California that features queer characters (*The Man in the McIntosh Suit* by Rina Ayuyang). My TBR pile contains several more queer-themed books that captured my interest after seeing their Kirkus reviews.

If you read the columns by editors Mahnaz Dar and Laura Simeon in this issue, you’ll also see that there’s a broad range of books for young people being published today that would once have been unthinkable. Elsewhere in the issue, interviews with Tegan Quin, Sara Quin, and Tillie Walden (creators of the middle-grade graphic novel *Tegan and Sara: Junior High*) and Federico Erebia (author of the YA novel *Pedro & Daniel*) further highlight the encouraging LGBTQ+ offerings for young readers. It truly can feel like the best of times.

And yet…anyone who follows the news knows that challenges to LGBTQ+ books in schools and libraries are multiplying at an alarming rate. A recent report issued by the American Library Association found that book bans nearly doubled between 2021 and 2022, and the “vast majority” of those titles, according to the ALA, were written by or about LGBTQ+ people or people of color. A similar study by PEN America last fall found that 41% of the books banned or challenged in 2022 had queer characters or themes. For all the extraordinary books that are opening doors or holding up mirrors to LGBTQ+ life, it’s hard to escape the feeling that these books will become harder and harder for children and young people to access.

Where does that leave us? I’ve been inspired by the example of the Brooklyn Public Library, which is fighting the right-wing backlash in its own way with the Books Unbanned Initiative. Young people ages 13 to 21—whatever they may live—can apply for a free digital library card good for one year that grants access to the library’s complete e-book and audiobook collections as well as its databases (email booksunbanned@bklynlibrary.org). A world of LGBTQ+ books awaits.
Mapmaker Jennifer Thermes’ perceptive and thought-provoking picture book is a much-needed corrective to history texts that center the achievements of White men. Read the review on p. 110.

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.
EVERY RISING SUN
Ahmed, Jamila
Henry Holt (432 pp.)
$28.99 | July 18, 2023
9781250887078

Shaherazade forges a path for herself against the turbulent, violent backdrop of the Third Crusade and the 12th-century Persian Empire in crisis.

Storytelling is at the heart of this debut novel, with Shaherazade spinning tales and writing verses for her loved ones to help make sense of their often mystifying world. It is poetry she turns to when she stumbles upon the reigning Malik’s beloved wife engaging in adultery. Shaherazade’s revelatory lines result in the woman’s execution and then the swift, brutal murders of the Malik’s next three young brides. She is appalled that this man she grew up with has become unrecognizably evil: “Three thousand lives or three, to take even a single life unjustly is to murder all of mankind. Can a soul stained so dark be redeemed?” She atones by offering herself for the position of the Malik’s wife herself, and so begins her perilous journey into the lion’s den. Night after night, Shaherazade whispers stories of daring and magic to her dangerous husband, always promising more detail the next night, thus prolonging her own life for another day.

Ahmed revives the ancient tales of One Thousand and One Nights through Shaherazade, who is able to harness her storytelling to effect political change. She spins webs to protect her loved ones and ensnare her enemies at once, drawing the reader ever closer as the boundary between her life and stories begins to blur. Constantly probing her faith and moral judgment, she is profoundly aware of the gray area between right and wrong and the unfathomable role of chance: “I once thought opportunities were ever arising, but now, older, I realize how thinly the door to destiny opens, how quickly it shuts.” Readers will love Shaherazade, who is acutely sensitive to nuance—social, political, and romantic—and refuses to lose her empathy. Ahmed flawlessly weaves together countless threads to create a stunning tapestry revealing the bonds that tie people together and the deceptions that tear them apart. “In fifty years, in a century, in a millennium, who will remember her life, let alone her death, all that preceded it and all that followed?” the narrator asks. Here, Ahmed gives us the voice echoing through eras, Shaherazade’s honeyed stories dripped onto the page.

A gorgeous novel that rejoices in the legacy of the woman who tells tales.
WHAT FALLS AWAY
Anderson, Karin
Torrey House Press (320 pp.)
$18.95 paper | Aug. 1, 2023
9781948814799

A woman returns to her rural hometown after nearly 40 years to care for her ailing mother in Anderson’s intimate family saga.

On the cusp of 60, Cassandra Soelberg arrives in the small town of Big Horn, Utah, after a brother she hasn’t spoken to in decades demands she care for their aging mother, Dorothy, who has dementia. Having been forced as a teenager to give up a baby, Cassandra abandoned her roots in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and has been living a fulfilling life as an artist in Minnesota; she dreads her impromptu return to her childhood home. Interspersing flashbacks of Cassandra’s past, Anderson crafts a gorgeously descriptive narrative of aging, religious harm, and childhood trauma, complete with colorful characters who mostly eschew Mormon stereotypes. Through present-day Cassandra, the author offers up a refreshing depiction of older women and doesn’t shy away from visible descriptions of age, from graying hair to sagging breasts. The story is also peppered with queer themes and characters, such as Cassandra’s third sibling, Matilda—born Matthew—who is decidedly not cisgender, though their exact identity is left vague. But the story shines brightest in its depiction of female bonding. Cassandra becomes a patchwork of the women who have left their marks on her life: Her grandmother Irene, who cast aside all the restraints of womanhood after the death of her husband; Elodie Linhardt, a worldly college professor who nurtures Cassandra’s artistic ability; even Toni Fuller, the Relief Society president, whom she initially distrusts. These encounters with other women, who rarely linger in the narrative yet become fully fleshed out in the space they’re given, are imbued with Anderson’s lyrical writing, which equally elevates the vast rural landscape, as in this speech from Irene: “Marvelous doesn’t mean perfect....Marvelous calls us to live on the earth, amidst the wreckage, above the mundane hours that tick on toward tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, toward that stifling heaven of a poor prophet’s wet dream.”

A powerful novel that will resonate with anyone who has returned to a place they no longer recognize as home.

DIALOGUE WITH A SOMNAMBULIST
Stories, Essays & a Portrait
Gallery
Aridjis, Chloe
Catapult (288 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781646221820

A collection of fiction and nonfiction pieces by a Mexican American writer who lives in London.

Divided into sections—stories, essays, and portraits—Aridjis’ book troubles its own categories. Some stories read like philosophical essays or even poems, and none have anything resembling a conventional plot, while the subjects of her portraits often resemble mysterious characters standing at the thresholds of fictional worlds. In some cases, Aridjis revisits the same subjects in different forms. In the story “In the Arms of Morpheus,” an insomniac spends the night at a sleep clinic where the staff insist that dreams are just “electrical discharges” and “there’s little porosity between conscious and unconscious states,” while in the essay “Kopfkino” (which in German literally means “mental cinema”), Aridjis, the author, living in Berlin, is deciding whether she’ll treat her insomnia when she writes “In the Arms of Morpheus”: “My senses were aware of some kind of continuum existing between the material world and the imaginary, the fantastical and the banal.” That continuum is the subject of many of these pieces. “Into the Cosmos” explores the connections between aerial circus performers and Russian astronauts, the thrill of weightlessness, and the disorientation of being untethered from Earth. “Baroque” brings together lucha libre, or Mexican professional wrestling, and drug violence to show how each is an expression of the baroque in Mexico and its excesses and extremes. In a brief but stirring essay on stray dogs in Mexico, Aridjis points out that they’re both iconic and overlooked. Though the dogs are often in motion, they don’t have any particular destination. While some of the stories fall flat, the nonfiction pieces, including the portraits of famous and ordinary people, are treasures. Here, Aridjis’ curiosity feels vast, her intelligence finely tuned to discover hidden connections, her playful, searching style capable of enlivening anything.

Heady, marvelous work about the familiar and obscure.

THE FOREST BRIMS OVER
Ayase, Maru
Trans. by Haydn Trowell
Counterpoint (208 pp.)
$16.95 paper | July 25, 2023
9781640095373

In this novel by Japanese writer Ayase, the first of her 18 works to be translated into English, a writer’s wife transforms into a forest.
More than a celebration, this Pride Month feels like a time for fighting back against the encroaching censorship and even outlawing of LGBTQ+ books—and people. But there’s still time for pleasure, which can be found in abundance in these recent novels and story collections.

_The New Life_ by Tom Crewe (Scribner, Jan. 3): Crewe’s novel is set in 1894 London, when men could be thrown in jail for being gay—and Oscar Wilde’s trial and imprisonment for “gross indecency” are incorporated into the plot. Two men who don’t know each other but share an appreciation for Walt Whitman collaborate on a book about the lives of gay men, hoping to prove they shouldn’t be branded criminals. “A smart, sensual debut,” according to our starred review.

_After Sappho_ by Selby Wynn Schwartz (Liveright, Jan. 24): Written in the collective “we,” Schwartz’s “formally inventive blend of fiction, biography, linguistics, and history...follows the lives of women writers, artists, actors, dancers, and activists who lived in the early 20th century: Eleanora Duse, Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall, Natalie Barney, Romaine Brooks, and more,” as our starred review said. “An exciting, luxurious work of speculative biography.”

_Behind the Scenes_ by Karelia Stetz-Waters (Forever, Jan. 31): Rose is a 38-year-old business consultant; 40-year-old Ash is a talented filmmaker who needs help creating a proposal for her latest project. Sparks fly. “It’s lovely to see a romance about two women older than their 20s,” said our starred review. “A delight from start to finish.” Plus there are rescue dogs.

_Tell the Rest_ by Lucy Jane Bledsoe (Akashic, March 7): Delia and Ernest were teenagers when they were sent to conversion therapy camp, and they escaped together. Now in their late 30s, they’re both drawn back to Oregon as “they come to terms with the spiritual abuse they suffered” at camp, according to our starred review. “A heartening, issues-driven book.”

_Chlorine_ by Jade Song (Morrow, March 28): When Ren Yu joins her high school swim team, she finds herself pushing her limits in all kinds of ways. Our review said: “Part body horror, part science fiction, part queer teenage romance, Song’s debut novel dives into the deep end of bodily and psychological metamorphosis.”

_A Safe Girl To Love_ by Casey Plett (Arsenal Pulp Press, April 4): Plett’s story collection explores the lives of trans women, and there’s often what our reviewer called “a feeling that the other shoe could drop at any moment...In ways ranging from fun to awkward, from endearing to heartbreaking, [her characters] grapple with what that might mean for their physical or emotional safety....A collection driven by deeply human, sometimes humorous, but always exquisitely rendered details.”

_This Brutal House_ by Niven Govinden (Deep Vellum, May 9): English novelist Govinden’s latest is set in New York’s Ballroom scene and focuses on the Mothers, community leaders who are protesting at City Hall against the way the authorities have ignored missing people from within their community. “Govinden emphasizes the queer characters’ treatment by often callous officials and establishes a world where both elation and danger aren’t far away,” according to our review.

_Farrell Covington and the Limits of Style_ by Paul Rudnick (Atria, June 6): I’ve been a Rudnick fan since his alter ego, Libby Gelman-Waxner, began writing hilarious movie reviews for _Premiere_ magazine in the late 1980s. His new novel is “a gay love story for the ages from one of the great comic voices of his generation,” according to our starred review.

Laurie Muchnick is the fiction editor.
Ayase begins with the third-person point of view of an editor named Sekiguchi Masashi, who’s visiting the house of Nowatari Tetsuya, a well-known novelist whose salacious debut featured thinly veiled details about his sexy young wife, Rui. None of his subsequent books have been as successful, and Sekiguchi is trying to help him with ideas. While there, he overhears the couple fight, and soon afterward Rui begins to sprout buds and leaves: She’s turning into a forest because she suspects her husband of infidelity. Instead of taking her to the hospital, Nowatari writes a novel called Garden. And it’s really good! Sekiguchi finds himself in a moral quandary. “This horrifying situation, and the literary work based on it, were ultimately Nowatari’s sin. Sekiguchi was just supposed to receive his breathtaking manuscript and deliver it to the world... His job was no more than that, he repeated to himself over and over.” Meanwhile, in his own marriage, the editor fails to understand the ways he burdens his wife. In the second section, the point of view switches to the student Nowatari is having his affair with; he loves her “emptiness and purity.” Ayase’s concerns are contemporary gender roles, sexism in publishing (and society generally), and the relationship between exploitation and art. Her examination has depth and nuance. Male characters reflect on the pressures to compete and the perils of the succeed-or-die mentality. Meanwhile Rui’s forest grows and spreads, affecting the entire town. When Sekiguchi moves to another department, the young woman assigned to be Nowatari’s new editor asks the writer a single blunt question.

A sprightly, compelling tale with magical realist flair in which a novelist’s muse takes charge of her own story.

SIMPLY LIES
Baldacci, David
Grand Central Publishing (432 pp.)
$16.99 | April 18, 2023
978-1-5387-5063-6

Motherhood is no barrier to crime busting in this clever thriller.

Mickey Gibson is an ex-crime scene tech, ex-cop, ex-detective, and a single mother of two tykes, including one who’s been known to throw up on her. She works at home as an investigator for ProEye, chasing down criminals online, and she is quite good at it. Her ex-hubby, the rat, had said he wanted a big family but bugged out on her when the “daddy do list” “ruined” his weekends. Now a phone call turns her life upside down. A woman she doesn’t know, ostensibly from ProEye, asks her to do some fieldwork: inventory the contents of an old mansion. The woman at first goes by Arlene, but she might really be Clarisse or Francine. In other words, “she’s a liar, plain and simple,” and she has strong motivation to get Mickey involved. Naturally, the contents of the mansion include a murder victim, a smelly corpse that had once been “a criminal on a global scale.” Mickey feels compelled to solve the crime, though she’s emphatically told “it’s not your job to solve this sucker. You’re not a cop anymore.” More murders follow as the possibility of a hidden treasure looms. Two strong, engaging women drive the complicated plot—the multitasking mom who’s compelled to solve a crime while defending against threats to her children, and the childless manipulator who has her own big-time personal issues. She—let’s call her Clarisse for now—has the best lines: “Hell, with just the right eyeliner I can rule the world,” and “Life was a shell game. The winners could just hide the truth better than everybody else.” And she has a lot to hide. In the end, the plot elements are all tied up in a neat little bow.

More good fun from a master storyteller.
A detective and a pathologist in 1950s Ireland suspect an apparent suicide is actually a murder.

When Rosa Jacobs is found dead in a garage, it initially looks like an open-and-shut case. The body of the 27-year-old woman, a history scholar in 1950s Dublin, is discovered behind the wheel of a car, with its hood up and most of its windows closed, a hose connecting the exhaust pipe to a gap in the driver's side window. DI St. John Strafford is assigned to the case, as is Dr. Quirke, a pathologist who doubts that the case is a suicide—he noticed marks on Rosa's mouth, which he thinks points to her having been gagged and anesthetized before being put in the running car. The two men's investigation leads them to a German family that Rosa knew; they hear rumors that Rosa was romantically involved with one member—Frank. (The idea that Rosa, who was Jewish, would befriend Germans so soon after World War II strikes many involved in the case as odd.)

The plot thickens as the investigators discover that a friend of Rosa's from Tel Aviv has been killed by a hit-and-run driver. Throughout the novel, the difficult relationship between Strafford and Quirke is explored; Quirke's wife was shot to death in Spain some time before, and Strafford killed her killer. Quirke turned to alcohol after his wife's murder, and his personality has become unpredictable: “Quirke’s mere presence in a room had an incendiary effect. He was like phosphorus, that burns in air.”

This novel succeeds on the considerable strength of its characters, especially the quicksilver Quirke and the quiet Strafford. The prose and dialogue are stellar, as one would expect from the Booker Prize-winning Banville, and the ending comes as a complete shock. Banville has written several novels featuring Quirke, mostly under the pen name Benjamin Black; this one is a worthy addition to that series.

Another worthy thriller from the Irish master novelist.
WESTERN ALLIANCES

Barnhardt, Wilton
St. Martin's (400 pp.)
$29.00 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781250090003


Roberto Costa has never had to work. Son of Salvador, a Providence bond trader–turned–CNBC talking head–turned, lately, investment bank CEO, Bobby drifts through Europe, in parallel and in competition with his feeble sister, Rachel. He is a charmer, a gifted linguist, tall and handsome in addition to rich, and he bounces from city to city, conquest to conquest, taking notes for an always-in-its-early-stages magnum opus he sees as part Pepys, part Sebald, part guide to comparative linguistics. Bobby and Rachel are gluttons for all things old European, and they have a spirited rivalry when it comes to collecting places and relics, especially Romanesque architecture. Both are circled by hangers-on, users; chief among these is their shameless, amusing con woman mother, who's long since moved on from Salvador but not from the pursuit of his assets. The novel is lightly but deftly plotted; most of its joys have to do with bantering dialogue and with what Bobby calls his “Notebooks” project. His observations about history, culture, and especially language are great fun, and Barnhardt also excels, in the son's affectionate interactions with his father, at illustrating and glossing the 2008 crisis and the greed and skulduggery that caused it. (The Henry Miller part of all this, detailing the sexcapades of our blood flow–challenged hero, pale by comparison.) About two-thirds through, several swift, cleverly deployed plot devices put Bobby in possession of significant new resources, significant new moral ambiguities, and at last, nearing 40, in vague pursuit of a coming-of-age. The novel begins to morph into the one genre its man-child protagonist has never wanted any part of.

A likable, smart, wide-ranging ramble, good fun for those who like novels not aimless but a little aim-resistant.

TOM CLANCY FLASH POINT

Bentley, Don
Putnam (432 pp.)
$29.95 | May 23, 2023
9780593422786

With the United States the “closest [it’s] been to war” in a lifetime, intelligence operative Jack Ryan Jr. faces stiff odds in trying to avert a Chinese undersea glider capable of detecting a $3 billion American stealth submarine are in jeopardy. Things look especially grim with the capture of crash survivor John Clark, Ryan’s boss and a close compadre of his father, President Jack Ryan Sr. With Ryan Sr. still shaken by the abduction of his wife a year ago and Ryan Jr. doubtful of his abilities as a team leader, it’s up to intelligence director Mary Pat Foley to calm the waters with her expertise and strong will. One possible outcome is a Chinese attack on Taiwan. In Bentley’s third outing in the series, it takes a while to get past cookie cutter stuff: Many pages go by before the reader knows what all the tense language, chase scenes, and international travel are about. But the book’s cool, checkered efficiency eventually takes hold. And the streaks of vulnerability that run through the Ryans impart a human dimension that most such thrillers lack. Bentley also takes pains to distinguish the novel from fake fiction: “Unlike American brother, a specialist in machine learning. With a sniper attack on the German outpost of The Campus, Ryan’s “off-the-books” agency, and the downing of an American plane over the South China Sea, U.S. efforts to recover a Chinese undersea glider capable of detecting a $3 billion American stealth submarine are in jeopardy. Things look especially grim with the capture of crash survivor John Clark, Ryan’s boss and a close compadre of his father, President Jack Ryan Sr. With Ryan Sr. still shaken by the abduction of his wife a year ago and Ryan Jr. doubtful of his abilities as a team leader, it’s up to intelligence director Mary Pat Foley to calm the waters with her expertise and strong will. One possible outcome is a Chinese attack on Taiwan. In Bentley’s third outing in the series, it takes a while to get past cookie cutter stuff: Many pages go by before the reader knows what all the tense language, chase scenes, and international travel are about. But the book’s cool, checkered efficiency eventually takes hold. And the streaks of vulnerability that run through the Ryans impart a human dimension that most such thrillers lack. Bentley also takes pains to distinguish the novel from fake fiction: “Unlike
“With melancholy imagination, Bergman elegantly tackles nothing less than the entire arc of human history.”

**THE MUSEUM OF HUMAN HISTORY**

Bergman, Rebekah

Tin House (900 pp.)

$17.95 paper | Aug. 1, 2023

9781953534910

A treatment that pauses aging and pain affects an entire city in unforeseen ways in this debut novel.

Maeve Wilhelm is asleep. She’s been asleep for 25 years, since she nearly drowned in a community swimming pool at the age of 8. But Maeve’s sleep is not a coma: She’s breathing on her own and, more importantly, not visibly aging. Hers isn’t the first family tragedy: Maeve’s mother, Naomi, a senior researcher at a biotech company, also drowned under strange circumstances. Naomi’s body was found with a mysterious red rock in her pocket, apparently related to the red algae bloom that appeared off a private beach where her company was conducting top-secret research. This rock, this algae—what does it have to do with Naomi’s death or Maeve’s sleep, which occurred not long after she ingested some of the algae at the closed beach on a dare? How does it connect to Naomi’s biotech work on a procedure designed to pause outward signs of aging as well as numb pain? And what of the Museum of Human History, a local attraction built around caves in which ancient humans—and a single doll, “in a sleeping posture…covered in beautiful red stones”—had once been discovered? Bergman’s novel, structured like a series of concentric circles, ripples out to include a number of characters affected by the anti-aging treatment in some way: a young widower, a performance artist, a museum director, and Maeve’s own identical twin. Each narrative ring reveals unexpected connections among them, images and bits of language that recur, ideas and themes—memory, death, the slippage between the past and the future—that deepen as the novel blends fairy tale, philosophy, and shades of literary-futurist classics like *Never Let Me Go*.

With melancholy imagination, Bergman elegantly tackles nothing less than the entire arc of human history.

**BRIDGE**

Beukes, Lauren

Mulholland Books/Little, Brown (432 pp.)

$29.00 | Aug. 8, 2023

9780316267885

What if it were possible to inhabit different versions of yourself in different realities? Beukes explores the scientific and ethical ramifications—with a healthy dose of speculative horror.

Cleaning out her estranged mother’s house after she dies, Bridget Kittinger-Harris finds a horrifying husk she recognizes as “the dreamworm,” sparking memories from her childhood of strange adventures and her neuroscientist mother’s odd, sometimes dangerously neglectful behavior. She immediately swallows a strand and soon finds herself inside another Bridget in another universe. Meanwhile, that alternative Bridget wakes up inside the original Bridge’s body, and chaos and near violence ensue. Once order has been restored, it’s clear that Bridge’s mother, Jo, was up to something—probably the permanent relocation of her own consciousness into some other world’s version of herself, so Bridge will be able to find her and they will be reunited. Thus begins a weird treasure hunt as Bridge uses strands of the dreamworm to travel from body to body while her friend Dom reads Jo’s journals, reaches out to a musician and a neuroscientist for help, and babysits all the other Bridges as they turn up, confused, out of their own realities. Meanwhile,
“A former Army Ranger with intense psychic abilities sets out to rescue a woman abducted by a religious cult.”

“An ever-present element of suspense reinforces the story’s rapid pace, and Merrill delivers a riveting conclusion that will entice readers with the possibility of future installments.”
—BookLife Reviews

“This second installment of Merrill’s Gifted saga—which blends elements of contemporary fantasies, suspense novels, and paranormal romances—continues a story about the staff and students of a school for gifted kids whose lives have been impacted by tragedy.”

“A fast-paced and fun fusion of supernatural romance and mainstream thriller.”
—Kirkus Reviews

For All Inquiries, Please Email
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a woman named Amber and her cuddly dog, Mr. Floof II, seek to eradicate anyone who’s infested by the dreamworm threads. The worldbuilding here is skillful, as is the pacing—Beukes avoids dropping anvil-like plot points or world details, trusting the reader to unpack clues and read between the lines. Bridge’s world is not our own, featuring something called Lifebook instead of Facebook and a pandemic faced by a President Harris rather than Trump and/or Biden, but the differences are subtle enough that we can believe there really might be an infinite number of universes, and selves, out there somewhere. And maybe grief itself, Beukes suggests on a deeper level, is strong enough to alter space and time.

Effective as metaphor but mostly ass-kicking, mind-bending entertainment.

THE ART OF SCANDAL
Black, Regina
Grand Central Publishing (304 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781538722770

After discovering her husband has been unfaithful, a politician’s wife revisits her life choices and everything she gave up for her husband’s career.

Rachel is the perfect wife to Matt Abbott, the mayor of Oasis Springs, a fictional town near Washington, D.C. During Matt’s 40th birthday party, he sends her a racy photograph of himself. It’s so out of character that she instantly realizes the text was meant for someone else and her husband is having an affair. Having met Matt at a difficult time in her life, she was initially content to put aside her dreams of a career in art photography in order to play her role as the White politician’s Black trophy wife. Over time, having forsaken her ambition in favor of her husband’s weighs more heavily on her, and his infidelity makes her sacrifices feel all the more painful. She strikes a deal with him that she will remain in their marriage, playing up to the press for the remainder of his current campaign, provided she gets the house and $1 million at its conclusion. When she meets Nathan Vasquez, a fellow artist who reawakens her old passions, she’s suddenly not so sure she can wait out the remainder of her sentence with Matt. As Rachel begins a steamy affair with Nathan, she worries she’s jeopardizing her daughter’s financial future and her own reputation. Told in an engaging, close third-person narrative, the book alternates between Rachel’s and Nathan’s perspectives. While it is obvious almost immediately that there will be an affair between them, there is joy and suspense in watching it unfold. The way the author manages to center their passion for each other around art is clever and engaging. Teeming with complicated family dynamics and the negative aspects of media attention, the novel also examines the difficulty of being in the public eye. The author also explores the complexities of interracial marriage with a perspective that feels fresh and insightful.

A sexy, elegantly crafted debut.

THE ROMANTIC
Boyd, William
Knopf (464 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780593536797

This appealing picaresque follows its hero’s escapades for most of the 19th century.

As a boy in Ireland, Cashel Greville Ross wonders one day why his aunt is disheveled just after he has seen a man leaving through the back gate. In his teens he’ll discover his true parentage and leave home in anger. For his 17th novel, Boyd turns again to the sort of narrative he fashioned in The New
“After just two collections, Brinkley may already be a grand master of the short story.”

**WITNESS**

Brinkley, Jamel

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

(240 pp.)

$26.00 | Aug. 1, 2023

9780374607036

Short stories that in their depth of feeling, perception, and sense of place affirm their author’s bright promise.

As in his debut collection, *A Lucky Man* (2018), Brinkley sets these stories in New York City ethnic neighborhoods on the edge of transformation, vividly and, at times, hauntingly showing how the people in those enclaves struggle to withstand, even transcend...
In Johanna Hedva’s most recent novel, *Your Love Is Not Good* (And Other Stories, May 23), the lead is a queer Korean-American painter whose grasp of boundaries, self, reality, and ethics is fuzzy—she locks her muse in a Vantablack basement and drives off to an art opening. She leads us through the oppressive heat of Los Angeles and “steely” Berlin as the novel traces her gradual dissolution and the racist systems and family dynamics that got her there.

Hedva, who, like her protagonist, is an artist with a White mother and Korean father, uses color to depict the mental states of the narrator as she probes ideas of Whiteness. White can be described as a “stygian fog,” the color of a skull, the byproduct of a yeast infection. At the same time, the narrator is in love with her muse and model, who has “gleaming white skin.” The author also explores the making of art and a predatory art world filled with chutes and ladders (but mostly chutes). Amid layered prose and wry one-liners (“Thank God he was a service top, which is what all cis men should be”), definitions of art terms appear and grow more abstract and inaccurate. In a starred review, Kirkus called the novel “a resplendent and fearless book. Must read.” We asked Hedva some questions via email; the exchange has been edited for length and clarity.

Your book burrows into challenging topics like identity and race, capitalism and exploitation, child abuse and sexual assault; but it’s also compassionate, caustic, funny, and clever as hell. What was it like to write?

I wanted to write about things that make me the most ethically uncomfortable, and I wanted to write a first-person narrator whom I disagree with politically. The reason is because I think this is what fiction is very good at—getting into all that gunk. Often I think of something Deborah Levy said, that “fiction is a wonderful home for the reach of the mind,” and as she said it, she reached her hand into the air and closed her fingers into a fist. When I see this image, I think of fisting. In fisting, it’s good to wear gloves. If you’re going to reach into the mind, the ass of inquiry, the gaping genital of speculation, it’s good to have some kind of prophylactic protection. As much as it is the reach itself, fiction is also the glove.

In Adam Smyer’s *You Can Keep That to Yourself: A Comprehensive List of What Not To Say to Black People, for Well-Intentioned People of Pallor*, he writes, “You use light-and-dark/black-and-white imagery to signify good and evil while you are talking to me, a black person….Some bowl-cut translucent psycho commits a horror, and the first thing you call him is ‘dark.’ Keep us out of your fuckery.” The novel so successfully explores the fuckery of Whiteness. How did you fold so much of...
the attraction, repulsion, and general history of the nature of Whiteness into such a rich story?

I love that Smyer quote. I thought quite a lot about how whiteness and Blackness are leveraged as metaphor and symbol, how something that is visual can slip into meaning something deeper, rooted, ontological.

This slipperiness is profound for me because I am someone who doesn’t look like what I am. I look like a white abled cis woman, but what I am is a Korean American, disabled, genderqueer person. Which means that I’ve never felt like I belong anywhere—I always feel like a sort of spy—and this means that passing-ness is a primary condition of my life. Specifically, being so white-passing has always made me feel disowned by my own skin, like I am something I shouldn’t be, and yet it’s given me enormous benefits and privileges. Being enculturated as white—even by the Asian side of my family, for whom assimilation into whiteness was the mandate—is something I’ve been trying to untangle for decades. The novel felt like a supple form to really crack open and get messy with the ick of all this.

I was ready to abandon *Your Love Is Not Good* after the second dog dies. It was only because I was preparing for this Q&A that I kept going. (So glad I did!) Why kill off the canines?!

Two of the dog scenes are taken from my real life, and they were some of the most significant, life-changing experiences I’ve had. But I felt that they were too melodramatic to ever work in nonfiction.

I think of that scene in Season 1, Episode 5 of *Atlanta*, where Darius shoots a dog target at a shooting range and everyone gets outraged at him for not shooting a human target. There’s something about killing a dog that feels like the worst deranged evil, perhaps because we’ve bred them to be so obsequious to us. We’ve engineered them to be these perfect bottoms who follow our orders, so to be cruel to them feels unbearable. I wanted my book to get into this sticky, grimy dynamic of dominance and submission, the relationship between cruelty and pity, why there are parts of us that need to be obeyed and worshiped.

**The protagonist, exploited and commodified by the art world and beyond, must make a no-win decision to become complicit in that same system or continue to face financial precarity; it’s a turning point. Why give the character that dilemma? Was it something you faced?**

This book is my experiment in something I was thinking about as “anti-autofiction.” I started with a character who, on paper, in terms of how she’d fill out a form at the DMV, has the same identity demographics as me: white mother, Korean father, born and raised in LA, poor as hell, queer as fuck, kinkkinkkink, went to art school, wanted to “be somebody.” But every time this character makes a choice, I wanted her to do the thing I disagreed with politically, that I thought was ethically wrong, that I did not, would not, do. So, no, I’ve never faced such a dilemma because the choices I made led me very intentionally away from it.

With this book, I wanted to feel into the muck of how—if at all—our intentions affect the consequences of our choices, and I wanted to see what sort of life someone like me could have had if they made different choices than the ones I did.

I wanted to write a tragedy based on the definition that a tragedy is where you watch a character make the wrong choice because there is no other choice. My narrator makes the wrong choice over and over and over again, and hopefully the reader can feel a pathos in the fact that she does this either because she does not have the equipment to make the “right” choice, or, even worse, she thinks these choices are the right ones.

**What’s next?**

My new solo exhibition opens in October 2023 at JOAN LA. The next book, *How To Tell When We Will Die: Essays on Sickness, Fate, and Doom*, comes out in fall 2024. And I’m working on the next record, which is “succubus folk songs” and “hag blues” and a lot of yowling about orifices.

*Karen Schechner is the president of Kirkus Indie. Your Love Is Not Good received a starred review in the April 15, 2023, issue.*
the changes around them. “The Happiest House on Union Street,” for instance, focuses on a young girl named Beverly, old enough to be “past the phase of making words up,” who spends the days and nights leading up to Halloween trying to mediate tensions between her father and her uncle (both named Ray) as a developer is showing interest in the Brooklyn home that’s been in their family for generations. Then there’s “Bartow Station,” in which a delivery-truck driver’s encounter with an abandoned subway tunnel triggers unwanted memories of a personal tragedy. In this story, as in others, characters’ presumptions are upended, secrets revealed, and wounds, both physical and psychological, are exposed. These factors come together most strikingly in the title story, in which a young woman named Bernice embarks on a romance with a club DJ to the consternation of her turbulent, disapproving brother, and the petty disputes among the three of them obscure the fact that something is terribly wrong with Bernice’s health. In some ways, the plots of these stories, however engrossing, are less significant than their vivid physical details, graceful language, and acute observation of even the most bewildering of human behavior. Brinkley’s stories carry a rich veneer worthy of such exemplars of the form as Chekhov, Eudora Welty, Alice Munro, and James Alan McPherson. At their best, these stories provide inspiration to all of us, no matter who we are or where we live, on how best to deal with those moments in life when, as one of Brinkley’s characters puts it, “all we can manage...is halting small talk, and the awkwardness of letting it resound in our ears.”

After just two collections, Brinkley may already be a grand master of the short story.

TOMB SWEEPING
Chang, Alexandra
Ecco/HarperCollins (256 pp.)
$17.99 paper | Aug. 8, 2023
9780062951847


Unemployed after being replaced by a piece of software, a woman in her 30s is burning through her severance pay, spending her days eating weed gummies and binge-watching dating shows. When a former co-worker steers a housesitting gig her way, she finds the idea of an “escape into someone else’s house, someone else’s life” attractive. This job takes her to a secluded home in the hills owned by a couple embarking on a trip to Portugal. Our narrator is free to enjoy the home’s amenities—meditation room, swimming pool, Peloton, professional espresso machine—as long as she agrees to stay out of the wife’s painting studio and a dilapidated shed. Despite the contemporary details, this is a perfect setup for a gothic tale, and Chang delivers a story in which the unexplained takes on the power to chill because of how it occurs within the quotidian abnormality of extreme privilege. This story, “Unknown by Unknown,” is the first in the collection, and it is far and away the best. The title story is also very good. In it, a series of rituals meant to honor ancestors forces a young girl to reckon with a massacre that occurred long before she was born—a massacre that her now-dead grandfather had tried to make her understand. The rest of the stories presented here are substantially less satisfying. Chang’s debut novel was brilliantly executed. Most of the works we see here feel like warm-up exercises or not entirely successful experiments. The author seems to have a particular aversion to—or difficulty with—endings. The openness at the end of “Unknown by Unknown” feels both scary and weirdly thrilling. Elsewhere, though, stories end at a moment that is maybe supposed to seem portentous but comes across as arbitrary.

An uneven collection from an exciting young author.

FEARLESS
Craven, M.W.
Flatiron Books (416 pp.)
$27.99 | July 11, 2023
9781250864567

Off the grid for six years, former U.S. Marshal Ben Koenig is asked to find his former boss’ missing daughter. Koenig was forced to leave the elite Special Operations Group when he was found to have a rare genetic disorder that makes him impervious to fear. Tagged with a $5 million bounty for killing the son of a Russian crime boss, he faked his own death and went underground. He resurfaces when the head of SOG, to whom he is devoted, summons him to find his daughter, Martha—and, in the likely event that she’s dead, punish her abductors. Martha’s disappearance and the death of a George-town professor of hers have something to do with the research she was doing into a mysterious solar energy company in Texas’ Chihuahuan Desert, where the company founder’s best friend died in a rock climbing accident. The business proves to be cover for a criminal operation. Working mostly alone, Koenig schools the reader on such line-of-work skills as the “two ways to kill someone quietly with a knife” and shopping for supplies (“You need more than just a fold-up toothbrush,” he says, scoffing at the solo heroics of Jack Reacher even as he emulates the fictional hero). When his life is threatened, he unnerves his captors by making wisecracks. English author Craven’s first series novel set in the U.S. following his British Washington Poe mysteries gets off to a strong start. But the unwinding of the plot doesn’t always make sense. As one character says, “It all got a bit...metaphysical.” And a little of Koenig’s smugness and cold proclivity for violence go a long way.

A fast-moving but slow-to-convince series debut.
An engaging story set in 1950s Manhattan focuses on Radio City Music Hall and its performers.

It’s 1956, and Marion Brooks thinks she’s satisfied with her life. She lives comfortably with her businessman dad and her older sister, Judy, in Bronxville, she has a fiance who’s suitable (even if she doesn’t feel all that excited about marrying him), and she has a job teaching her true passion: dancing. It’s not like having a dance career herself, but with her overprotective and overbearing father, it’s as close as she’s likely to get. Then she gets fired. Dad advises her to start planning her wedding, but then by chance she hears about an open audition for the Rockettes, the iconic dancers of Radio City Music Hall. She goes on a lark, but when she’s offered the job, she’s dazzled—so much so that she upends her life, taking it in stride even when she’s kicked out of the family home. Living amid the merry chaos of the Rehearsal Club, a Manhattan boardinghouse for women in the performing arts, she welcomes the grueling training dancers undergo, then relishes the four-shows-a-day performance schedule. She even finds time to party and, in spite of her newfound independence, is intrigued by Peter Griggs, a psychiatrist interested in what would come to be called criminal profiling. But New York City isn’t all bright lights; for an astounding two decades, someone called the Big Apple Bomber has been setting off explosives in public places without being caught. He’s bombed Radio City twice—and when he does it again, Marion will have to grapple with far more shocking changes to her life. The novel is rich with historical details, and it comes most vividly to life in the passages about the Rockettes, with all the sweat, agony, and camaraderie that go into those miraculously perfect performances.

This historical novel’s strong point is finding the grit behind the glamour of the Rockettes.
Miss Dottie" King, whom she discovers dead in her luxurious Wells murder trial, Ella Bradford catches a subway from her White. DiVello maintains a breakneck pace from one brief, I went to the Manor again," Eliza Raine writes to her former DiVello shrewdly draws parallels between Julia's hardscrabble struggles in a misogynistic era and Dot's use of her sexuality to rise in society, and she crafts an intriguing relationship between Julia and Coughlin, prickly yet mutually respectful. Race and class factor into Ella's anxiety over her proximity to the crime, since she's Black and all the other characters are White. DiVello maintains a breakneck pace from one brief, dated line chapter to the next. Her pulpy, over-the-top prose credibly evokes the era's crime magazines, while her fidelity to the characters and the well-documented facts surrounding the unsolved murder give the story extra interest. Her meticulous care extends to a lengthy postscript tracking the subsequent lives of all those involved.

A juicy Roaring '20s crime yarn set in red-hot Manhattan. A juicy Roaring '20s crime yarn set in red-hot Manhattan.

Sara Divello

BROADWAY BUTTERFLY

Thomas & Mercer (432 pp.)

$28.99 | Aug. 1, 2023

9781662510137

Who slew the Jazz Age party girl? This novel, based on a true story, investigates the crime.

After poring over the New York Daily News of March 15, 1923, for the latest developments in the sensational Pettit-Wells murder trial, Ella Bradford catches a subway from her Harlem apartment to West 57th Street and her job as a maid to "Miss Dottie" King, whom she discovers dead in her luxurious bed. When ambitious News reporter Julia Harpman, who happens to be covering the Pettit-Wells trial on Long Island, learns of the murder of the flapper and sometime actress known as the Broadway Butterfly, she rushes to cover that as well. The official investigation falls to veteran Inspector John D. Coughlin, whose steel-trap mind recalls other brutal crimes on West 57th. Though it focuses on three protagonists who are all invested in solving the mystery, this tale is less a whodunit than a lurid crime story set in the Mad Decade and presented from multiple perspectives. DiVello shrewdly draws parallels between Julia's hardscrabble struggles in a misogynistic era and Dot's use of her sexuality to rise in society, and she crafts an intriguing relationship between Julia and Coughlin, prickly yet mutually respectful. Race and class factor into Ella's anxiety over her proximity to the crime, since she's Black and all the other characters are White. DiVello maintains a breakneck pace from one brief, dated line chapter to the next. Her pulpy, over-the-top prose credibly evokes the era's crime magazines, while her fidelity to the characters and the well-documented facts surrounding the unsolved murder give the story extra interest. Her meticulous care extends to a lengthy postscript tracking the subsequent lives of all those involved.

A juicy Roaring '20s crime yarn set in red-hot Manhattan. A juicy Roaring '20s crime yarn set in red-hot Manhattan.

Grossman, Emma

LEARNED BY HEART

Little, Brown (336 pp.)

$28.00 | Aug. 29, 2023

9780316564434

An ill-at-ease schoolgirl at a 19th-century boarding school finds love with her swashbuckling roommate.

In the latest of her fact-based historical novels, Donoghue strikes an unabashedly romantic, dreamlike tone with an opening line deliberately evocative of Rebecca. "Last night I went to the Manor again," Eliza Raine writes to her former lover, Anne Lister, a decade after the two met in 1805 as teenage students at King's Manor in York. Sent from Madras to England at age 6, the product of a "country marriage" between an Indian woman and an East India Company employee, Eliza is painfully aware of how her brown skin and illegitimacy mark her out among her privileged classmates even though her father's death has left her heir to a modest fortune. She does her best to be the perfect student—until Lister arrives and is placed in her garret room. Self-confident, rule-breaking Lister both fascinates and frightens Raine, from her insistence that they call each other by their surnames like schoolboys to her casual disrespect for the teachers. Yet Raine comes to relish the spirit of adventure her new friend has brought into her life, and eventually the two embark on an ecstatic physical relationship. The story of the girls' deepening bond is told in third-person chapters interspersed with Raine's anguished letters to Lister, in which it quickly becomes clear that at age 24 Raine has been confined for some time to an asylum. We don't know why until the very end, but it's clear in the school chapters that her growing sense of self-worth is bound up in her love for Lister and might not survive their parting. Donoghue draws a wonderfully rich portrait of boarding school life, both a mirror of the outside world's social hierarchies and a hothouse of complex interactions among girls striving to become women. As always, her narrative is grounded in sharp observation, strong characters, and nice period detail. She also tenderly evokes passion between two young women, though Raine's perpetual insecurity and timidity eventually become as wearying for the reader as we suspect they may have for Lister.

Not quite on the level of Donoghue's very best work but nonetheless a treat for her many fans.

Julia Franks

THE SAY SO

Hub City Press (368 pp.)

$28.00 | June 6, 2023

97808888740074

Societal pressures are the backdrop to this story about pregnant women and the decisions they make.

Based in part on Franks' own experience, this compassionate novel follows the lives of two pregnant young women as they make tough decisions, with little support from families and friends, that will change their lives and the lives of their children forever. When high school senior Edie Carrigan discovers she's pregnant in the 1950s, she ends up doing what most girls in her situation are forced to do: She hides away in a group home until her baby is born and then placed for adoption. Her desires don't matter. Throughout her pregnancy she's ashamed, ridiculed, and blamed for being single and pregnant. Her boyfriend experiences none of this, and her best friend, Luce Waddell, turns against her. Twenty-five years later, Luce's daughter Meera, a college student, has more options than Edie did when she finds out she's pregnant, but despite the burgeoning women's movement and expanding reproductive rights, she's still judged for the choices she makes. Franks channels insight from her experience as a pregnant college student in the 1980s into vibrant, sensitive characters who
“The book interweaves shrewd observations about the human condition into its tales, even throwing in comedic laugh-out-loud lines on occasion, often when least expected.”
—David Messineo, Publisher/Poetry Editor, Sensations Magazine

“Paul Kiritsis has a unique and profound understanding of myths and shares his insights with his fortunate readers in this magnificent retelling…”
—Stanley Krippner, Ph.D., Co-author of Personal Mythology: Using Ritual, Dreams, and Imagination to Discover Your Inner Story

“...an unexpected and entertaining twist in the end.”
—The US Review of Books

“Just when we think we've come so far, narratives like this show us how little we've actually progressed.”
—OnlineBookClub.org

FOR ALL INQUIRIES, PLEASE EMAIL TOLAKOS@GMAIL.COM • PAULKIRITSIS.NET
What would it mean to be happy? It’s a question both essential and existential, one that seems so daunting, it’s best avoided. But queer Indonesian poet Norman Erikson Pasaribu has no intention of shying away from the messy nature of happiness—including its more melancholic aspects. The title of their U.S. fiction debut, *Happy Stories, Mostly* (Feminist Press, June 6), doesn’t say it all, but it does set the tone for the book, “a beautiful collection that refuses to shy away from the often complex and difficult queer experience,” according to our review.

Careful readers will notice how queerness is threaded through these stories in subtle ways and overt ones. Queerness affects “how we negotiate with the world we live in” and “makes our choices different from those of the hetero people in our lives,” says Pasaribu, speaking to Kirkus via Zoom from Bali. Traditional notions of sexuality and gender dominate Indonesian culture, intertwined with the majority Christian religion of the author’s Toba Batak people. Pasaribu, 33, recalls the imagery of Adam and Eve being particularly strong throughout their upbringing, and they say that strict heteronormative ideals “[make] you question yourself when you grow up.” When they are writing, their process includes “unloading all of the bias that society has imposed on me.” Being queer, says the author, is like “having a different religion.”

This pressure and bias make Pasaribu especially grateful for their friendship with Sydney-based translator Tiffany Tsao and the nonjudgmental space that Tsao provides. “As a queer, I feel like I’m not heard enough in my real life by the people around me….When I’m working with Tiff, my opinions matter. My vision matters. She treats me like an equal.” The author says that their stories tend to contain a lot of “secret passages,” different ways the reader can encounter and understand what’s on the page, and Tsao incorporates these subtleties in her translations.

Religion is one of the collection’s recurring themes, but explorations of the subject are far from straightforward, imbued with the author’s sense of humor and an appropriate dose of cynicism. In “Ad maiorem dei gloriam,” readers meet Sister Tula, a nun who takes clandestine visits into town to escape the tedium of convent life; “Welcome to the Department of Unanswered Prayers” imagines what heaven itself might look like—and depicts it as rife with many of the same complaints and trials that plague life on Earth. The outsize influence that the idea of heaven has within Toba Batak culture provokes the author to interrogate it. “I was like, OK, let’s see how heaven is. And probably because I am quite cynical and maybe quite funny, I [thought], yeah, heaven has a clean water problem, like where I grew up.”

In “The True Story of the Story of the Giant,” two male university students, both captivated by the legend of a giant man, progress from academic rivals to unlikely friends; their friendship falters when Tunggul, who is gay, confesses unrequited feelings for Henri, who is straight. In this story, the author wanted to explore what they perceive to be a lack of
positive role models for both straight and gay men as well as the pressure for queer people to excel in order to be accepted by the dominant culture. Pasaribu says that it can be difficult for them to parse the full extent of complex themes within the short story form, but they also appreciate how short stories can connect and become “greater than the sum of [their] parts. That’s a phrase I like in English.”

As for readers who may have been led by the title to expect more obvious depictions of happiness, Pasaribu says they consciously wanted to probe more complicated emotions and experiences in this work. They describe their first book of stories, published in Indonesian in 2014, as “romance fiction” that “explores queer love,” while their debut poetry collection, *Sergius Seeks Bacchus*, focused on “finding queer salvation in Indonesia in the context of a Batak Christian family.” With this book, they wanted “to ask the bigger questions,” having explored “the fun parts of being queer” in their previous works. Still, “I call them ‘happy stories’ because I’m happy they are written. I’m happy they are there.”

When it comes to queer literature in Indonesia, Pasaribu is mindful of the history of those who preceded them and excited about the possibilities of literature in the present. “Queer people before me have written, have struggled, have persisted, so I want to honor them. But then, I feel queerness is changing [so much] that even the word tradition doesn’t make sense, because we are all changing, evolving, transforming—so to transform itself is the tradition. I want to continue to experiment with form, style, perspective, themes. Then, by doing so, I feel I have honored all of the things that older queers have done in their lifetimes, so I can be here today.”

Nina Palattella is the editorial assistant. Happy Stories, Mostly was reviewed in the May 15, 2023, issue.

break the stereotype about selfish birth mothers who relinquish their babies and never look back. She takes us into her characters’ heartbreak and raw emotions as they make the best decisions for themselves even as other people try to control them. When Edie’s boyfriend wants to make decisions for her, “it occurred to her that he wanted the same thing she did: the say-so. Over her body and over her child.” With heart and spirit, this novel reminds us that no matter the time period, women are pressured to conform to other people’s wishes and beliefs.

A timely and relevant story about every woman’s control over her body and her life.

**THE WOLF HUNT**

Gundar-Goshen, Ayelet

*Trans. by Sondra Silverston*

Little, Brown (288 pp.)

$28.00 | Aug. 15, 2023

9780316423472

The dark experiences of an Israeli immigrant family in “one of the greenest, quietest, safest cities in America.”

Israeli-born Lilach and Michael Shuster “raised an American child who went to high school with American children, and now they say he killed another American child,” we learn in the first pages of Gundar-Goshen’s third novel. Like many of the husbands in their neighborhood, Michael works in tech, but “while other companies in Silicon Valley developed apps for internet shopping, the company Michael worked for developed security products, which was a nice way of saying ‘weapons.' ” As for the women, Lilach wryly notes, “there were sleep consultants and breastfeeding consultants and toilet-training consultants. There were also couples therapists and art therapists. But the people who provided real care were the Hispanic women who came to our houses every day by public transportation. They took care of the art therapists’ children while the art therapists were taking care of the couples therapists’ children.” Lilach’s alienation and anxiety escalate when there is a violent attack on a local synagogue, then skyrocket when a Black teenager dies at a party and her son, Adam, becomes the prime suspect. Like the other Jewish mothers in the community, she has signed Adam up to take self-defense classes with an Israeli named Uri Ziv; rumored to be ex-Mossad. Adam worships Uri, who also becomes very close with Michael and gets a job at his company; as the family is targeted, Uri becomes their protector. But should they trust him? Gundar-Goshen navigates the landscape of racial prejudice, particularly the tension between Jews and the Nation of Islam, through the eyes of an Israeli immigrant who is already scarred by experiences of terrorism in Israel. Sexual identity and bullying also play roles in the plot, which moves uneasily to a conclusion that leaves some questions unanswered. Gundar-Goshen solidifies her brand with this ambitious novel, her first set in the United States.

Flawed but relatable characters and off-the-charts emotional intensity with a sharply evoked Israeli cultural perspective.
A young man seeks closure—or is it revenge?—after a childhood of sexual abuse.

Dylan, the narrator of Hertz’s sharp, candid debut novel, is a heavily tattooed 26-year-old gay New Yorker who, as the story opens, seeks normalcy but finds it elusive. He’s honeymooning in Florida with a decent man, Moans, and though Dylan struggles to keep his promiscuity in check, he’s in a better place than he was during the three years he spent—beginning at age 14—being raped, drugged, trafficked, and used in child pornography by a man named Vincent. He’s forced to reconsider his past, though, with the passage of the Child Victims Act, which extends the statute of limitations on childhood sexual abuse. But his “lookback period” to press charges is only one year, prompting a variety of stressors: Difficult sessions with his therapist, an attempted confrontation with his pedophilic abuser, temptations to feed his drug and sex addictions, and lawyers uninterested in taking his case. (The law prompts Hertz’s talent for evoking the horrors and consequences of abuse runs deep, but the effect is of a short story stretched out.)

Dylan’s narration strives for a kind of hard-won stoicism but radiances he faced as a teenager is unflinching—at times tough to take—and Hertz has a fine command of the anxieties his protagonist faces and why simple solutions are hard to find. But within this unique milieu are some common first-novel issues: Dylan’s narration strives for a kind of hard-won stoicism but often reads as flat; the characterization of Moans and other secondary characters (including another potential love interest) are relatively thin; and plotwise the novel cycles from a memory of abuse to self-sabotage to desperate gestures of love and affection. Hertz’s talent for evoking the horrors and consequences of abuse runs deep, but the effect is of a short story stretched past its limits.

A promising debut seeking storytelling to match the trauma it evokes.

In his declining years, a man reflects upon, and relates, the brutal circumstances of his earliest life as a slave living in the Roman Empire.

Sold into slavery as a child and unaware of any details about his background, Jacob, the narrator of Hynes’ richly detailed historical novel, begins his story with a litany of the identities he may (or may not) have assumed or been forced into: Standing out on the list are “cinaedus,” “eunuch,” “pimp,” “slave,” and “whore,” alerting readers that this rendition of ancient life casts an eye on Roman culture beyond amphitheaters and gladiators. Raised in a brothel, after having been mistakenly bought as a girl slave, Jacob (the name adopted later by the narrator referred to initially only as Pusus or “Little One”) endures years of menial domestic labor and harsh treatment but falls into a quasi-familial relationship with several of the “wolves” (prostitutes) working there. The viscerally disturbing turns that his life takes set by despotic leader Joel Davis must wear letters around their necks or branded on their arms. (Sound familiar?) Mia’s mother, Ivy, who came to the Community as a pregnant, runaway teen and reluctantly married Joel, now secretly encourages Mia’s small rebellions, steering her to read books, an activity Joel made Ivy abandon. Mia becomes obsessed with The Scarlet Letter after finding a first edition mysteriously inscribed “To Mia.” After Ivy’s death, Mia escapes the Community. Under the tutelage of Constance Allen and Sarah Mott, a loving couple of lesbian librarians in Concord (where Hawthorne is buried), she finishes growing up and becomes a librarian herself, although Joel continues hounding her. One day, while visiting Hawthorne’s grave, she makes a wish that she could meet the author. Poof! At its midpoint, Hoffman’s novel transforms from a relatively realistic story of female empowerment and the spiritual/psychological magic of reading into pure fantasy. Mia finds herself transported to 1837 Salem. Hawthorne, a struggling young writer whose book Twice-Told Tales has recently been a commercial flop, finds Mia asleep in the grass. She lamely announces, “I came from another time only to meet you,” and they fall rapturously in love, but the inevitable time-travel question arises: If she stays with him, will she alter history? Mia recognizes that The Scarlet Letter is her life story; if the book did not exist, would she? Hoffman makes Nathaniel dreamily appealing and creates a riveting voice for his sister Elizabeth, whose brilliance is thwarted by the times in which she lives, but Mia is more author’s puppet than character, and Hoffman’s worthy message concerning women’s rights feels repetitive and ultimately didactic. More important, the realism and fantasy never quite jibe.

Not one of Hoffman’s best, but it may spark a desire to reread Hawthorne.

In his declining years, a man reflects upon, and relates, the brutal circumstances of his earliest life as a slave living in the Roman Empire.

Sold into slavery as a child and unaware of any details about his background, Jacob, the narrator of Hynes’ richly detailed historical novel, begins his story with a litany of the identities he may (or may not) have assumed or been forced into: Standing out on the list are “cinaedus,” “eunuch,” “pimp,” “slave,” and “whore,” alerting readers that this rendition of ancient life casts an eye on Roman culture beyond amphitheaters and gladiators. Raised in a brothel, after having been mistakenly bought as a girl slave, Jacob (the name adopted later by the narrator referred to initially only as Pusus or “Little One”) endures years of menial domestic labor and harsh treatment but falls into a quasi-familial relationship with several of the “wolves” (prostitutes) working there. The viscerally disturbing turns that his life takes
during his preadolescent years force Jacob to create an alter ego for himself, and he becomes—via the escape hatch of his mind at least—the eponymous Sparrow. Pusus/Jacob/Sparrow (among his other acquired monikers) breaks the literary equivalent of the theater’s fourth wall and occasionally addresses readers with foreshadowing or commentary on the fallibility of memory, providing some relief from the inexorable grimness of his existence. Extensively researched, Hynes’ examination of an empire grappling with survival and the growing influence of the not entirely beneficent force of Christianity raises questions about trauma, identity, and the creation of intentional family in the context of the sympathetic narrator’s growing awareness of the world he is locked away from. (Hobbes’ oft-quoted observation that life is “nasty, brutish, and short” seems appropriate to Jacob’s story.)

A vivid portrait of a literal empire of pain.

NONE OF THIS IS TRUE
Jewell, Lisa
Atria (384 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781982179007

When two women who share a birthday meet, a journalist becomes the subject of her own true-crime mystery.

On their 45th birthdays, Josie Fair and Alix Summer meet at a pub and discover they were born not only on the same day, but in the same hospital. Alix is a successful journalist, and Josie convinces Alix that her story is worth telling. Josie met her husband when she was 13 and he was 40. “I can see that maybe I was being used, that maybe I was even being groomed?” she confesses to Alix. “But that feeling of being powerful, right at the start, when I was still in control. I miss that sometimes. I really do. And what I’d like, more than anything, is to get it back.” From this premise Alix creates a Netflix series, Hi! I’m

THE AI DYSTOPIA
WHAT REALLY HAPPENED IN THE AI WAR?
WHO CONTROLS THE AIs? WHAT SECRETS LURK IN THE DARK CORNERS OF THE VIRTUAL WORLD?

“An ex-office worker, banished to a treacherous apartment district, fights to survive thugs and a rogue artificial intelligence in this SF sequel.”

“Stanfill delivers a faster-paced follow-up to series opener Terms of Service...”

“Stanfill, as in his earlier book, animates the pages with lucid details...”

“A smashing, energetic installment in this futuristic series that keeps getting better.”
—Kirkus Reviews

For Agent Representation or Information on Publishing and Film Rights, Email craig.w.stanfill@bad-rooster-press.com • craigwstanfill.com
William Dean Cawthorn, a man with a swastika tattoo, sleeping and the mystery at the novel’s heart plays out in an unexpected for you to have some moment of insight, some moment of clarity.”

It’s hard to read but hard to look away from.

A pair of violent attacks reveal the racist history of a North Carolina town.

Joy’s new novel opens with a foreboding sentence: “The graves took all night to dig.” The graves in this case are part of an art project headed by a young Black woman named Toya Gardner, who is engaged in a series of works that revisit the town’s history of racism and intolerance. (Of a local college’s early-20th-century expansion, she says, “They bulldozed a Cherokee mound and razed a Black church. Those are the things that school chose to move.”) Nearby, Ernie Allison, a White sheriff’s deputy, finds William Dean Crawthorn, a man with a swastika tattoo, sleeping in the back of a car along with Klan robes, a gun, and a list of contacts that includes the local chief of police, the last of which soon goes missing. Tension builds and builds to two acts of violence directed at Toya and Ernie. In the aftermath, the aging Sheriff John Coggins and Toya’s grandmother Vess Jones move to the forefront of the novel, as does Leah Green, the detective handling the investigation. Joy emphasizes the setting here, immersing the reader in quotidian details and embracing the plot’s slow burn. It’s telling that snakes in a house are a recurring image—and much of the book centers around its White characters grappling with their culpability in racism both overt and passive. Or, as the head of a local church tells Green, “It shouldn’t take a Black life for you to have some moment of insight, some moment of clarity.” And the mystery at the novel’s heart plays out in an unexpected way, with Joy employing a deft touch to the plotting.

An emotionally complex procedural that goes to unexpected places.

“The personal is patently political in Kiesling’s call to environmental arms.”

An examination of the myriad costs of delivering the “energy” needed to power everyday life through the story of one American woman.

Bunny Glenn, the disaffected teenage daughter of a U.S. foreign service officer, floats through life and her father’s relocations in a state of adolescent ennui and annoyance. Kiesling begins her account of Bunny’s slow journey to a level of heightened awareness of petropolitics in 1998 with her father’s posting in Baku, Azerbaijan, a hotbed of political and oil industry machinations in the wake of the breakup of the Soviet Union. While primarily concerned about her appearance and prime-time American soap operas translated into foreign languages for worldwide consumption, Bunny manages to absorb enough about the oil industry through osmosis that it comes as no surprise when, years later, an adult Bunny (who eventually prefers to be called Elizabeth) finds herself climbing the corporate ladder of a small, family-owned energy company in Texas. Through a lens focused on Bunny, Kiesling is able to deliver an examination of the roles of (among other factors) class, gender, politics, and economics in the development of the world’s addictive reliance upon fossil fuels. Bunny, who has been privy to rumors and stories of industry corruption and avarice, grapples with the need to make a life (and a living) for herself in an arena filled with self-interest and increasingly devastating environmental danger. All the while, she contends with concerns shared with women finding their ways in the corporate world and the world of self-fulfillment. Designer bags, Korean skin care lines, nail polish colors, and the resolution of a long-held sexual attraction take turns as signals of Bunny’s evolving persona in this artful demonstration of how micro decisions have macro results.

The personal is patently political in Kiesling’s call to environmental arms.

Working-class siblings in Port Chester, New York, struggle to face down secrets and family demons. If the grown Connelly siblings confided in each other, there wouldn’t be much of a plot for Lange’s novel, which unfolds in the same Hudson Valley universe as her first book, We Are the Bromans (2021). But like many of us, instead of talking honestly,
the troubled Connellys nurse grudges and hide their shame, though they’re bound together by surviving a tough childhood (their mother, who loved to tell them fairy tales about her native Ireland, died young, and their criminal father abandoned them). Impetuous Tara, the youngest, has just been released from prison after an 18-month sentence for drug trafficking. She has moved in with her sister, Geraldine, a bookkeeper for a local business; their brother, Eddie, a single dad; and his young son, Conor. Returning to her old life has left Tara reeling, and the attentions of Brian Nolan, one of the detectives who arrested her, are unsettling. She knows she should hate him, but she’s attracted instead. Brian’s partner, who’s also his uncle, is sure Tara will end up back in prison, but Tara isn’t a criminal. She’s got a secret, just like Eddie, who’s still suffering the repercussions of a traumatic brain injury, and Geraldine, who is overwhelmed at work and shops to console herself. Lange offers a window into these messy, error-prone Connellys, understanding their flawed humanity and the fact that their Westchester community isn’t merely a haven for wealthy commuters, but also an increasingly difficult place to live for working-class families. With compassion and insight, she explores the loyalties and frustrations that ebb and flow among siblings, especially those who have suffered trauma, and she reminds us that no matter how deep the wound, it’s always possible to follow your heart.

A compassionate look at family dynamics and a reminder that it’s never too late to heal.
This emotionally intense, wildly imaginative novel is both down-to-earth and out-to-lunch.

**TIME’S MOUTH**

Lepucki, Edan

Counterpoint (416 pp.)

$28.00 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781640095724

Communes and counterculture, dysfunctional families, astral travel...welcome to California in the second half of the 20th century. The first time Sharon experiences her ability to revisit scenes from her past, she’s 16. “How could she see herself? She could feel her own body, back in the bedroom, but she was also here in the backyard, without a form. She was a floating consciousness.”

This other self, the one on the grass—Sharon recognized herself. This time she saw herself as another character turns out to have Ursa’s gift. The novel follows the characters into the 1990s, by which time the terrible traumas that first pushed them to the margins. Meanwhile, the threat of their debts and fears that the police will track them down loom large. Erin finds herself more and more strongly drawn to Coral while she remains as elusive as ever. Ray and Staci find themselves alternately drawn toward and away from each other, each unsure where the other will land. One day, on the hunt to find a pet for Coral, Ray and Ernie encounter an animal that might even be better...and bigger. The introduction of the animal into the household intensifies the group’s already fraught relationships—or perhaps merely further reveals their own animal natures.

An engaging read that has its moments but fizzles out before living up to its potential.

**YOU’RE AN ANIMAL**

Libaire, Jardine

Hogarth (272 pp.)

$27.00 | Aug. 8, 2023
9780593449431

In this entertaining new novel, a ragtag group of misfits is on the lam after a fire breaks out on the meth-making commune in Oklahoma they used to call home.

There’s Ernie, who looks like a “hustler-Jesus from outer space”; Staci, bleached blond and burned out; Ray, Staci’s partner, roughed up from hard living and riding; and Coral, a 17-year-old deaf girl whose half-sister unceremoniously dumped her at the compound in a dented minivan. The four eventually find their way to Texas, where they settle down in a run-down house. As the group slowly grows into an eccentric sort of family, they must confront their pasts and the early traumas that first pushed them to the margins.

A 54-year-old widow who has barely left the house in four years creates a new life for herself. Joan Sample was destroyed when Jared, her husband and soul mate, died unexpectedly of an aneurism six months before the Covid-19 lockdowns began. Then it was suddenly four years later, and she found herself spending all her time on her own—scared to go out; ordering her groceries to be delivered; barely talking to her adult sons, Nick and Steve; spending hours and hours on puzzles. After an angry letter from the homeowners association about the state of her yard, Joan finally decides to start making changes. She gets a haircut, hires a landscaper, starts going to counseling and a grief therapy group, and opens up her home to boarder, nursing student Maggie Herbert, who’s trying to create some boundaries with her alcoholic father. When Nick drops a puppy off at her door, the complete reversal of the cloistered existence she’s been leading since Jared’s death is complete. Readers looking for an uplifting story focusing on character growth and newfound happiness will find solace here. The characters and situations fulfill the expectations of a fairy tale: Men are gruff and don’t know how to communicate; women are forgiving, understanding, and hard-working; people
are paired off after finding true love; houses are repaired with hard work and yards made glorious with flowers.

A gentle story of rebirth that focuses on love and partnership as the antidotes to loneliness.

THE CONTINENTAL AFFAIR
Mangan, Christine
Flatiron Books (320 pp.)
$27.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9781250788481

A thrilling chase through 1960s Europe with an emotional core and gorgeous prose.

Henri and Louise fatefully cross paths one morning at the Alhambra in Granada, Spain. Henri is a former gendarme living in exile from his homeland of Algeria. Louise is running, too—from a shadowy past in London and the chains of gendered expectations. When she steals the money that Henri is supposed to protect, the two end up in a cat-and-mouse chase across continental Europe—from Granada to Istanbul, with stops in Paris and Belgrade. As the narrative unfolds and an unlikely bond forms between the thief and the enforcer, the reader learns about both their pasts—including crimes, secrets, and private shames. Alternating chapters weave together their final train ride (from Belgrade to Istanbul) with their individual histories and the two-week journey that has brought them to this critical point. The book is front-loaded with too much backstory, but a patient reader will quickly be rewarded by an unconventional heist narrative that is equal parts moving and thrilling. Although they try to resist it, an attraction emerges between Henri and Louise that is at once organic and bittersweet, informed by their shared pain and respective cultural baggage. Mangan's prose is evocative and specific—she brings midcentury Europe to life through sensory descriptions that conjure the sights, smells, and tastes of each iconic city. The novel is a smart riff on a familiar genre, with complex protagonists and a cliché-defying love story. Even minor characters are
imbued with surprising depth, making for memorable, and often humorous, interactions throughout. The world that Henri and Louise inhabit is, at times, heartbreaking, but it is never bleak thanks to the beauty of the language. Through Henri and Louise, the text offers insights about gender and colonization that are as relevant now as they ever were. For fans of spy thrillers and literary romances alike.

A cat-and-mouse caper with the usual stock characters replaced by complex human beings.

**JUST ANOTHER MISSING PERSON**
*McAllister, Gillian*
Morrow/HarperCollins (368 pp.)
$28.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9780063252394

McAllister’s novel isn’t “just another missing person” story but a twisty exploration of professional and familial responsibility, the anonymity of the internet, and the slippery slope to criminality.

DCI Julia Day is a dedicated, some would even say work-obsessed, detective in Portishead, England, so when she’s summoned from dinner with her husband and daughter to investigate a report of missing woman Olivia Johnson, she’s all in. As she drives to Olivia’s apartment, she’s surprised by a man in her back seat and by the message he carries: She is to plant evidence that will point toward the guilt of one Matthew James—or the blackmailer will reveal the fact that a year ago, Julia covered up a crime committed by her daughter, Genevieve.

When the missing woman turns up, she’s not who Julia thought she was. Julia has to decide to do the right thing, at work and in her relationships, render real harm will have been done. But when the missing woman turns up, she’s not who Julia thought she was. Julia has to decide whom she can trust with her secrets in order to finally connect all the loose ends from a previous case to this one and to Genevieve’s mistake—and figure out whether she still has a future in the police force. The twist in this book comes out of left field and is, in that way, extremely successful. Once the pieces fall into place and all is revealed, however, it feels a little familiar—but that’s the pleasure and challenge of a really good police procedural, as McAllister’s is. Julia holds her own as a character; her moral quandary is completely believable, and her struggles to do the right thing, at work and in her relationships, render her understandably human. Though McAllister shares the narrative across several voices out of plot-driven necessity, Julia is definitely the center.

Dips a bit into formula by the end, but oh! What a twist in the middle.

**SILVER NITRATE**
*Moreno-Garcia, Silvia*
Del Rey (356 pp.)
$28.00 | July 18, 2023
9780593453567

Embattled players in Mexico City’s horror film industry get more than they bargained for.

Mexican Canadian author Moreno-Garcia cracks open the ragtag underworld of early 1990s Mexican B-movies, a perfect backdrop for the intertwined plights of two childhood friends obsessed with horror. Montserrat Curiel (“a tiny, ferocious elf”) works as a part-time audio engineer,patching together a life behind the scenes as she struggles to support her ailing sister. Tristán Abascal, an aging actor, can’t catch a break following a car wreck that claimed the life of his then-girlfriend, the daughter of a powerful film industry executive. Fortune takes a wild turn for the pair when they discover a legendary filmmaker living in Tristán’s building, Abel Urreta, a director during the golden age of 1950s cinema, has become convinced an unfinished film is cursed. He enlists Montserrat and Tristán to help reverse the curse, and the plan yields decidedly supernatural, if terribly unintended, results. Moreno-García’s quick pacing and thoroughly developed characters are aided by the author’s seamless blending of invented filmographies with references to actually existing niche titles (Jacques Tourneur’s Cat People, anyone?) and era-appropriate moviemaking techniques (“the Dunning method,” “foley art”). Details regarding the dark arts and occultism are equally immersive. Facts about the Rite of Saturn, a play organized by Aleister Crowley in 1910, bolster the fictional claim that Crowley filmed the performance using “silver nitrate stock because silver is a powerful conduit for spells.” Moreno-García’s clever blurring of these lines makes for fantastic reading.

An engaging, inventive story of moviemaking and the occult for film geeks and genre buffs.

**FIT FOR THE GODS**
*Greek Mythology Reimagined*
*Northington, Jean & S. Zainab Williams*
Vintage (480 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Aug. 1, 2023
9780593469248

Greco-Roman epics live again in this intriguing anthology of retellings from diverse authors.

In the introduction to their first anthology as an editing duo, Northington and Williams invoke childhoods spent with d’Aulaire’s Book of Greek Myths, and that affection is clearly shared with the 15 writers who transform stories of the Greek and Roman pantheons across lines of race, gender, sexuality, and genre in this collection, with mixed but often captivating results. Many of
the strongest entries take the biggest risks regarding style and setting and prioritize examination of a theme over strict adherence to every plot point in the source material. Sarah Gailey’s “Wild To Covet,” which has a kinship with the stranger interludes in the Coen Brothers’ O Brother, Where Art Thou? places Thetis’ journey from wild girl to wife and mother of Achilles (here, “Esau”) in American folklore. With admirably efficient storytelling and evocative prose, Gailey interrogates who and what is untameable. Who and what is capable of love is at the heart of another standout: Alyssa Cole’s poignant and richly imagined SF Hades and Persephone reinvention, “Stasis (Bastion in the Spring).” In a nice editorial touch, both “Stasis” and the stunning story that follows it, Taylor Rae’s “The Eagles at the Edge of the World,” concern themselves with the aftermaths of climate apocalypses—in the latter, a girl who’s one-quarter Kumeyaay is our Aeneas, attempting to find a new homeland with her mother in a flooded world. While not all the contributions are of the same caliber, the anthology ends in a blaze of glory thanks to Maya Deane’s incandescent “No Gods, No Kings,” which chronicles the Amazon queen Murina’s contribution to the fall of the Titans.

A collection of impressive breadth that will reward the mythically minded.

**STRANGE SALLY DIAMOND**

*Nugent, Liz*

Scout Press/Simon & Schuster (320 pp.)

$27.99 | July 18, 2023

9781501189715

Sally Diamond is beginning to connect with the world after having lived an isolated life with her late father. Will she be able to escape the shadows of her traumatic past and their echoes in the present?

Sally’s father, a psychiatrist, diagnosed her as “socially deficient,” so although she’s 42, she’s always lived with him outside the small Irish village of Carricksheedy. He’d always said that she should “put [him] out with the trash” when he dies, so when it happens, she tries to burn his body in their incinerator. In the flurry of public attention that follows, ranging from concern about Sally’s ability to function on her own to outraged theories that she must have murdered her father and was trying to dispose of the evidence, a secret about Sally’s past is revealed. While she’d always known she was adopted, she didn’t realize that she was the child of Denise Norton, who was kidnapped at age 11 and brutalized for 14 years. By the time Denise and Sally were rescued from their captor, Denise was so traumatized that she took her own life. So in addition to coming to grips with her adoptive parents’ roles—her father was the doctor treating her and Denise all those years ago, and her mother was the nurse—she also begins to process the truth about her biological parents. With the support of her therapist and her friends, Sally begins to step outside her constricted life, all the while keeping her eyes open for any sense of threat after she receives a mysterious gift in the mail. Nugent also begins to weave in flashback chapters from the perspective of a young boy being raised by a father who has a woman locked up in a single room. Between these chapters and Sally’s exploration of her past, this tragic, disturbing story of generational trauma eventually unspools. Despite the grim subject matter, Sally is an appealing character—strange, yes, but also engagingly literal.

Nugent hits exactly the right note of empathy and optimism, but she can’t fully banish the darkness.

**TRIAL**

*Patterson, Richard North*

Post Hill Press (448 pp.)

$30.00 | June 13, 2023

9781637588062

A Black teen stands accused of murdering a cop. Can his White father save him?

For his first novel in nearly a decade, popular thriller author Patterson heads to rural Georgia, where 18-year-old Malcolm Hill accidentally kills a racist White police officer during a scuffle following a traffic stop. Malcolm was targeted by the officer (and kept a gun in the car) because his mother, Allie Hill, is a prominent Black voting rights activist and magnet for death threats. But because Malcolm was intoxicated and the officer left his dash- and bodycams off, Malcolm lacks exonerating evidence; worse, when prosecutors learn his Facebook feed includes a rapper’s video advocating that Black people kill police officers, it’s easier to argue for premeditated murder. Enter Chase Bancroft Brevard, a U.S. congressman, one-time Harvard classmate and boyfriend of Allie’s, and—he’s compelled to reveal before the trial—Malcolm’s dad. Patterson is a pro at the courtroom procedure, well versed in legal and rhetorical parrying. But this narrative is labored and lapses into biased tropes. As an author’s note explains, Patterson consulted with a platoon of experts on race and voting rights, but his Black characters’ inability to talk about practically anything else makes them stiff and simplistic. And though Patterson has tried to avoid making a White savior out of Chase—Black lawyer Jabari Ford leads Malcolm’s defense—Patterson spends a disproportionate amount of time dwelling on Chase’s anxieties as a politician and father compared to Allie’s and Malcolm’s more pressing crises and Jabari’s battle against a biased justice system. (In a *Wall Street Journal* essay, Patterson claimed the book was rejected by multiple publishers because he tried to get into Black characters’ heads, but it’s a flaw that he doesn’t in Jabari’s case.) Patterson’s grasp of 2020s racial politics is solid enough, but he’s failed to construct persuasive characters around them.

A would-be timely page-turner, weakly executed.
IN THE LOBBY OF THE DREAM HOTEL

Plunkett, Genevieve
Catapult (368 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781646220489

An intimate, fractured case study explores the relationships and inner perspective of Portia Elby, who has bipolar disorder.

“A garish heap of self-loathing in her head” is one glimpse of how Portia characterizes herself in Plunkett’s first novel, a nuanced portrait of one woman’s years of mental and social struggle. Married to lawyer Nathan, with a beloved 7-year-old son, Julian, Portia currently spends her time playing guitar in a small rock band called Poor Alice and visiting her aging psychiatrist, Dr. Shay. Her nervous anxiety became acute at age 13, and by 15 she was in Dr. Shay’s care, although this didn’t prevent her from dropping out of college and spending time in a mental hospital, where she cut herself. Now, as a wife and mother, she’s found stability through Dr. Shay’s pills but at the price of “a fine, elusive layer of her spirit,” so for the last six months she has quietly stopped taking them. She has also fallen in love with band member Theo, who seems to reciprocate her feelings. But matters come to a head when Nathan—often a chilly, manipulative, critical presence—discovers the pill accumulation and stages an intervention. Plunkett’s presentation of Portia, her history, choices, feelings, and stranger notions, is far from linear. Instead, the novel unrolls scenes, moods, and events out of sequence, requiring some patience and unpacking, not least regarding various men in Portia’s life. There are also manic episodes and delusions regarding long-dead musician Alby Porter, all this delivered in slices interleaved with the intervention and its aftermath. Simultaneously sensitive to Portia’s perception and muddy in its chronology, the novel succeeds in accumulating a faceted psychological profile, but its indulgent length (including excursions into Theo’s point of view), the absence of plot dynamism, and the limited appeal of the characters leave it partially stranded.

Stronger on empathy than engagement.

TIDES OF FIRE

Rollins, James
Morrow/HarperCollins (480 pp.)
$32.00 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780062893079

Life on Earth may come to an end in this fast-moving Sigma Force novel.

In 1815, Mount Tambora exploded in the South Pacific, causing massive death and destruction. Its worldwide cloud cover caused the “year without a summer” in 1816. Two centuries later, Sigma Force explores the deepest parts of the Pacific with ultrasonified equipment such as the five-tiered Titan station. In the depths of the Coral Sea, they encounter giant coral forests containing highly aggressive and hostile giant coral trees. Deep in the crushing depths of the Tonga Trench lies a sunken nuclear submarine the Chinese don’t want anyone to know about. Meanwhile, Asia is beset by earthquakes and tsunamis, perhaps caused by disturbances in the “massive slabs” of the planetoid Theia, speculated to have crashed into Earth billions of years ago. Said slabs are buried in Earth’s upper mantle, and “they may soon destroy us.” Of course, a thriller needs human villains too; enter a rogue Chinese team that thinks they may be able to use ELF—extremely low-frequency—transmissions to manipulate pieces of Theia and cause earthquakes and tsunamis at will. Thus, China would have a weapon to make nuclear arsenals obsolete and ensure its world dominance for centuries to come. (That sounds like an iffy proposition, but who knows?) Along with a number of helpful illustrations, the author mixes his considerable scientific knowledge with ancient myths, speculation, and imagination. A Chinese sailor’s body undergoes “bimineralization,” turning him to stone. The sound of bullroarers may appease the angry gods as some pin their hopes on lost Aboriginal mythologies to quell the quakes. Scientists speculate on DNA based on silicon rather than carbon. And if you’ve ever wondered what would happen if your submersible springs a leak 11,000 meters below the ocean’s surface, well—not spoilers here—it’s not good. There’s plenty of brisk action in this undersea yarn, of both the people vs. people and coral vs. people variety. And don’t worry about the world really ending, because Rollins plans a sequel.

A solid Sigma Force adventure that’s sure to please thriller fans.

FEVER HOUSE

Rosson, Keith
Random House (448 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780593595756

All hell breaks loose in Portland, Oregon, when a pair of thugs stumble into a world-breaking government conspiracy. Grungy fantasist Rosson pivots to full-on apocalyptic horror but takes his time with talky, crime-heavy character arcs interspersed with 1970s-era conspiracy vibes and a compassionate family drama to boot. Hutch Holtz has a good heart, but he looks like 10 miles of bad road after a scrap with some bikers a while back. Hutch and his pal Tim Reed are stuck doing world-breaking government conspiracy. Grungy fantasist Rosson pivots to full-on apocalyptic horror but takes his time with talky, crime-heavy character arcs interspersed with 1970s-era conspiracy vibes and a compassionate family drama to boot. Hutch Holtz has a good heart, but he looks like 10 miles of bad road after a scrap with some bikers a while back. Hutch and his pal Tim Reed are stuck doing collections for small-time hood Peach Serrano, but things get weird when they roll a junkie client and find, in his freezer, a withered, supernatural band that triggers madness, self-mutilation, and worse in those it infects. Through interstitial reports and slow-burn introductions, the inevitable black ops agency, here dubbed ARC, joins the search for the hand and reveals itself to be in possession of an honest-to-God angel with inexplicable powers. To the detriment of “Saint Michael,” the agency’s director, David Lundy, delights in torturing and
“A satirical recipe that manages to turn sour, mismatched ingredients into something feather-light, affable, and sweet.”

THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE

THE LOVER
Sacks, Rebecca
Harper/HarperCollins (288 pp.)
$28.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9780063284234

The love affair between a Canadian grad student and an Israeli soldier grows increasingly complicated.

Sacks’ latest novel begins with a deceptively simple premise: A young woman falls passionately in love with an even younger man. Allison is a grad student visiting Israel from Canada; Eyal is on the verge of invading Gaza. She’s 27; he’s 19. At first, the story seems basic to the point of cliche. But Sacks quickly veers into territory much more troubling and complex. Just as Eyal is beginning to question the Israeli army’s actions in Gaza—and, by extension, his own—Allison is learning to silence the feelings behind the words. “I was finding that I liked myself better in Hebrew,” she tells us, “a language in which I had so much less to say.” Allison’s family, we learn, isn’t close—she and her sister have grown apart, and her parents are distant. In Israel, on the other hand, she finds herself fully embraced by both Eyal’s family and the country at large: “Nothing in my whole life had ever felt as good as being welcomed not just into a family but into a people,” she says. What’s most disturbing in this brilliantly rendered book is not the age difference between the lovers, not the war, but the way that Allison gradually learns to manipulate her own thoughts. “I could say to myself, ‘That was racist’; saying Death to Arabs is racist—but also,” she thinks, “I understood the feelings behind the words.” Desperate to belong, Allison engages in increasingly pliable mental gymnastics to justify her thoughts and actions. Sacks’ depiction of those mental gymnastics is astounding. Sometimes, it’s true, Sacks can be heavy-handed, repeating explicitly what is already implicitly clear. But this is a minor complaint. As a whole, the book—and Allison’s transformation—is deeply unsettling, and Sacks’ talent as a novelist who takes on thorny, multifaceted, unanswerable questions is clearly unmatched.

A brilliantly rendered novel raises crucial questions about identity, justice, war, and belonging.

THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE
Schumacher, Julie
Doubleday (240 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780385550123

A perpetually put-upon English professor is drafted to chaperone a student trip to England, with predictably disastrous if comical results.

Schumacher’s previous chronicles about the perils of academia—Dear Committee Members (2014) and The Shakespeare Requirement (2018)—levy herculean challenges upon Jason Fitger, our beleaguered hero, which are off-putting in their injustice if often laugh-out-loud hilarious. Fortunately, she seems to be easing up on Payne University’s least-favorite son, even if his high-strung superciliousness and propensity for accidents remain unchanged. In this third installment, Fitger has been recruited (read: blackmailed) to lead a three-week “Experience: Abroad” to London and other iconic U.K. locations during a soggy January excursion. His absence from home thankfully leads to less fretting about his academic standing at the backwater Midwestern college where he chairs the English department. However, Fitger is typically anxious about his ex-wife Janet Matthias’ potential job with a university in Chicago and her looming absence from his life. There are plenty of new oddballs to fill the space, as Fitger’s charges are a wonderfully weird mix of exiles from the Island of Misfit Toys. Payne University’s dirty dozen include a mismatched and hot-tempered goth-y undergrad and a juvenile delinquent; a student disappointed to learn he’s not on his way to the Caribbean, and a pair of artistic twins reminiscent of The Shining. On the more extreme end, Fitger finds himself the target of a prelaw student whose major requires study abroad, “which has historically been about young white Americans losing their virginity and learning how to use the salad fork.” He also worries about the delicacy of a future cat lady; mentors a goth-y undergrad and a juvenile delinquent; and ponders the whereabouts of a student so absent he’s found his way to mainland Europe. Along the way, Schumacher continues the series’ epistolatory theme with student essays about experiences ranging from the consumption of a Scotch egg to equally unsavory field trips to Oxford, Stonehenge, and Bath.

A satirical recipe that manages to turn sour, mismatched ingredients into something feather-light, affable, and sweet.
MY NAME IS IRIS
Skyhorse, Brando
Avid Reader Press (272 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781982177850

A Latine mom struggles to maintain her perch in a society determined to undermine her.

The title of Skyhorse’s second novel is a lie: The real name of the narrator, the daughter of Mexican immigrants, is Inés. But ever since a schoolteacher struggled to pronounce that correctly, she’s been Iris, which is just one in a series of microaggressions she’s spent a lifetime shrugging off. She’s led a life that in the early chapters appears to have the makings of a standard-issue novel of American family dysfunction: She’s middle-class, newly separated, and raising a 9-year-old daughter, Mel, in a new home in suburbia. But curious signs around town start promoting a “band” that people are asked to wear on their wrists; one day a stone wall appears in her front yard, which only she and Mel can see. From there, Skyhorse spins an extended allegory not just around just how much White America is eager to disenfranchise immigrants—the bands are ID badges available only to people with at least one U.S.–born parent; the wall speaks for itself—but how immigrants often live in denial about the contempt they face. Skyhorse can be didactic on these points: Iris’ sister, Serena, appears in the story mainly to deliver rough-tongued lectures about her cultural blindness (“I didn’t major in whiteness in college como tú”). But the eeriness of the mysterious wall and ever intensifying groupthink vibe give the book a well-imagined allegory of divisive racial politics.

A well-imagined allegory of divisive racial politics.

AFTER THAT NIGHT
Slaughter, Karin
Morrow/HarperCollins (432 pp.)
$32.00 | Aug. 22, 2023
9780063157781

Another violent crime in Atlanta provokes another deep dive into the tormented past of Slaughter’s regulars.

Three years after Dani Cooper, 19, crashes into an ambulance, gets taken to Grady Memorial Hospital, mutters to pediatric surgeon Mac McAllister and his wife, Britt, to protect their well-sheltered son—to force her to testify about her own rape 15 years ago, which resulted in an ectopic pregnancy that ended any chance she might have had of bearing children. Fanning drills Sara unmercifully but doesn’t bring up her history. Even more surprisingly, Britt McAllister, when Sara encounters her in the courthouse restroom, smugly informs her: “What happened to you. What happened to Dani. It’s all connected.” Indeed it is, and in order to work out the connections, Sara, who identified her rapist as janitor Jack Allen Wright, will have to work with her fiancé, Will Trent, and his partner, Faith Mitchell, of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, to dig deeper. Their goal: to figure out which fellow medical student who attended a fateful mixer all those years ago—a group Sara’s now come to think of as the Rape Club—was behind the assault on Dani and a potentially endless list of other victims. These horrors may seem too unspeakable to pin down to any one perpetrator. It’s a signal achievement of Slaughter that the climactic revelations add still another layer of horror to her tale.

A grueling, pitiless, yet compassionate anatomy of rape for readers who can take it.

THE GIRL IN THE EAGLE’S TALONS
Smirnoff, Karin
Knopf (368 pp.)
$29.00 | Aug. 29, 2023
9780593536688

Lisbeth Salander is back. She’s cold, lethal, and remorseless—and that’s on her good days. “Vigilance comes as naturally to Lisbeth as eating, shitting and sleeping.” So writes Smirnoff, picking up the posthumous Stieg Larsson franchise where David Lagercrantz left off. Normally glued to a computer, Lisbeth is up in the woods, fortifying herself against a villain who has a penchant for kidnapping youngsters, some to kill, some to rape, some to hold hostage. Lisbeth’s on the case for a couple of reasons, not least connecting with a niece, daughter of the brother she snuffed a few books back. (“Did you kill him?” asks the young niece. “In a way,” Lisbeth answers.) Another is to help intrepid Larsson stand-in Mikael Blomkvist, who’s at loose ends since his magazine Millennium folded. His sister and brother-in-law implicated by accident and by design in all these malevolent happenings, Blomkvist heads north to dig into the story, one punctuated by neo-Nazis, bikers, drug smugglers, and other
A lovely story about finding your path and believing in your own worth.

THE BREAKAWAY

Wener, Jennifer
Atria (432 pp.)
$28.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781668033425

A cyclist leads a group bike trip from New York City to Niagara Falls...with both her mother and a former one-night stand in tow.

Abby Stern's biggest passion is her bike. Bicycling saved her when she was an overweight child of divorce, forced into attending weight-loss camp every summer by her judgmental mother. Flash-forward 15 years and she's in a mostly happy relationship with Mark, a former camper she reconnected with as an adult. He's half the size he used to be and adores Abby exactly the way she is. She should be over the moon that Mark wants to take their relationship to the next level, even if he won't eat sugar or learn to ride a bike. He loves her, and that should be enough, right? When Abby gets the chance to lead a 12-day bicycling trip through New York, she takes it—it will be time on her precious bike, but most importantly, it's time to clear her head, away from Mark. But the trip ends up being more complicated than she expected, mostly due to two unexpected riders. First, there's Sebastian, a one-night stand Abby met before things got serious with Mark. And then there's her mother, Eileen, who claims she just wants to spend time with Abby—but after a childhood filled with shame and guilt about her body, Abby is apprehensive. As she and Sebastian spend more time together, Abby is both excited and dismayed to discover herself feeling things she's never felt with Mark—but can she trust a man who went viral on TikTok for sleeping his way around Brooklyn? Meanwhile, relying on her mother for help makes Abby wonder if their relationship might be salvaged after all. Abby is a deeply likable character, and Weiner expertly handles the delicate balance between her current body neutrality and her deep-seated trauma from years of attempting to shrink her body. The other riders on the trip provide humor and poignancy, and Weiner occasionally dips into their points of view. The romance between Abby and Sebastian is a slow burn that's incredibly fun to read, but Abby's journey to make her life her own is the real standout.

A lovely, compulsively readable story about finding your path and believing in your own worth.

WINE PEOPLE

Wildgen, Michelle
Zibby Books (304 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
978985282832

Wildgen explores the world of wine through the vicissitudes of two women's friendship.

Wren works in operations and Thessaly in sales at the high-end Lionel
Although each woman gets a romance, their lives are defined by their relationships to wine. Wildgen's eagerness to show and tell the ins and outs of winemaking and wine selling, including examples of chicanery but also nobility, is endearing, but she's conscious about her working-class Midwestern origins and sinews have deep respect for the physical world, and she honors it with poetic language. Here's how she describes Snow Crane pre-southern Siberia for decades. They belong to an ultratraditional sect of Christianity known as the Old Believers, and persecution by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviets has driven them into the wilderness. Agafia, now in her 30s, has never met anyone outside her family, though she's sometimes visited by visions of Peter the Great. The Kols' isolation ends when a helicopter delivers Galina, a successful geologist, and her pilot, Snow Crane, who are surveying the area for a new iron mine. Over the course of a few months, Galina falls in love with Snow Crane and with the Russian landscape the proposed iron mine would inevitably destroy. Worse, Agafia's siblings soon die from a disease the geologists may have brought with them. “First the germs, then the mine,” Galina muses. “By the time we’re done here, we’ll kill off everything in the taiga.” That winter, Galina and Snow Crane return to Moscow while Agafia is drawn deeper into the real world, meeting a hunter and a Neo-Nazis, gangsters, meth heads, and lots of gunplay in a thriller that reads more like an over-the-top Western.

**HARD COUNTRY**
Wortham, Reavis Z. Poisoned Pen (400 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Aug. 2, 2023
9781728256702

A North Texas lawman's compassionate leave from his job ends with a distinct lack of compassion for all parties. Apart from the obligatory handshakes and offers of help from the locals in Ganther Bluff, Special Ranger Tucker Snow's welcome to the neighborhood is a series of gunshots fired on a neighbor's property. The neighbor is Jess Atchley, a drug seller who's taken to using his own product. The telltale signs of meth cooking and distribution are an alarm bell to Tuck, who bought his farm with the proceeds of the insurance policy his wife secretly purchased before she and her 4-year-old daughter were killed in a collision with a meth user. Realizing that his new neighbor is suspicious of him, Atchley sets up surveillance, has an associate sneak into Tuck's house and plant an explosive device, and bullies Jimma Bailey, the daughter of his common-law wife, into bugging the place while she's visiting Chloe, Tuck's teenage daughter. But all these plans are stymied by Tuck and Harley, his kid brother and former undercover partner in the Texas Department of Public Safety before Tuck took a job as a stock inspector with the Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association and Harley, forced into retirement after he was shot on the job, launched the training operation Lone Star Tactical. In short, Atchley and his confederates couldn't have found a worse pair of targets to mess with—and that continues to be true even after Atchley kidnaps Chloe, planning to submit her to the same abuse Jimma's already suffered.

**LOST BELIEVERS**
Zhorov, Irina
Scribner (320 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781668011539

In the 1970s Soviet Union, an isolated family is disturbed by industrialization. The Kol family has lived alone in southern Siberia for decades. They belong to an ultratraditional sect of Christianity known as the Old Believers, and persecution by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviets has driven them into the wilderness. Agafia, now in her 30s, has never met anyone outside her family, though she's sometimes visited by visions of Peter the Great. The Kols' isolation ends when a helicopter delivers Galina, a successful geologist, and her pilot, Snow Crane, who are surveying the area for a new iron mine. Over the course of a few months, Galina falls in love with Snow Crane and with the Russian landscape the proposed iron mine would inevitably destroy. Worse, Agafia's siblings soon die from a disease the geologists may have brought with them. “First the germs, then the mine,” Galina muses. “By the time we’re done here, we’ll kill off everything in the taiga.” That winter, Galina and Snow Crane return to Moscow while Agafia is drawn deeper into the real world, meeting a hunter and a monastery of Old Believer nuns. Like her characters, Zhorov has deep respect for the physical world, and she honors it with poetic language. Here’s how she describes Snow Crane preparing to summit Mount Elbrus, Russia’s highest peak: “Snow Crane laid his head on the ground. Deep below the grass and granite, he heard the slow churning of melted lava, the sleeping volcano’s gentle snores.” The novel is inspired by the real story of Agafia Lykov, an Old Believer who grew up in isolation and is nearing 80 years old.

An elegant, melancholy debut written in gorgeous prose.
“The narrator’s voice and her story are so unusually vivid it feels like Zuravleff is channeling a real person.”

**AMERICAN ENDING**

**Zuravleff, Mary Kay**

Blair (320 pp.)

$28.95 | June 6, 2023

9781949467994

In early 20th-century mining country, a tough little girl digs herself out of a life without choices.

“The Pittsburg-Buffalo Company supplied Pa with a single ticket to come to Marianna in 1898, and selling all they could, floorboards to doorknobs, only raised enough for one more ticket. If Pa came alone, he wouldn’t get a house; if Ma came with him, they’d have to leave the girls behind. So Baba made up a room in their house for her precious granddaughters, and Ma and Pa promised to send for them within a year. But instead of getting their two girls back, they got me, their first American, on January 31, 1899.” Yelena Federoff is a born storyteller, raised on folktales with “Russian endings,” which are the sort where the wolf eats the bride “eyelash to toenail.” This little girl, who is pulled out of school to take care of babies and help keep house before she gets to sixth grade, learns early that real life offers few American endings, where the bride hops out unharmed.

Zuravleff’s tale follows Yelena to the age of 20, by which point she has made a few decisions of her own despite the 1908 mining disaster, problematic immigration laws, the Spanish flu epidemic, the reactionary culture of the Old Believers of the Russian Orthodox Church, and plenty of “Foolish Questions,” a long-running real-life newspaper feature with sarcastic answers to stupid queries. All of this is so thoroughly kneaded into the story you won’t stop to wonder at the research that yeasted this novel until you finish it. In Yelena’s voice, sprinkled with Russian words and early-20th-century idioms, a whole world comes steaming to life: the horrors of the mine, the closeness of the ethnic neighborhoods surrounding it, the babble of the schoolhouse, the smells of the kitchen, and so much more. When her little brother invents a cage with an air tank attached, so that a canary can do its job in the mine without having to die for it, it seems a metaphor for the love that kept these immigrant families going through the hardest of harscramble times.

The narrator’s voice and her story are so unusually vivid it feels like Zuravleff is channeling a real person.

**MYSTERY**

**MURDER IN THE BOOK LOVER’S LOFT**

**Adams, Ellery**

Kensington (304 pp.)

$8.99 paper | July 25, 2023

9781496729507

Bibliophiles unite to solve several puzzling murders.

Storyton Hall is a charming Virginia resort that celebrates books, but in addition to the extensive library in the public spaces, the inn is home to a secret repository of rare books and other items. After centuries during which her ancestors have guarded this collection, even having to fight off violent incursions, Jane Steward has decided to donate, return, or sell the whole thing to give her family a quiet future. In the meantime, Jane, a widow with two young sons—Fitzgerald and Hemingway—is looking forward to taking a vacation with her partner, Edwin Alcott, in charming Oyster Bay, North Carolina, home of her friend Olivia Limoges. Their bungalow at the Admiral’s Inn turns out to contain a skull in the shower and a warning written on the bathroom mirror: “Your story is over.” The skull is apparently a prop belonging to author Justin St. James, who recently stayed at the bungalow, so Jane and Edwin ignore what must be a prank. The next day, Jane and Olivia are hunting for treasure with a metal detector on Olivia’s private beach when they hear Edwin’s cries for help just as they find St. James dead on the shore. Edwin has stepped on stingrays, and the barbs that pierced his feet bring on a dangerous allergic reaction that sends him to the hospital. Since St. James died from an overdose, the police suspect a drug dealer, especially after Jane finds the body of one of the man’s clients. But Jane is less convinced after learning that St. James based his books on the painful stories of real people, including Olivia, who have cause to hate him.

Visually delightful backdrops and charming characters add appeal to a book lover’s mystery.

**THE ROOM WITH EIGHT WINDOWS**

**Adams, Jane A.**

Severn House (224 pp.)

$31.99 | July 4, 2023

9781448311101

A retired English policeman finds his way back into trouble in 1930.

Part of former DCI Henry Johnstone recognizes that his battered body just won’t stand up to the rigors of regular police investigations. But from his drafty room in Sir Eamon
Barry’s crumbling home, where eight tall windows set in an alcove let in the worst of the wind, his new job cataloging the late scientist’s library seems hardly strenuous than chasing down criminals. Henry is grateful to his sister, Cynthia, for having arranged his paid occupation once the injury he sustained in his last case forced his retirement. He never would’ve left without a word to Cynthia if a stranger hadn’t crashed into his dismal digs and tried to stab him while he was in his pajamas. Having fended off his attacker with a poker, Henry then disappears, leaving Cynthia no choice but to call Mickey Hitchens, Henry’s former bagman, to find her missing brother. Mickey arrives at Cynthia’s gracious home with Bexley Tibbs in tow. Now a DI himself, Mickey has been charged with whipping newly promoted sergeants into shape, and Tibbs is his latest work in progress. Fans of the Johnstone-Hitchens franchise will be amused to see Mickey struggle to fill his mentor’s shoes in his efforts to make a proper copper of the intuitive and perceptive Tibbs and in the more urgent job of locating said mentor. To find Henry, Mickey has to revisit the very cold case of Sidney Carpenter, found dead in the street in St. John’s Wood years ago outside a home whose inhabitants vanished.

Puzzles aplenty for coppers young and old.

ALL THAT GLITTERS ISN’T OLD
Allan, Gabby
Kensington (304 pp.)
$16.95 paper | July 25, 2023
9781496742056

The reappearance of a former resident throws some Avalon Bay denizens into a confusing mess of murder and mayhem.

Whitney Dagner has returned to Catalina Island, off the coast of Southern California, to help her grandparents, who brought her up after both her parents took off. Her brother, Nick, her grandmother Goldy, and her grandfather Pops all help with her gift shop, Dame of the Sea, and Whit is happily dating police diver Felix Ramirez. When Goldy insists Whit join her at the funeral of a woman whose son Goldy had dated 50 years ago, trouble is on the horizon—what else could it mean that Pops has refused to go? Darren Milner is attending his mother’s funeral with Jericho, his male romantic partner, whose presence makes Whit realize that Goldy had been helping Darren keep his sexuality a secret back when it “could have gotten you beat up, ostracized, and sometimes even killed.” Strangely, in the middle of the funeral, a car races up and knocks the coffin to the ground. The driver, Elsie Jacobs, who was once engaged to Darren, creates a nasty scene.

Later, when Jericho falls to his death from a catwalk at the Casino, where a documentary Darren has made about the island is premiering, it’s clear it was no accident. This isn’t Whit’s first rodeo. Realizing she has to investigate Jericho’s death to keep Goldy happy, she calls on some friends who are eager to help. Both Darren and Jericho have been involved in some dicey deals over the years, and their arrival on Catalina Island leads to an influx of tough-looking men who want answers to questions Whit’s clueless about. An underwater cave, a maniacal Elsie, and a raft of hidden secrets are just a few of the things Whit investigates on her journey to solving the murder and placating Goldy.

Fun characters keep a meandering plot from overwhelming the essential mystery.

DEATH OF JEZEBEL
Brand, Christianna
Poisoned Pen (256 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Aug. 1, 2023
9781728278568

An impossible crime featuring a severely limited number of suspects returns to print for the first time since 1949.

Seven years after Johnny Wise killed himself upon discovering his fiancee, Perpetua Kirk, in a compromising position with actor Earl Anderson, the surviving parties are reunited for a medieval stage pageant managed by sugar daddy Edgar Port that features a castle, knights in armor, a damsel in distress, and more violent death. No less than three characters—Perpetua, Earl, and enticing, blackmailing Isabel Drew—receive anonymous notes telling them they’re going to be murdered. As icing on the cake, Inspector Cockrill, an acquaintance of Perpetua’s who’s come down to London from Kent for a police conference, gets his own note assuring him that it’s no joke. One of the threatened parties, strangled and tossed from the stage castle balcony in front of hundreds of eyewitnesses by a killer who somehow got past Susan Betchley, the wardrobe mistress stationed at the set’s only entrance, fails to survive opening night, and a second is found soon afterward strangled and decapitated. Nostalgic readers who know their Brand (1907–88) will expect a mind-boggling set of complications, a playful atmosphere that extends to dubbing stage knight Brian Bryan “Brian ‘Two-Times’” and 17-year-old knight George Exmouth “Motherdear,” and an endless series of false climaxes based on mendacious confessions and carefully planted red herrings before the curtain finally comes down. An additional bonus is the rivalry between rumpled Cockrill and oblivious DI Charlesworth from Scotland Yard.

Despite the inspector’s claim that “this is not a detective novel,” that’s exactly what it is, in spades.
MURDER IS A PIECE OF CAKE
Burns, Valerie
Kensington (336 pp.)
$16.95 paper | June 27, 2023
9781496738233

Murder disrupts a young baker’s life. Madison Montgomery is well on her way to fulfilling the conditions laid out in her great-aunt Octavia’s will for her to claim her inheritance. In spite of a devastating fire, Maddy is operating Octavia’s bakery, Baby Cakes, and learning to make tasty confections from her aunt’s old friend Hannah Portman and head baker Leroy Daniels. Maddy has also taken excellent care of Baby, Octavia’s bull mastiff, under the guidance of Michael Portman, Hannah’s veterinarian grandson, who’s also Maddy’s main squeeze. So what could go wrong? For one thing, Baby’s been off his feed ever since meeting Daisy, a female mastiff whose owner inquired about Baby’s stud service but then decided not to follow through. Second, Maddy’s best friend, Sheriff April Johnson, is being stalked by Clayton “CJ” Davenport, a high school football hero. Though he’s not feeling great about his divorce from his husband, Ben Rosencrantz doesn’t think leaving his career as an English professor marks him as failure. So while he misses his students, he’s OK with being back in Salt Lake City to help his ailing father run Of Dice and Decks, the family board game shop. And the shop isn’t exactly a failure either, though if she doesn’t crack the case soon, there won’t be anybody left but Baby to stock the shelves of her newly opened store.

MURDER IS A PIECE OF CAKE proves that a girl and her mastiff can’t be defeated.

READ TO DEATH AT THE LAKESIDE LIBRARY
Danvers, Holly
Crooked Lane (288 pp.)
$28.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781639103317

Old wounds opened by a Wisconsin book club may provide motives for murder.

Now that she’s set to take on her mom’s duties at the Lakeside Library in Lofty Pines, Rain Wilmot is excited to introduce a book club to the library calendar. Once she and her best friend, Julia Reynolds, choose Agatha Christie’s Sparkling Cyanide as their inaugural book, they can’t wait to see who’ll show up to discuss it. At the book club’s first meeting, the novel’s plot points take a back seat to drama between club members, some of whom seem to have relationships or rivalries that go all the way back to high school. And that’s not the only drama of the meeting: Lily, one member, realizes that Kim, another member, hasn’t even read the book—she’s just seen the movie. Rain and Julia find themselves playing peacemakers, reminding everyone that the club is supposed to be fun, right? By the next day, though, they’re debating the wisdom of choosing a mystery over a romance. Speaking of romance, things have cooled between Rain and love interest Ryan Wright, so this might be the perfect time for Rain to pursue things with Jace, a great friend who’s also Julia’s brother. To make things even more complicated, life imitates art when a book club member appears to have been murdered by the same method as the victim in their recent read, and Jace, in his capacity as local police officer, is interested in Rain as a potential suspect. So plotting friends Rain and Julia have to crack the case.

As amiable and mild as the lakeside life that inspired it.
Or, more exactly, “puzzles,” since the Yorkshire site of the title is the scene of a series of baffling mysteries stretching back 300 years.

 Asked in 1930 by British Museum clerk Vernon Murray to look into the suspicious death of his mother, Ursula, while she was a patient in Blackstone Sanatorium, journalist Nell Fagan leans into her own network for help. Her colleague and friend Jacob Flint is willing to tear himself away from his investigation of two potentially fake mediums to help ask questions about professor Wilfred Sambrook, the alienist who bought Blackstone Lodge from Harold Lejeune, whose family had owned it for centuries, and founded the sanatorium. But Rachel Savernake, the wealthy star investigator Nell approaches, is less willing. All the locals know that back in 1606, Edmund Mellor, a guest of Blackstone’s very first owner, entered the lodge, locked the door behind him, and vanished, and that Harold’s brother, Alfred Lejeune, repeated the trick in 1914. But new developments come thick as hasty pudding. Vernon Murray dies in a convenient accident in the London Underground. Nell uncovers a string of untimely deaths of Blackstone patients. When Nell herself vanishes and Rachel finally agrees to take over the case, it turns out to have more courses than a tasting menu. Readers who aren’t already reeling from the string of climactic revelations will be properly chastened by the appended Cluefinder, in which Edwards, borrowing still one more page from the past, reminds them of all the evidence they overlooked along the way.

 A triple-decker banquet honoring the golden age of mysteries and bidding fair to continue it to the present.

 MURDER AT A LONDON FINISHING SCHOOL

 Ellicott, Jessica
 Kensington (304 pp.)
 $27.00 | July 25, 2023
 9781496740144

 Two very different detectives take on the task of protecting the finishing school they attended before the Great War.

 Edwina Davenport is surprised to receive a letter from Ermentrude DuPont, the head teacher at Miss DuPont’s Finishing School for Young Ladies, asking for help with an unspecified problem and suggesting that she attend an event for prospective students while pretending to investigate the school’s offerings for a young relative. Edwina and her adventurous friend Beryl Helliwell, who’d both attended the London school, run a detective agency and feel they can’t ignore the cry for help. Arriving at Miss DuPont’s, which is already in dire financial straits, they discover that someone has been playing nasty tricks, stealing things, making odd noises at night, and causing quite a few of the girls to leave. The stern Miss Glover and their former schoolmate Mary White, the only other teachers, are supplemented by the butler and cook, who are husband and wife, along with the gardener and a new maid. The only other current visitors are another former classmate of Edwina and Beryl’s—Veronica DeLisle; Paul Deering, her second husband; and her very unhappy daughter, Florence Montrose. Veronica has changed all too little since her school days, when she was a horrible bully. So when Edwina finds her dead in the school grotto, she can’t help but suspect foul play. Veronica’s first husband, Desmond Montrose, was once Edwina’s crush. Now he runs Montrose Aeronautics, an airplane manufacturer. Her second husband seems completely under her thumb, but he could be one of a long list of people who might want her dead. The police seem to be writing off Veronica’s demise as an accident, but Edwina and Beryl disagree and set to work to find a killer.

 A fine period mystery with a surprising ending.

 MURDER AT THE PUMPKIN PAGEANT

 Hannah, Darci
 Kensington (352 pp.)
 $8.99 paper | July 25, 2023
 9781496741721

 Living in a haunted lighthouse adds spice, and some other features, to a baker’s life.

 Halloween is nigh, and Beacon Harbor, Michigan, is celebrating with pumpkin-themed events. Although Lindsay Bakewell has whipped up a bunch of seasonal treats at her Lighthouse Bakery, a paranormal research team and a bunch of teen pranksters are making her nervous. Awakened by her Newfoundland, Welly, she’s not amused to find a life-sized Freddy Krueger doll hanging from a tree in her yard. Her boy-friend, former Navy SEAL Rory Campbell, and her flaky best friend, Kennedy, help keep her calm, and she asks high school teacher Leslie Adams to point her toward possible perpetrators. Then Kennedy drops a bombshell: She’s invited the Ghost Guys from the Travel Channel to see if they can raise the spirit of the lighthouse ghost, Capt. Willy Riggs. Hoping to stop the pranks, Lindsey invites the local teens to a pumpkin-carving party, Leslie having steered her toward several groups with varying interests: jocks, witches, nature lovers. Also intrigued by her haunted lighthouse is a well-known author in search of a topic to juice his sales. After the Ghost Guys stir things up, the fleeing Kennedy runs into the corpse of Leslie hanging from the oak tree. Because the lighthouse may hold a map leading to a sunken treasure, the suspects in Leslie’s death by mushroom poisoning include treasure hunters. Lindsey and friends, who all have experience in finding killers, resolve to uncover this one before they become the next victims.
With the help of Bernice, Piers, and her friend Hari, a tough guard dog next door barking its head off, she manages to rush outside to find a bundle of clothes thrown against her garage door and inside them, a man, barely conscious. Against the guard dog's warning, she enters the garage to find a body inside. Could this be the missing contessa? Establishing the identity of the corpse is the first challenge for Clover and Lizzie. The second is locating the legendary portrait of the title, which went missing at the same time Lucia did. Gothic trappings abound as the duo pore over buried documents and search historic buildings for clues to the married life and death of Lucia. All the while, unctuous villain Enzo Canale, who has designs on the property himself, is breathing down their necks with his own tawdry tales and his own tawdry tales about Chas and Lucia. Along with creepy anecdotes, Hewson packs his novel with historic references going all the way back to a 14th-century rebellion, with nods to Byron, Casanova, and Primo Levi.

An atmospheric thriller studded with lurid tales of Venice.

A feel-good whodunit with plenty of thrills and chills for the likable sleuths.

FALSE NAME
Hiley, Veronica
Severn House (224 pp.)
$31.99 | July 4, 2023
9781448306572

Entrepreneur Bea Abbot takes in a homeless man with more than a little baggage.

As owner of a busy London employment agency, Bea is usually good with details. But now that her portrait painter husband, Piers, is off in Silicon Valley capturing the image of the latest media influencer, checking his studio in a nearby mews for mail somehow hasn't been at the top of her mind. When she realizes that bills about to come due are sitting in the studio’s mailbox, she braves an oncoming storm to retrieve them. Somehow, under a darkening sky with the guard dog next door barking its head off, she manages to overhear a hushed conservation punctuated by a thud. She rushes outside to find a bundle of clothes thrown against her garage door and inside them, a man, barely conscious. Against her better judgment, she brings him home, where she and her teenage ward, Bernice, listen to his rambling story about a rappelling adventure gone bad. Teasing out the truth from a garbled account of a traumatized victim whose story combines the most pedestrian details (the seeming vagabond is actually a chartered accountant) with the most fantastical claims (after one of his party was injured in a fall, he was chained in a cellar for weeks before being doused with paraffin and tossed into the mews) is hard work, but methodical Bea takes the task in stride. With the help of Bernice, Piers, and her friend Hari, a tough bodyguard, she unravels a tangled web of abandonment, lost legacy, and, finally, reclamation.

An unusual outing for Hayley’s competent, reliable heroine.

THE BORGIA PORTRAIT
Hewson, David
Severn House (320 pp.)
$31.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781448306572

A curious British curator uncovers fabulous treasures and murderous secrets in Venice.

Retired archivist Arnold Clover, who moved to Venice a year ago after the death of his wife, can’t resist an offer to examine the abandoned palazzo Ca’ Scacchi, situated on the Grand Canal. Lizzie Hawker, who wants to unburden herself of this gothic headache before she turns 40, inherited the palazzo from her mother, Lucia, a beautiful contessa who mysteriously vanished when Lizzie was 5. Her father, Charles, aka “Chas,” was a careless, and probably criminal, music mogul from London’s East End. The existence of a crypt in the palazzo is a small surprise dwarfed by the discovery of a body inside. Could this be the missing contessa? Establishing the identity of the corpse is the first challenge for Clover and Lizzie. The second is locating the legendary painting of the title, which went missing at the same time Lucia did. Gothic trappings abound as the duo pore over buried documents and search historic buildings for clues to the married life and death of Lucia. All the while, unctuous villain Enzo Canale, who has designs on the property himself, is breathing down their necks with his own tawdry tales about Chas and Lucia. Along with creepy anecdotes, Hewson packs his novel with historic references going all the way back to a 14th-century rebellion, with nods to Byron, Casanova, and Primo Levi.

A thought-provoking noir with a searing period flavor.
Haunted houses, bickering spouses, and murder mix in this Halloween treat.

Poppy McAllister runs the Butterfly Wings, a B&B in Cape May, New Jersey, with the dubious help of her Aunt Ginny, snarky cook Joanne Junk, and actor/housekeeper Kenny Love. Poppy's history of finding dead bodies and helping to solve the mysteries behind them has given her a reputation as a murder magnet. The B&B is participating in the town's Halloween Week Package, which includes scavenge hunts and haunted dinner tours. The guests are a mixed bag of paranormal researchers, bickering college professors, and students. A colander-wearing pet psychic who translates Poppy's cat Figaro's thoughts and a tabloid journalist hoping to crash Poppy in lies only add to her angst. On top of it all, her boyfriend Gia's mother, who hates her, has broken her hip, and their restaurant, Mia Famiglia, will be forced to close temporarily if Poppy can't pitch in to help. Many of Poppy's guests are interested in handsome professor Simon Beck and Brooklyn, his much younger wife. So when Simon drops dead in his tinfoil, there's no dearth of suspects. Poppy is forced to investigate by Amber Fenton, her high school nemesis, now a police officer. Perfectly placed to spy on her guests, Poppy quickly learns that just about everyone either loved or hated Simon, who had a record of dallying with his students and stealing their research. Although he was poisoned with eyedrops, the police close Poppy's kitchen, forcing her to work nonstop to cook at the Italian restaurant while she solves the case.

Suspects and motives abound in this laugh-out-loud mystery.

Cambridgeshire Constabulary, DCI Arthur St. Just is on hand as the plus-one of his fiancee, criminologist and crime writer Portia De'Arth, and he quickly decides to back up the impetuous DCI Ampleforth of the Thames Valley Police. There's no lack of suspects. Verdoort had a reputation for romancing every woman in sight. Minette Miniver, his long-ago girlfriend, had crashed the party in the faint hope of winning him back. David Castle, the publisher's son and editor-in-chief, was worried that Verdoort was going to leave Castle Publishing for a more lucrative offer from a more well-established press. And David's assistant, Gita Patel, has made a discovery about The White Owl that puts the whole case on a different footing. Malliet sketches in the characters so briefly that they're hard to remember from chapter to chapter, and the solution is likely to disappoint everyone but die-hard Oxonians. But readers will get to pass a few hours in a setting a good deal more august than their reading spaces.

Will this latest case follow the meteoric curve of the victim's bestselling debut? Don't hold your breath.
SCAREDY CAT
Ryan, Sofie
Berkley (272 pp.)
$8.99 paper | July 4, 2023
9780593201992

An opponent of the occult meets an unanticipated end.

When Sarah Grayson takes North Harbor, Maine’s annual house tour, she stops in at Gladstone House, where the first bedroom features a fabulous maple spool bed. The second bedroom offers a beautifully restored navy blue cannonball four-poster. Oh, and a corpse, which turns out to belong to Mark Steele, co-host of Night Moves, a television show dedicated to debunking tales of otherworldly hauntings. Persistent Mr. Steele had come to North Harbor to persuade stubborn Annie Hastings to allow her historic home to be featured on his program. Sarah, owner of Second Chance resale shop, is far more interested in home furnishings than either corpses or the specters they may or may not leave behind. But when her friends at Charlotte’s Angels detective agency agree to accept Steele’s producer, Delia Watson, as a client, it’s only a matter of time before Sarah gets caught up in the investigation of the ghost hunter’s death. Unlike strictly amateur sleuths, the Angels are fairly systematic in pursuing Steele’s killer. They inspect the crime scene, interview suspects, and plumb public records to gather the background needed to crack the case. Ryan does offer a smattering of subplots, opportunities offered by her gossipy small-town Maine setting and her characters’ wide assortment of attachments, hobbies, and fancies. But undergirding a standard shopkeeper cozy with the guts of a police procedural provides a novel take on the village murder scene.

The ghosts don’t stand a chance against Ryan’s savvy sleuths.

THE SPLINTER IN THE SKY
Ashing-Giwa, Kemi
Saga/Simon & Schuster (384 pp.)
$27.99 | July 11, 2023
9781668008478

A polyglot from a colonized moon nation stumbles into a web of interplanetary intrigue when her erstwhile lover is murdered.

Language scholar Enitan Ijebu’s appointment as a scribe sent shock waves through the Holy Vaalbaran Empire’s religious community. As a native from Koriko, a Vaalbara-colonized moon, Enitan has no legal right to citizenship within the Empire; her homeland has not yet assimilated into Vaalbaran culture at large, which makes her people no more than “savages” in their oppressors’ minds. After her older sibling, Xiang, disappears, Enitan suspects foul play, leaving her with no choice but to turn to the one person whose help she doesn’t want: Koriko’s half-Vaalbaran governor, Ajana Nebaat—her ex-girlfriend. Enitan barely has time to make amends with her ex before the governor is murdered, however. Imperial forces quickly sweep her off to the Vaalbaran capital—a massive, floating structure known as the Splinter—as a scapegoat for the assassination. There, she’ll join the recently coronated God-Emperor’s court as a political prisoner. Unfortunately for Enitan, the court intrigue begins long before she reaches the Splinter. Emissaries from Vaalbara’s biggest enemy, the Ominirish Republic, recruit her as a spy en route to the capital, and the God-Emperor herself, Imperator Menkhet, keeps her close as an “informal advisor” practically from the moment she arrives. Here, Ashing-Giwa constructs a sweeping backdrop for her characters’ plights to play out against. The Vaalbarans’ personal and political oppression of the Korikese calls to mind European conquests across the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Readers will recognize conversations regarding cultural appropriation, the looting of sacred artifacts, slavery, and sexual stereotypes, among other things. Notably, the characters’ racial traits cannot be used to distinguish their nation of origin. Enitan is coded as Black, both Xiang and Menkhet have “golden” skin, and many tertiary characters are White. Members of a nonhuman race—the synths, whose existence is outlawed in the Empire—emerge as secondary players in the novel’s second half.

A strong debut with soft SF elements offering major crossover appeal for fantasy aficionados.
When the book ends on a well-earned cliffhanger, readers will be clamoring for the next volume of this planned trilogy.

IMMORTAL LONGINGS
Gong, Chloe
Saga/Simon & Schuster
(984 pp.)
$28.99 | July 25, 2023
9781668000229

Every year the twin cities of San-Er hold a set of games, a fight to the death with the promise of unimaginable riches for the victor. This time, there’s an unlikely competitor—Princess Calla Tuoleimi, who’s presumed dead, has entered the contest in disguise.

For five years, Princess Calla has been living in hiding from the absolute monarch, King Kasa, ever since, in a defiant and ruthless massacre, she killed the leaders of Er—her own parents. Her plan has always been to free the people of San-Er from the oppressive monarchy; and she won’t stop until the palace falls and she has the king’s head. It’s finally time for her to finish what she started, and the only way to get close enough to him is by besting the other 87 players and winning the competition. Lucky for her, the king’s heir, August, would also like to see King Kasa dead and a new era for San-Er begun. With their aligned endgame of regicide and shared willingness to break some rules, August can think to summon a god. Simultaneously, Eva’s path brings her ever closer to the Águilas. The lush and varied landscape as well as the clear effects of colonialism and revolution are all inspired by Venezuela, creating a rich, complex world. Featuring morally gray characters and a plethora of relationships among women, both Sapphic and platonic, the book has an occasionally heavy hand in terms of characterization, but that doesn’t detract from the overall scope of the plot.

An ambitious new fantasy with a unique setting and broad cast of characters.

THE SUN AND THE VOID
Romero Lucrcez, Gabriela
Orbit (304 pp.)
$18.99 paper | July 25, 2023
9780316336543

As the barrier separating the god Rahmagut from the world thins, the ambitious and desperate rally to seek his favor.

After the death of her father, Reina has had to survive alone in a society unable to see past her ears and tail, which betray the fact that her mother was a nozariel and not quite human. Humans once enslaved nozariels, and though slavery is now outlawed, society is still deeply divided. When Reina’s estranged grandmother summons her to the Águila Manor, Reina leaves at once. Meanwhile, far away, Eva is singled out within her own family for her valco blood, deemed dangerous and warlike by humans. The Águilas are valcos as well, and Reina must prove herself useful to the family’s head, Don Enrique. Reina throws herself into her work, learning magic tied to the dark god Rahmagut from her grandmother and fighting the dangerous creatures conjured by Rahmagut’s powers alongside the beautiful Celeste and the vicious Javier. Reina experiences a new world of magic and devotion to a god other than Ches, who is revered for trapping Rahmagut in a void beyond the world. Rahmagut promises power for whomever completes an invocation on the few days when his constellation appears. Those days fast approaching, Don Enrique works with single-minded purpose to gain Rahmagut’s favor, though he is not the only one in his household who would think to summon a god. Simultaneously, Eva’s path brings her ever closer to the Águilas. The lush and varied landscape as well as the clear effects of colonialism and revolution are all inspired by Venezuela, creating a rich, complex world. Featuring morally gray characters and a plethora of relationships among women, both Sapphic and platonic, the book has an occasionally heavy hand in terms of characterization, but that doesn’t detract from the overall scope of the plot.

A woman with amnesia gets tangled up in the world of international espionage.

THE BLONDE IDENTITY
Carter, Ally
Avon/HarperCollins (304 pp.)
$29.00 | Aug. 8, 2023
9780063276642

A woman with amnesia gets tangled up in the world of international espionage.

On a cold, snowy night in Paris, a woman (eventually she’ll discover her name is Zoe) finds herself on the street with no idea of who she is or how she got there. She’s rescued from a team of menacing strangers by a spy named Jake Sawyer. He explains that his partner, Alex, who’s Zoe’s identical twin, has gone missing. Alex infiltrated the organization of a dangerous Russian oligarch named Kozlov. Before going on the run, she copied and then destroyed the originals of Kozlov’s personal encrypted files—including everything from his bank accounts to his personal contacts. Kozlov and his henchmen...
“Explosives are dangerous, but love is even riskier.”

KNOCKOUT

will do anything to find Alex, but every international spy agency in the world is also on the hunt for the flash drive, hoping to use the data to cripple Kozlov’s criminal empire. Sawyer and Zoe spend most of the book on the run from Kozlov and eventually go undercover as newlyweds on a river cruise. Finally able to pause and strategize, they hatch a plan to infiltrate Alex’s Swiss bank account. Zoe can access the bank disguised as her sister, looking for clues that will help them find her twin and the flash drive. The novel is a clichéd mishmash of plots, tropes, and archetypes from espionage thrillers. There is little depth or nuance to either Zoe or Sawyer as characters, and their romance is shallow and underdeveloped. Long action sequences and chase scenes drive most of the book, but the plot is so blandly predictable that the result is more frantic than fulfilling.

Flimsy and insubstantial.

THE DÉJÀ GLITCH

James, Holly
Dutton (336 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Aug. 1, 2023
9780593471586

Stuck in a time loop, two people must fall in love in order to break out. When Gemma runs into Jack—literally—at a Los Angeles coffee shop, there’s something strangely familiar about him. In fact, Gemma has been having moments of déjà vu all morning. Now, Jack tries to convince her that they’ve been stuck repeating the same day for almost five months. Having been aware of the “temporal anomaly” the whole time, Jack is already madly in love with Gemma and believes that if she can fall in love with him, too, they’ll be freed. Gemma is understandably skeptical, but with encouragement from Jack and her best friend, Lila, she tentatively indulges the theory. What follows is a daylong adventure, taking them from the radio station where Gemma works to the television set where Jack is a writer as well as Caltech, LAX, and the Hollywood Bowl. Along the way, they make major discoveries and positive changes to their lives that they wouldn’t have done without each other. But Gemma has been betrayed before, and when they hit an emotional stumbling block, she flees. Will they reunite before the day is over? Consent is tricky business in this novel; while the reader has evidence that Jack is telling the truth, Gemma has none besides an uncanny sense of familiarity. James does a laudable job emphasizing Jack’s desperation and adoration, the sparks that fly between him and Gemma, and the way they make each other’s lives better, but whether that justifies the power of experience he has over her or his ability to manipulate is debatable. Additionally, Lila, an influencer, posts a video of Gemma and Jack to her socials that becomes a viral sensation—all without asking. While this doesn’t pose a problem for the characters, it may for readers.

Readable and sweet but with a flawed premise.

MY ROOMMATE IS A VAMPIRE

Levine, Jenna
Berkley (352 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Aug. 29, 2023
9780593548912

A down-on-her-luck artist discovers her new roommate is a 300-year-old vampire.

Cassie Greenberg barely makes a living from her cobbled-together part-time jobs, her art incorporating trash and recycled items is too avant-garde to be successful, and she has just been evicted from her Chicago apartment. When she sees a Craigslist ad for a room rental in Lincoln Park for only $200 a month, she contacts the owner even though she’s sure there must be a catch. Frederick J. Fitzgerald, her stunningly handsome new roommate, is a bit of an oddball: His clothes and mannerisms are too formal, he sleeps all day, and he seems completely unaware of how the modern world works. Who doesn’t have Wi-Fi or prefer texting in this day and age? Cassie mostly works when Frederick is sleeping, so they strike up a flirtatious friendship through handwritten notes. When Cassie arrives home early from work one day, she discovers the fridge is full of blood and realizes that Frederick is a vampire. He recently awoke from a centurylong coma and realized that finding a human roommate might help him learn the ropes of the 21st century. The two strike up a tentative friendship, and Cassie agrees to teach Frederick how to navigate the modern world, including using public transportation, ordering drinks at the coffee shop, and shopping for clothes at the mall. It’s a cute setup, one full of potential, but the plot and characters are shallow and underdeveloped. Cassie and Frederick settle into a tame, conflict-free relationship. The details about Frederick’s history and the supernatural world are thin and full of omissions, leaving so many unanswered questions that the book almost feels unfinished.

Weak and inert, like a dead vampire’s heart.

KNOCKOUT

MacLean, Sarah
Avon/HarperCollins (384 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Aug. 22, 2023
9780063056794

Explosives are dangerous, but love is even riskier.

Lady Imogen Loveless is considered by most to be “too much.” Her penchant for chemistry makes her peculiar, and her brother, the sixth Earl Dorrington—who’s been her guardian since their father died—thinks it’s time for her to marry. What few know is that explosives expert Imogen is part of the Hell’s Belles, a woman-led collective that helps “those whom society ignored.” DI Thomas Peck brought himself out of the gutter and is rising in the ranks of Scotland Yard. The Hell’s
Belles have been known to tip him off about crimes committed by the aristocracy, but they aren’t looping him in on their discoveries about a recent spate of building explosions. He’s captivated by the chaos that is Imogen and is more than happy to help when her brother hires him to protect her during his off hours. Tommy tells himself he’s doing this to get information from her about the blown-up buildings, but he also just finds her company irresistible. Imogen loves to rile Tommy up and wants to trust him, but the evidence about the explosions so far points right at Scotland Yard. MacLean delivers big action, high heat, profound emotions, and a thoughtful critique of power and privilege in this dynamite tale sure to keep readers tearing through the pages. Like the protagonists of the series’ previous installments, Imogen is tough and smart, yet there are layers to her characterization so that she becomes a fully developed and relatable character. Tommy complements her so well, as they’re opposites in many ways yet both big-hearted and dedicated to social justice.

This sensational romance completely lives up to its title.

**BETWEEN US**
McFarlane, Mhairi
Avon/HarperCollins (432 pp.)
$18.99 paper | Aug. 8, 2023
9780063179990

Friends turn lovers after years of misunderstandings.
Roisin Walters and Joe Powell have been a couple for a long time, she being the kind Monica to his somewhat mean Chandler in their group of friends in northern England. But as Joe has found fame as a TV writer, Roisin can no longer pretend that their relationship is thriving. When she realizes that he’s stealing ideas from her life to fuel his new project, and might also be unfaithful, Roisin tries to call it quits. In the process, it slowly dawns on her that their pal Matt McKenzie no longer feels like just a friend.

McFarlane’s latest offering is more in the tradition of Bridget Jones’s Diary than a straightforward genre romance novel. While her female protagonist occasionally seems written to incite the reader’s exasperation, Roisin’s scenes with other women and the portrait of her flawed mother show a more deft hand at representing the kind Monica to his somewhat mean Chandler in their group of friends in northern England. But as Joe has found fame as a TV writer, Roisin can no longer pretend that their relationship is thriving. When she realizes that he’s stealing ideas from her life to fuel his new project, and might also be unfaithful, Roisin tries to call it quits. In the process, it slowly dawns on her that their pal Matt McKenzie no longer feels like just a friend.

McFarlane defers their happy ending (or happy start, as Roisin the Viewpoints. The problem is that her connection to Max consists of one incredible night they spent together long before his band hit it big. On the other hand, Max is reportedly back in his hometown of Ridley Falls, Washington—the same place Sammy grew up. If she can score an in with Max, she might be able to make a comeback of her own, but Ridley Falls is tied to painful memories that Sammy has tried to forget, including a family she’s always been estranged from. Returning there brings with it a lot of old baggage and even more complicated feelings, but Sammy is determined to make her last review her best one yet. What she doesn’t count on is falling for the one who got away all over again. Mejia’s adult debut is a poignant story about overcoming fears in relationships of all kinds, as Sammy reconnects with more than one aspect of her past. Readers drawn to late-blooming characters and the conceit of long-deserved reinvention will find all that and more to love within these pages.

**SAMMY ESPINOZA’S LAST REVIEW**
Mejia, Tehlor Kay
Dell (532 pp.)
$17.00 paper | July 18, 2023
9780593598771

A struggling music critic returns to her hometown in search of a story but faces up to her past in more ways than one. Sammy Espinoza’s career is in jeopardy. After she used her column to try to win back a musician ex-girlfriend through positive reviews, her editor has threatened to ax her, so in a last-ditch attempt to salvage her reputation, Sammy pitches one more story idea. Former rock star Max Ryan hasn’t been heard from since his band called it quits years ago, but rumor has it he’s recording the beginnings of a new solo album, and Sammy thinks she can get exclusive access to his songs. The problem is that her connection to Max consists of one incredible night they spent together long before his band hit it big. On the other hand, Max is reportedly back in his hometown of Ridley Falls, Washington—the same place Sammy grew up. If she can score an in with Max, she might be able to make a comeback of her own, but Ridley Falls is tied to painful memories that Sammy has tried to forget, including a family she’s always been estranged from. Returning there brings with it a lot of old baggage and even more complicated feelings, but Sammy is determined to make her last review her best one yet. What she doesn’t count on is falling for the one who got away all over again. Mejia’s adult debut is a poignant story about overcoming fears in relationships of all kinds, as Sammy reconnects with more than one aspect of her past. Readers drawn to late-blooming characters and the conceit of long-deserved reinvention will find all that and more to love within these pages.

**KISSING KOSHER**
Meltzer, Jean
Harlequin MIRA (400 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Aug. 29, 2023
9780778334408

Two bakers on opposite sides of a longtime family feud must set aside their differences for a satisfying ending. Avital Cohen rarely experiences life without pain these days. Dealing with a condition known as interstitial cystitis while managing Best Babka in Brooklyn, her family’s successful kosher bakery, she’s hanging on by a thread. Enter Ethan Lippmann, who shows up to interview for a new position at Best Babka with unending positivity and a distractingly attractive everything to boot. Ethan might seem like just the right person to help Avital, but it turns out that his motives are a little less than altruistic. He’s taken the job at the direction of his grandfather, who had a falling out with Avital’s grandfather.
years ago—and is still driven to take down his former partner in kosher baked goods at any cost. As far as the Cohens are concerned, the Lippmanns are to blame for that legendary rift between their families. What’s more, Avital doesn’t know that the new guy she’s working next to in tight quarters is the heir to Best Babka’s biggest competitor. When a mandatory fire safety inspection starts to loom, demanding the two of them work late into the night, Ethan offers to take more responsibility off Avital’s plate so she can prioritize her health. Suddenly, Avital begins to wonder why she’s so motivated to keep this handsome stranger at arm’s length when she could be letting him get closer instead. Meltzer’s latest novel follows a vulnerable, authentic journey about learning to navigate pain of all dimensions—individual and generational—and the boundaries people can set for themselves while also advocating for others who might not be capable of speaking up for themselves. Avital and Ethan approach their steadily deepening relationship with understanding and maturity, learning to embrace one another for who they truly are without caveats. In fact, the only thing that might be missing from this sweet story is a recipe for that pumpkin spice babka.

**An unflinchingly honest romance.**

Chandler feels seen and heard in all aspects of their nebulous relationship. Solomon consistently balances spicy and sweet, making her romance novels a sure bet for a good read. **A must-read modern romance that emphasizes silliness and sexiness in equal parts. Solomon's best yet.**

**BUSINESS OR PLEASURE**

Solomon, Rachel Lynn
Berkley (384 pp.)
$17.00 paper | July 4, 2023
9780593548530

A ghostwriter and a C-list actor supplement their working relationship with lessons in seduction.

Chandler Cohen is a ghostwriter, and her insecurities about her work only grow larger when an author whose memoir she wrote fails to recognize her at their launch event. In need of commiseration, she strikes up a conversation with a fellow event attendee. Following an immediate attraction, they cap off the night with a surprisingly mediocre one-night stand. Her next assignment is yet another celebrity memoir, this one written with Finn Walsh, known mostly for playing the nerdy character in a werewolf drama with a cult following. It turns out that he was also her lackluster hookup. At first, they agree to keep things professional, but when Finn learns that Chandler was left unsatisfied by his bedroom prowess, he seeks to spice up their arrangement: Perhaps Chandler could improve not only his memoir, but his seduction skills as well. He thinks getting Chandler to go along with this plan is a long shot, but she readily agrees. It’s always a pleasure to see the woman in a heterosexual couple being more experienced in intimate matters and having no problem communicating her desires. Chandler knows she deserves better at work and in her romantic life, and it’s a joy to root for her as she makes changes for her own happiness and independence. Finn is pretty close to the definition of a cinnamon-roll hero; he’s genuine, communicative, and has an earnest desire to make sure...
A political journalist examines the assault on liberty at the hands of profit-seeking entities from Amazon to Zillow.

Ahmari opens with a series of stories in which Russian, Chinese, and Iranian workers are subjected to indignities ranging from being blacklisted to unemployability to being required to attend a Putin speech or lose a day's pay. None of the events happened in those countries, he reveals, but instead in the U.S., where workers were required to attend a Trump rally and some seeking safer working conditions wound up unemployed. In theory, we freely consent to such abuse via the employment contracts and service agreements we sign. That consent, writes the author, serves as "the fig leaf covering over the sheer power of private individuals and entities to coerce us as consumers, workers, and citizens." The manipulation of working hours as a means of enforcing precarity is just one tool, but corporations have many more, including the fact that state governmental authorities are "prone to capture by narrow, private cliques and class interests at the expense of society as a whole." The dismantling of more or less protected or relatively high-paying work by the wreckers of private equity is largely protected by at-will laws and an ethos that if a worker doesn't like it, they can just get another job. As Ahmari shows, no corner of the economy is safe.

For example, much of the work of rural firefighting and medical care is now controlled by private companies, most news sources are in the hands of monopolies, and most big firms—a case in point being the Sackler opioid empire—have the wherewithal to shop for judges who permit them to act without consequence. All this adds to "a political crisis that therefore requires a political solution"—one that has yet to materialize.

A trenchant critique of neoliberal capitalism that offers pointed remedies.
The extraordinary achievements of women serving during World War II.

Andrews, a military analyst at the CIA, has interviewed many of the last remaining survivors of the war effort, and she also incorporates many other first-person accounts written over the years. Her work encompasses all of the official U.S. programs created during the war years to incorporate women in the military. These included the Women’s Army Corps, the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots, the Marine Corps Women's Reserve, the Navy’s Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, and the Coast Guard Women’s Reserve. Though her focus remains on the impressive achievements of the women on the battlefield, she also amply delineates the contribution to the “unstoppable” manufacturing effort across the country by noncombatant forces. “By one account,” she writes, “women composed nearly forty percent of the workers in war industries by 1944 and, at their peak, made up thirty-five percent of the overall labor force, a ten percent increase from before the war.” Ultimately, noncombatant forces “were a critical, though often unseen and underappreciated, element of battlefield operations.” Andrews begins with the Army and Navy nurses stationed in the Philippines and at Pearl Harbor, the first women in uniform to participate in the war effort. The author creates a host of illuminating biographical portraits, including that of Oveta Culp Hobby, the enormously influential head of WAC who helped convince Congress to authorize the program, with the support of Eleanor Roosevelt and Josephine's to his own marriage to Marie-Dominique Montel. Despair certainly characterized several passions: Victor Hugo’s schizophrenic daughter, Adèle, for example, descended into madness, obsessed over a lover who jilted her; Modigliani’s lover Jeanne Hébuterne committed suicide after the artist died of tuberculosis; and the fate of Princess Diana and her lover Dodi Al-Fayed is well known. Same-sex couples include poets Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine; Jean Cocteau and Raymond Radiguet; and Left Bank booksellers Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier. Baxter asserts that Monnier’s seduction of Beach was “more intellectual than sexual.” The two did not share a bed or socialize with the Parisian lesbian community. Monnier eventually took a lover, photographer Gisèle Freund; Beach died impoverished and alone. Some couplings—Sartre and de Beauvoir, Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin—were volatile. Baxter describes the Sartre–de Beauvoir affair as a “slow-motion train wreck.” Others ended badly: Man Ray abandoned his lover and muse Kiki de Montparnasse, who descended into poverty and drugs. Baxter recounts tempestuous relationships (André Malraux and Louise de Vilmorin, for one), betrayals, and devotion, such as the marriage of Charles Boyer and actor Patricia Paterson. Baxter’s marriage to Montel was incited by a hypnotism session in Los Angeles, in which he had a sudden recollection of their affair, seven years earlier, when he was living in Paris. He phoned her the next morning; six weeks later, she flew to LA; and two weeks after that, they both returned to Paris, where they have lived, happily, it seems, ever after.

Lively vignettes about storied lovers.
I don’t want to sound like a broken record, but—as I have noted in columns for previous Pride Issues—it’s still baffling to me that LGBTQ+ rights remain such a fraught topic of discussion. Many reactionary elements within the heteronormative world can’t seem to wrap their heads around the concept of equal rights for everyone—or, at the very least, keep quiet and mind their own business. Rather than indulging in a bloated political rant, however, let’s just get to the work. Here are six new books that offer a diverse array of perspectives on the history and current status of a host of issues affecting the LGBTQ+ community.

Before Lawrence v. Texas: The Making of a Queer Social Movement by Wesley G. Phelps (Univ. of Texas, Feb. 7): In a significant 2003 case that may not be familiar to many readers, the Supreme Court ruled against anti-sodomy laws, which had been used for decades to discriminate against members of the queer community. “Movingly,” noted our reviewer, “the author rewinds and introduces readers to the everyday queer Texans and their allies who paved a path of small, vital steps to that momentous 2003 decision.” Phelps’ impeccably researched narrative is an essential document in the struggle for queer rights. (Read an interview with the author on Page 54.)

Marry Me a Little: A Graphic Memoir by Rob Kirby (Graphic Mundi, Feb. 23): This charming graphic memoir chronicles the author’s life with his partner and their experience with marriage alongside an exploration of the politics surrounding the issue. “Panel by panel,” wrote our reviewer, “this graphic memoir is wry, intelligent, compelling, and adorable.” Fans of Alison Bechdel will find plenty to love in Kirby’s intimate and often laugh-out-loud-funny narrative.

Lesbian Love Story: A Memoir in Archives by Amelia Possanza (Catapult, May 30): Both personal and cultural, Possanza’s memoir explores queer love from a variety of angles and historical perspectives. “Bringing together seven epic love stories across eras, ranging from the classical Greek poet Sappho and her lover Anactoria to lesbian caretakers in the AIDS crisis extending beyond romantic boundaries, Possanza cultivates a worthy collection of lesbian love stories,” noted our reviewer. (Hear the author on the latest episode of the Fully Booked podcast.)

Gays on Broadway by Ethan Mordden (Oxford Univ., June 1): In his latest illuminating cultural study, Mordden, an expert on British and American theater, “focuses on the influences of ‘homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals, metrosseuls, and the sexually fluid’ on American stage productions throughout the 20th century,” according to our review. This authoritative account, bursting with palpable artistic pride, will appeal to both theater buffs and students of gay history.

Trans Children in Today’s Schools by Aidan Key (Oxford Univ., June 27): Key’s longtime work as a gender identity advocate is on full display in this indispensable resource for students, teachers, administrators, and parents. From bathroom choices to sports participation, Key covers it all in a straightforward, engaging style. Showcasing wide-ranging knowledge, compassion, and instructive anecdotes, the book is an ideal handbook for the burgeoning topic of gender inclusion. The author, says our reviewer, delivers “essential guidance on proactively navigating the challenges of gender-diverse student bodies.”

A Place for Us: A Memoir by Brandon J. Wolf (Little A, July 1): The theme of inclusion is built into the title of this book, which our critic calls “pignant, inspiring reading.” After surviving the Pulse nightclub massacre of 2016, Wolf founded the Dru Project, which provides safe spaces for queer youth, a critically overlooked segment of the population. “This heartfelt book will appeal not only to LGBTQ+ readers,” notes our reviewer, “but to anyone committed to the fight for social justice for any marginalized community.”

Eric Liebetrau is the nonfiction and managing editor.
“A captivating group biography of four impressive British women composers.”

**QUARTET**

**RED SAPPHIRE**

_The Woman Who Beat the Blacklist_

Bricklin, Julia

Lyons Press (224 pp.)

$29.95 | Sept. 1, 2023

9781493061877

A biographer and historian introduces a singular woman who helped sustain blacklisted writers and directors during the McCarthy era.

Hannah Weinstein (1911-1984) had a profound but largely underestimated influence on 1950s TV. The daughter of progressive Jewish parents, Weinstein became a campaigner for prominent New York City Democrats during the 1930s. Later she became a strategist for a public relations firm and came into contact with socialist groups, which made her appear, by association, to be part of the supposed internal communist threat to American democracy. She went on to work with many left-leaning Hollywood celebrities, many of whom she brought together in an organization called the Independent Citizens Committee for the Arts, Science and Professions. When the House Un-American Activities Committee began investigating members of the entertainment industry for subversion in the late 1940s, Weinstein formed committees to help the artists who became HUAC targets. Weinstein eventually came under investigation by the FBI and left the U.S. for England in 1950. In London, she launched a TV production firm called Sapphire Films. Over the next decade, her company covertly employed dozens of blacklisted writers, including Ring Lardner, and directors who transformed Sapphire Films projects—e.g., the British and American TV hit _The Adventures of Robin Hood_—into “thinly veiled commentary on the plight of the blacklisted writers and McCarthy hysteria in general.” The strength of this well-researched book lies in the abundance of information it provides about Weinstein’s contributions to the often entangled worlds of entertainment and politics. However, those same details—like those pertaining to the many colorful actors and directors who came into the Sapphire Films orbit—occasionally detract from Weinstein’s story. Still, readers seeking to understand the McCarthy era and how it resonates today, as well as those interested in women working at the intersection of media and politics, will find this book of interest.

**ILLUMINATING READING.**

**QUARTET**

_How Four Women Changed the Musical World_

Broad, Leah

Faber & Faber (480 pp.)

$29.95 | Sept. 5, 2023

9780571366101

A captivating group biography of four impressive British women composers.

In her first book, a vibrant narrative, music historian Broad redefines whom musicians could be and what they could do. Each of her subjects wrote “exquisite, breathtaking music” and achieved “extraordinary” things. Ethel Smyth (1858-1944) is first. A rebellious, eccentric suffragette—she wrote the anthem “The March of the Women” in 1910—she is the “grande dame” of the book. Openly queer, she was a trailblazer for female conductors and composers. “When composing under the immediate influence of a muse,” writes
Broad, “Ethel could write music that was both bold and intimate, sprightly and humorous, and always with a driving energy that stunned her listeners.” Her vast body of work would inspire others, including Rebecca Clarke (1886-1979). A viola virtuoso, she spent much of her life in America, eventually settling there. Unlike Smyth’s initial pieces, Clarke’s first musical compositions were far more accepted and celebrated. In 1913, she was “one of only six women to play in the string section of the Queen’s Hall Orchestra—the first women in England to be employed in a professional orchestra.” Conservative and quiet, Dorothy Gertrude Howell (1898-1982) bonded with Smyth, and they “became threads in the rich tapestry of each other’s lives.” The “crunchy chords” in her early pieces, Broad writes, would become the “searing, intense, uncomfortable discords that make her later works so powerful.” Her 1919 symphonic poem, Lamia, was a huge success. Finally, Doreen Carwithen (1922-2003) lived a complex life in the shadows. A star at the Royal Academy of Music, where she studied piano and composition, she received a scholarship to score films and went on to become one of the first women to have a career as a film composer. Her affair and later marriage to the popular, married composer William Alwyn resulted in what Broad calls the “familiar” story: a woman’s work subsumed by the man’s.

A stellar work of social and music history sprinkled with emotional dashes of love, sex, and politics.

SEEING
A Memoir of Truth and Courage From China’s Most Influential Television Journalist
Chai Jing
Trans. by Yan Yan
Astra House (304 pp.) $27.00  |  Aug. 15, 2023 9781662600678

One of China’s most accomplished TV journalists reflects on the reporting that shaped her career. Chai Jing begins this memoir with a consideration of her rise to prominence in Chinese media at the end of the 20th century and then offers an insider’s perspective on some of the most significant stories she covered during her 14-year career. As she notes of her devotion to her craft, this was “not just a job, but a way to live, to throw myself into this thorny world...experience the principles of journalism with flesh and blood until I was intertwined with people’s destinies like water in water.” Among the profound events the author chronicles are an inexplicable murder by a talented but troubled student and the human toll of catastrophes such as the 2008 earthquake and the SARS outbreak. Lighter fare occasionally appears as well, as in the author’s investigation of apparently fraudulent efforts to prove the existence of South China tigers in a region where they were presumed to be extinct. Throughout this consistently moving book, we get a clear sense of both Chai’s talent for engaging with her interview subjects and encouraging them to speak frankly before the camera and the challenges she faced as a woman reporter. She also memorably relays the political dynamics of Chinese media—e.g., the role of state oversight and censorship. Occasionally, there is a certain voyeuristic quality in the author’s narration of the most heart-wrenching events and a tendency, notoriously common in contemporary journalism, to bend news toward entertainment. Admirably, however, Chai includes commentary on her own unease at sharing the intimate details of victims’ lives, and she astutely identifies some of the ethical quandaries that confront anyone tasked with exposing individual suffering for the public’s ostensible benefit. Ultimately, readers will agree that these are important stories told with insight and sensitivity.

Poignant and thoughtful considerations of Chinese news stories from behind the scenes.
A delightful historical study of women coming to the forefront in a world dominated by men.

YOUNG QUEENS

A celebration of the lives of three significant European queens.

For centuries, dispatches from royal courts around the world have reflected only the male perspective. In this thorough historical excavation, Chang, a former professor of French literature and culture, immediately ensnares readers with her painstakingly rendered, intertwined narrative about three royal women in 16th-century Europe: Catherine de’ Medici, Elisabeth de Valois, and Mary, Queen of Scots. Refreshingly, the author doesn’t merely rehearse her subjects’ daily lives. By using intimate, personal accounts gleaned from her extensive research, Chang transports readers directly into their world. She shows how, despite limitations on their power, they used what little they had to help shape events around them. Born into wealth and privilege, all three shared the same fate of being married off at a young age, often traded for land or peace and goodwill treaties. As young brides, their bodies were not their own; rather, they were considered property of their families or the nation at large. “Their bodies, passed across borders, became symbolic capital,” writes the author, “the vector of peace, alliance, wealth or empire.” Fertility was paramount, and primitive women’s health rituals haunted them as they attempted to produce heirs for their husbands. Though Chang highlights their similarities, she also allows their distinct personalities to shine through, demonstrating the evolution of each woman: Catherine emerges as a skilled power seeker; Elisabeth, as a queenly wife and mother beloved by her husband and her nation; and Mary, as an embattled widow who “spent half her life a prisoner.” Chang vividly captures the importance of religion and war, both of which had profound effects on the decision-making of all three women and everyone within the royal orbit. In addition, the author delineates many intriguing details about extravagant weddings, celebrations, and other courtly matters, ably balancing the personal and the universal.

A delightful historical study of women coming to the forefront in a world dominated by men.

THE PROBLEM OF TWELVE

Harvard Law School professor Coates looks inside the financial microcosm that exercises outsized influence on the economic landscape.

The “problem of 12” is a term of art that describes the capture of some aspect of commerce, governance, or the like by a small number of the participating players. In this instance, it’s a handful of index funds, entities such as Vanguard, Fidelity, State Street, and BlackRock, “which now own as much as 20 percent of corporate America.” Given that the S&P 500 is made up of companies in which a huge number...
of shareholders hold a tiny number of votes apiece—“no one person owns more than 1 percent of a company’s shares”—this enables these funds to exercise undue authority over the firms in question: CEOs have to listen to them perhaps even more closely than they do their own boards of directors. Sometimes, Coates allows, this can be to the good, as when the funds, responding to their own shareholders, press for companies to be more attentive to diversity hiring, climate change, and other issues of the day. More often, it has negative consequences. Especially damaging is the capture of a large sector of the economy by private equity funds. The private is a complicated term, but for the author’s purposes, one meaningful aspect is that these funds need not be as transparent in their reporting as other investors. Furthermore, they can acquire companies, dissolve pension funds, lay waste to payrolls, and engage in all sorts of rapacious mischief without being held to account in an ethos of “heads I win, tails you lose.” In this short report, Coates proposes “greater antitrust management of index and private equity funds and the companies they own,” which would involve thorough change in the face of massive lobbying efforts calculated to keep such change from happening.

A powerful argument for thoroughly revising how the chief players in the financial world are regulated.

KINGDOM QUARTERBACK
Patrick Mahomes, the Kansas City Chiefs, and How a Once Swingin’ Cow Town Chased the Ultimate Comeback
Dent, Mark & Rustin Dodd
Dutton (400 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 22, 2023
9780593472033

Can football save a city? In this story from the heartland, the answer just might be yes.

By 1920, Kansas City, once just “a tiny trading post on the frontier,” was transforming into “a wide-open, freewheelin’ river town, a rollicking den of gambling and booze, [and] a second-tier financial center for the cattle and wheat industries.” So write native sons and sportswriters Dent and Dodd in this lively and meaningful book. As the authors also note, for all its positive qualities—interesting architecture, vast parks, broad boulevards, and excellent barbecue—the city also has problems ranging from overcrowded freeways to long-standing racist housing covenants, “fueled by booze and beef,” with a past checkered by organized crime and political corruption that made of it “a haven for lawlessness, vice, and outsize dreams.” Enter the visionaries who brought professional sports to the city as a boost for civic pride: first, the baseball squad that would become the Royals, and then a gridiron team from Texas that took a long time to catch on. Now enter Patrick Mahomes, “unlike any football player Kansas City had seen.” A charming young man from a multiracial background, Mahomes displayed a rocket arm, an impeccable football mind, and a willingness “to try shit, even when it seemed unorthodox.” A surefire Hall of Famer who will likely finish his career as one of the best ever, Mahomes led the Chiefs to a Super Bowl victory, the first in half a century, in 2019 (and another in 2023), and has become “the single most important person in Kansas City right now,” inspiring city leaders, planners, and developers to do better—e.g., to improve inner-city neighborhoods and make homeownership accessible to those often denied mortgages, among many other civic improvements.

Chiefs fans will find this a revelation, and urban planners might learn a thing or two, too.
HONEY, BABY, MINE
A Mother and Daughter Talk Life, Death, Love (and Banana Pudding)
Dern, Laura & Diane Ladd
Grand Central Publishing (256 pp.)
$30.00  |  April 25, 2023
9781538720370

When a famous mother and daughter take up walking in an attempt to heal mom’s troubled lungs, hearts and souls become involved.

Ladd and Dern, her daughter from her marriage to actor Bruce Dern, didn’t realize quite how much they had to talk about until Ladd was diagnosed with a lung condition that could kill her in six months. There wasn’t much to be done; the doctor could only suggest that walking might expand Ladd’s lung capacity. It may have worked, as four years later, both mother and daughter are around for photo sessions, an audiobook recording, and publicity about the book. Based on the transcripts of a series of recorded talks, the book includes an introduction by Reese Witherspoon, additional commentary from both writers, a gorgeous collection of snapshots and studio stills, and a few recipes. Reminiscences of Ladd’s Mississippi youth are one of the treats of this double memoir, but what is most remarkable about the book is that because of the nature of the conversations, Ladd and Dern were able to dig up all the unfinished business and resentments of their relationship. Instead of preserving them in amber as in many memoirs daughters write about their mothers, this book allows readers to share in the flare-ups, the sorting through, the soothing, etc.

One of the best mother-daughter stories to come out of Hollywood.

THE GIRLS WHO FOUGHT CRIME
The Untold True Story of the Country’s First Female Investigator and Her Crime Fighting Squad
Eder, Mari K.
Sourcebooks (224 pp.)
$18.99 paper  |  Aug. 8, 2023
9781728283371

A retired Army major general unearthed the story of one of the first detectives in the New York Police Department.

Eder chronicles the life and work of Mary “Mae” Vermell Foley (1886-1967), who was raised by Irish and French immigrants in the gang-infested Gas House District of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Sharp, energetic, and determined to make her own way in the world, she began working for the city when she was 17. From clerking at a settlement house to organizing for the Women’s Police Reserve under the auspices of the newly formed International Association of Policewomen (1915), Foley was interested in police work from an early age. Married with small children, she convinced her husband that the police force was the future. With the passage of the 18th Amendment and the Volstead Act, it was an opportune time for her to join the NYPD. By the time Foley was selected and began her training in 1923, there were 55 women serving as “full police officers,” making the department 8% female. Early on, Foley spent time on the “Masher Squad,” which “had the mission of stopping perverts and other so-called mashers bent on harassing or even assaulting women on the streets of New York, at subway stations, and even in movie theaters.” Widowed in 1928, Foley became a detective in Queens, serving in the homicide division.
Twenty years ago this month, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a landmark decision, one that marked a new pivot in the battle for LGBTQ+ equality. In 2003’s Lawrence v. Texas, the high court struck down the country’s remaining anti-sodomy laws, which for years had empowered law enforcement to broadly discriminate against queer Americans.

But while the decision may have seemed to “materialize out of thin air,” writes Wesley G. Phelps in his new book, Before Lawrence v. Texas: The Making of a Queer Social Movement (Univ. of Texas, Feb. 7), “the case should be viewed as the culmination of a social and legal revolution that had been building for nearly three decades rather than a sudden or unexpected development.”

In a starred review, Kirkus called Before Lawrence v. Texas a “bracing journey through decades of struggle for queer equal-

ity.” I spoke with Phelps by phone about the significance of the decision in the long arc of LGBTQ+ rights, the lessons that activism around the case has for advocates today, and the threats Lawrence faces at a moment of renewed hostility against queer communities. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Why did you center your book on Lawrence v. Texas?

Lawrence is the foundation for all the recent gains in the movement for queer equality that have happened since 2003. If you think about the many achievements since then—the repeal of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” the partial nullification of the Defense of Marriage Act, the marriage equality ruling in Obergefell v. Hodges, the Bostock v. Clayton County decision recognizing that gay and transgender people are protected by Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act—none of those would’ve been possible if queer people’s romantic lives had still been criminalized.

Could you tell me about some of the key organizing that ultimately led to Lawrence?

One of the earliest cases I document is Buchanan v. Batchelor. Alvin Buchanan was arrested for violating the Texas sodomy law in 1969. His case went to a federal court in 1970, and he and his attorney challenged the constitutionality of the Texas sodomy law. They got a favorable ruling in that case from Judge Sarah Hughes. She didn’t rule based on the constitutional rights of Buchanan. She ruled on the constitutional rights of a married couple, saying that the law violated their privacy rights within their marriage. However, because the statute applied to everyone before 1974, she nullified the entire law. That was the first time a federal court struck down a state sodomy law on constitutional grounds.

That laid the groundwork for several other cases that followed. Probably the most important case I document is Baker v. Wade, which was filed in 1979. In that case, Don Baker was the plaintiff. He was a local Dallas activist. He hadn’t been ar-
rested for violating what was then known as the homosexual conduct law. But he said that just the existence of the law was a threat of prosecution and also served as a justification for all kinds of discrimination against gays and lesbians. He got a favorable ruling at the district court in 1982. Judge Jerry Buchmeyer ruled that the homosexual conduct law violated the privacy and equal protection rights of gay and lesbian Texans. That was eventually overturned at the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans in 1985. And then the following year, in 1986, the Supreme Court refused to hear it.

By the time John Lawrence and Tyron Garner were arrested in 1998, their legal team didn’t have to invent a legal strategy out of thin air. It had already been established by the cases that came before.

The book explores complex legal arguments, but it still feels broadly accessible—in large part, I think, because you animate it with stories that capture how anti–LGBTQ+ laws affected queer Americans’ everyday lives. Was that balance important for you to strike?

I’m trained as a social historian, and so the focus of my career has been to tell the stories of real people, to expose the human stories behind some of these larger historical trends. So, when I learned about these cases that came before Lawrence, I just thought, I want to know about these real people. Because often we talk about cases without knowing about the people. When people talk about Lawrence, they often don’t know about John Lawrence and Tyron Garner. They don’t know about what those two went through.

I think that it’s crucial to understand these human stories and the personal sacrifices people made. It’s important to know the legal strategies of these cases and the constitutional arguments. But it’s also important to know what the personal motivations were for filing these cases and seeing them through to the end.

What lessons does the organizing around Lawrence and other cases have for advocates today?

The biggest lesson is that winning these victories takes a tremendous amount of work and funding and support from an organized community. And anything worth achieving is going to take that kind of long-term approach.

Another lesson for advocates is the value of using the judicial system. Many advocates, especially over the past two or three years, have grown somewhat sour on using the courts to try to advance equality, mostly because of the disappointing decisions we’re seeing from the Supreme Court. But the Supreme Court is really just the last court available. I have a quote in the book about a Supreme Court decision being the punctuation at the end of a very long sentence. I’d encourage advocates not to get too discouraged by what the Supreme Court is doing, though it’s been quite detrimental over the past few years. But there are other avenues to pursue. In one case I document—Morales v. Texas—activists decided that the federal courts were no longer a fruitful avenue for securing rights, so they decided to go through state courts and launch a state constitutional challenge to the sodomy law and were quite successful.

How is Lawrence in danger in a post–Roe v. Wade world?

I think that the Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization decision is a very real threat to queer equality today, not to mention a threat to women’s reproductive health and rights. In the majority opinion for Dobbs, the justices go out of their way to suggest that this is only about abortion, that it’s not about other kinds of rights that derive from the constitutional right to privacy. But in Justice Clarence Thomas’ concurring opinion, he says that this isn’t just about abortion and that we need to revisit other cases based on the right to privacy. The head of the Texas Right to Life filed an amicus brief in Dobbs in which he argued that Obergefell should be on the list and that Lawrence should be on the list.

The reason for that is that Lawrence was decided only on the issue of privacy, meaning that with Roe overturned, these other cases based on privacy are at risk. The attorney general of Texas has already said that if Lawrence is overturned, the state still has the sodomy law on the books, and he’ll be ready to enforce it the very next day. That’s a real threat, because if Lawrence is at the center of recent gains for queer equality, overturning it is going to put those achievements in jeopardy.

Brandon Tensley is the national politics reporter at Capital B and a freelance culture writer. Before Lawrence v. Texas received a starred review in the March 1, 2023, issue.
In 1935, women were finally “issued their own uniforms.” Foley went on to serve under Manhattan District Attorney Thomas Dewey, protecting female witnesses in the Luciano crime boss case, among others, and later worked undercover to expose the pro-Nazi actions of the German American Bund. She retired in 1945, and in 1961, the borough of Queens proclaimed her birthday Mae Foley Day. Though the prose is average, Eder presents an informative historical portrait of a largely unknown trailblazer.

An inspiring work about a persistent woman who succeeded in a challenging profession.

TIME’S ECHO
The Second World War, the Holocaust, and the Music of Remembrance
Eichler, Jeremy
Knopf (400 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 29, 2023
9780525521716

A respected cultural historian delves into music that serves as “a carrier of memory for a post-Holocaust world.”

Not all memorials are made of chiseled stone. Some of the most enduring are evocative pieces of music, often integrating spoken narratives. Eichler, chief classical music critic at the Boston Globe, focuses on four major composers of the period following World War II: Richard Strauss, Arnold Schoenberg, Dmitri Shostakovich, and Benjamin Britten. Refreshingly, the author makes no attempt to hide their flaws. Strauss made compromises with the Nazi regime, although in the end he admitted the depth of his failings—as demonstrated in his masterful Metamorphosen, which also commemorated the victims of the war. In many of his works, Shostakovich complied with the Stalinist precept that art must serve the state, but in his later symphonies, he radically changed course, condemning Hitler’s and Stalin’s atrocities with equal force. Schoenberg struggled to find a balance between his German cultural roots and his Jewish heritage, a duality reflected in his calibrated dissonance and innovative scaling. A Survivor From Warsaw is a powerful example of music as memorial. Britten, a committed pacifist, also assumes that readers will have a detailed grasp of classical depth to key composers and their work.

One of the best entries in the health care reform genre.

WE’VE GOT YOU COVERED
Rebooting American Health Care
Einav, Liran & Amy Finkelstein
Portfolio (304 pp.)
$29.00 | July 25, 2023
9780593421239

A highly insightful examination of how to fix America’s woefully inadequate health care system.

Einav and Finkelstein, professors of economics at Stanford and MIT, respectively, manage the impressive feat of appearing neither liberal nor conservative, portraying the American health care system as not merely deplorable, but grotesque. Its patches, exceptions, complexities, and cutouts illustrate our “plug-the-leaks, squeaky-wheel-gets-the-grease approach of the past half century.” The authors make a compelling case for going back to the drawing board to do it right. The idea of universal health care is rooted in an unwritten social contract: to provide essential medical care regardless of resources. Most liberals and conservatives accept this concept, at least in theory. Current reforms miss the point by emphasizing the uninsured, ignoring the fact that 90% of insured Americans have problems. Even the coverage we do have is a mess. The authors argue for a fixed government health care budget to provide free universal coverage for basic services and the option to buy additional, supplemental coverage. Conservatives may be discomfited to learn that almost every high-income nation with free, “socialized” medicine operates under a fixed health care budget. America doesn’t and vastly outspends them all. Ironically, much of American health care is already socialized—i.e., paid for by the government with salaried doctors at the VA hospitals and community health centers. Taken as a whole, our taxes already pay for universal basic care. Their plan would create a two-tier system benefiting those with supplementary coverage. Conservatives may be discomfited to learn that almost every high-income nation with free, “socialized” medicine operates under a fixed health care budget. America doesn’t and vastly outspends them all. Ironically, much of American health care is already socialized—i.e., paid for by the government with salaried doctors at the VA hospitals and community health centers. Taken as a whole, our taxes already pay for universal basic care. Their plan would create a two-tier system benefiting those with supplementary coverage, but we already have that. The advantage is that it would fulfill the social contract we all accept. Today’s basic coverage for the poor—i.e., Medicaid—is not only a failure; it’s often undeniably cruel.

One of the best entries in the health care reform genre.

FALLING UPWARDS
Living the Dream, One Panic Attack at a Time
Fall, Jeremy
Hachette Go (224 pp.)
$29.00 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780306830952

A successful California restaurateur dishes on his “fall” into success. In 2014, then-23-year-old Fall took a chance and opened his first bar. His
idea was simple: to reinvigorate a staid Los Angeles nightclub scene and transform it into an experience that intermingled "ideas and friendships and art." The popularity of this bar and others quickly transformed Fall into a "thing," but he soon realized that his real interest was food and creating unique dining experiences. His limited knowledge of the restaurant world had come through a mother who had managed a Skid Row cafe. Despite countless challenges, the author dove into his work with Nighthawk, a diner named after the 1942 Edward Hopper painting. Nighthawk featured a "live DJ 'jukebox' " and served breakfast and breakfast-themed cocktails like his famous "spiked cereal milk." Other mixed media-style restaurants followed, and Fall eventually landed in Forbes magazine's "30 under 30." Meanwhile, he found himself reckoning with an extreme anxiety that threatened to shut down his creative output. Pulling no punches, the author discusses how therapy and medication helped him navigate his mental health issues and allowed him to embrace neurodivergence as the source for the "loose balloon" ideas he credits for his successes. Remaining authentic and vulnerable in spaces overrun by toxic masculinity also became part of his regimen to remain healthy. "I'd always grown up with the cliché that men hate to talk, but it's just not true," he writes. "All you need is a few positive experiences to realize that wow—talking about our feelings actually makes things better." In that spirit, Fall discusses Alan, his anxiety, and Bob, his inner critic, with refreshing openness and humor. At a time when the highly flawed alpha male credo of "stronger, harder, better" still dominates ideas about success, Fall's book offers a welcome take on both masculinity and the nature of creativity.

A quirky and inspiring story.

"Briggs led an eventful and fascinating life—he discovered a world of art and culture studying at the University of Heidelberg after he left the Army and became a very successful businessman after returning to the United States."

"This is a touching memoir, personally candid and philosophically reflective."

- KIRKUS REVIEWS, 2023

A renaissance man—Top gun in his tank battalion, White House Fellow, managing a campaign with Paul Newman, sending John Denver to the USSR, Wall Street rainmaker, blue-ribbon shag dancer, friendship with Sting, Proust aficionado, National Park Service "Volunteer of the Year" for 16-year care of the Lincoln Memorial.

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WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT ANTISEMITISM
Fersko, Diana
Seal Press (240 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781541601949

Antisemitism is alive and well and worth talking about.

Fersko, senior rabbi at the Village Temple in Manhattan and vice president of the Women’s Rabbinic Network, argues that Americans of all backgrounds must discuss antisemitism. The author notes that many people view antisemitism as a problem of the past, an issue that is rare and isolated in 21st-century America. She demonstrates convincingly that this mindset is misinformed and that antisemitism is on the rise. Early on Fersko provides a lengthy explanation of antisemitism as “the longest-held, farthest-reaching conspiracy theory in the world.” She explains that antisemitism is a belief in a variety of lies and stereotypes about Jews and Judaism, which manifests in everyday life from seemingly innocuous remarks to outright physical violence. Fersko points to seven points of dialogue that Jews and non-Jews need to address in order to help battle antisemitism, including race, Christianity, microaggressions, the Holocaust, and Israel. Throughout, she urges readers to educate themselves about the past and to learn to recognize the prejudices about Jews that many Americans inherit unknowingly. Though Fersko addresses obvious sources of antisemitism as right-wing and racially based extremist groups, she makes it clear throughout the book that the American left is also a major source of antisemitism today. In some cases, this is seen in virulent anti-Israel stances, where left-wing activists portray Jews as racists and oppressors. In other cases, American liberals simply perpetrate tropes and stereotypes about their Jewish friends and neighbors, often through microaggressions, misplaced humor, miseducation about the Holocaust, etc. Though there are certainly points for debate, the text serves as a meaningful starting point for dialogue. If nothing else, she provides the important reminder that the age-old specter of antisemitism is not extinct; in many ways, it’s stronger and more dangerous than at any time since the Holocaust.

An eye-opening and thought-provoking read.

CLIMATE RESILIENCE
How We Keep Each Other Safe, Care for Our Communities, and Fight Back Against Climate Change
Flanagan, Kylie
North Atlantic (256 pp.)
$19.95 paper | Aug. 1, 2023
9781623179021

Diverse contributors explore the many dynamics of climate change.

Climate activist Flanagan launched her environmental justice project during the summer of 2020 amid the “entwined crises” of surging Covid-19 infections, racial unrest, and California’s epic wildfires. The book features the author “in conversation with 39 women, nonbinary, and gender-expansive climate leaders,” and their impassioned discussions sound the alarm for practical solutions from their areas of expertise within the grassroots climate movement. The text includes important perspectives from Black, Indigenous, people of color, feminist, queer, and other marginalized communities, countering the narrative that Flanagan characterizes as “rooted in more masculine ideals such as efficiency, competition, ego, scale, and domination.” Ruth Miller, of Dena’ina Athabaskan descent, reflects on the effects of climate change in her native Alaska, which experiences the degradation at a drastically faster rate. Olivia Juarez, a lifelong resident of the Goshute and Eastern Shoshone lands of the Greater Salt Lake region,” advocates for aggressive wilderness preservation, while Emmy Award-winning actor Casey Camp-Horinek promotes the Rights of Nature Movement, which reenacts natural law with human law. Native Los Angeles holistic ecologist Heather Rosenberg works to solve some of her region’s issues with a multipronged approach using the LA River as a model. Nonbinary educator Ceci Pineda discusses how queer communities intersect with climate futures and demonstrates the power of a community composting initiative as a method of methane emission reduction. Other contributors introduce initiatives such as seedkeeping, eco-friendly prescribed burns, and fossil fuel resistance. Most importantly, the book offers “resilience tool spotlight” segments as resources for readers to directly connect and participate in these movements. Each impassioned essay is highly educational as well as encouraging, and the cross-cultural, inclusive perspectives show the power of proactive, real-world climate solutions. The book includes a helpful glossary.

An essential, inspired chorus of voices echoing the urgency of action in the fight against climate change.

WIFEDOM
Mrs. Orwell’s Invisible Life
Funder, Anna
Knopf (432 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 22, 2023
9780593320686

An electrifying biography of George Orwell’s first wife.

In 2017, Funder, author of Stasiland and All That I Am, found herself embarking on a massive Orwell reading project in an effort to excavate herself from the domestic drudgery that seemed to be dominating her life. Coming across a strange passage in Orwell’s private notebook that cites the “incorrigible dirtiness & untidiness” and “terrible, devouring sexuality” of married women, Funder sought more information about Orwell’s first wife, Eileen O’Shaughnessy (1905-1945), an Oxford graduate and working
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KIRKUS REVIEWS
woman. As the author notes, she is a somewhat inscrutable figure in the major male-authored biographies of Orwell. This book is not a traditional biography but rather a pastiche of Eileen’s letters to her friend Norah Symes, Funder’s invented scenes of the Orwell’s lives, and a first-person account of Funder’s own life as the mother of teenage daughters as the “revelations of #MeToo erupt,” a time of “unspeakable truths.” Eileen is a worthy subject in her own right, but the author ably depicts the balance of power between the Orwells, particularly the way George wrote Eileen out of the narrative. With a combination of excitement and indignation, Funder recounts how, during Orwell’s stint in the Spanish Civil War, Eileen, who had followed her husband to Spain, was doing complicated and dangerous work in the office of the Independent Labour Party, producing its English-language newspaper and radio program. Funder creates a convincing, vivid portrait of Eileen as an irreplaceable font of unpaid labor for George. Not only did she take care of domestic affairs; she also edited and typed for him, prioritized his work above all else, and suffered through his many extramarital affairs (on the latter note, the author rejects the oft-repeated notion that the Orwells had an open marriage). Daring in both form and content, Funder’s book is not a traditional biography but rather a pastiche of scenes of the Orwells’ lives, and a first-person account of how, during Orwell’s stint in the Spanish Civil War, Eileen, who had followed her husband to Spain, was doing complicated and dangerous work in the office of the Independent Labour Party, producing its English-language newspaper and radio program. Funder creates a convincing, vivid portrait of Eileen as an irreplaceable font of unpaid labor for George. Not only did she take care of domestic affairs; she also edited and typed for him, prioritized his work above all else, and suffered through his many extramarital affairs (on the latter note, the author rejects the oft-repeated notion that the Orwells had an open marriage). Daring in both form and content, Funder’s book is a nuanced, sophisticated literary achievement.

A sharp, captivating look at a complicated relationship and a resurrection of a vital figure in Orwell’s life.

PLEASE UNSUBSCRIBE, THANKS!
How To Take Back Our Time, Attention, and Purpose in a World Designed To Bury Us in Bullshit
Gambuto, Julio Vincent
Avid Reader Press (336 pp.)
$27.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781668009543

A filmmaker and producer maps out clear-cut methods to uncomplicate life, online and off.

The Covid-19 pandemic took a particularly devastating toll on Gambuto, as he struggled to find breathing room for six months while quarantining in his small Manhattan apartment. Furthermore, he was “tired of being tethered” to emails, auto-subscriptions, unfulfilling personal relationships, and compulsive purchases of unnecessary things. Building on his 2020 viral essay “Prepare for the Ultimate Gaslighting,” Gambuto seeks to help others declutter by investigating what has made levels of happiness and leisure time in America consistently plummet in the last few years. He cites relentless levels of commitments, agendas, voracious consumerism, and social treadmills as the main culprits, and he swiftly but informatively moves through the relentless mechanics of “click-up economics,” strategic branding, compulsive consumption, and the conundrum of corporations gaslighting a pandemic-weary public. As he emphasizes repeatedly, breaking free from these habits and hindrances takes steely determination. He offers a viable prescription of email unsubscribing, browser blocking, app downsizing, and embarking on a “digital detox,” and he also shows us how to renegotiate work or personal relationships. The author dispenses step-by-step instructions on how to effect change and distance oneself from automation and become resistant to the sly allure of advertising. Gambuto’s enthusiastic delivery and practical self-help tactics will remind readers that significant internal work is necessary to clear out the clutter, making room for beneficial relationships in real life and online. Witty and passionately written, the book shows that “there actually is time to process your life” once you eliminate seductive inbox offers, opt-in links, premium memberships, and toxic “people subscriptions.” It all starts with the “deeply gratifying” process of cutting the subscription cord and being wholly present for renewal with oneself and communion with others.

A potent slice of social commentary and strategic advice on reclaiming valuable time and personal joy.

CROSSINGS
How Road Ecology Is Shaping the Future of Our Planet
Goldfarb, Ben
Norton (384 pp.)
$30.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781324005896

A wide-ranging, fascinating exploration of roads, which are “not merely a symptom of civilization but a distinct disease.”

Goldfarb’s follow-up to Eager, his award-winning book on beavers, is another illuminating, witty work. He chronicles his journeys through numerous countries with colleagues to conduct extensive field research and mixes his findings with historical research showing the effects of roads on our ecology. Pavement, he writes, “blankets less than 1 percent” of the U.S., “but its ecological influence “covers a full 20 percent.” Goldfarb sadly notes that it “has never been more dangerous to set paw, hoof, or scaly belly on the highway.” With the rise of cars and roads in the 20th century, the degrading word roadkill was born, and the deer became primary victims. The author bemoans how the “Interstate Highway System lopped off migration routes as neatly as a guillotine,” and roads with more than 10,000 vehicles per day loom as what road ecologists call “absolute barriers to most wildlife.” The sprawling Los Angeles freeway labyrinth, with its “clean as a scalpel” east-west habitat fragmentation, has disrupted practically every species, especially the mountain lion. As a result of roadkill, Goldfarb sadly notes, 21 critters, especially reptiles and amphibians, face extinction, and he reveals how the National Forest Service’s many roads have become “proxy battlegrounds in a cultural war” and how they’re working to reduce them. Excessive road noise is equally pernicious, as is excessive salt on roads. Not to be overlooked, usually on a car’s front, is the ongoing insect liquidation, but many shrubby roadides have also become insect sanctuaries. “The necrobiome,” Goldfarb writes, “airbrushes our roadides,
camouflaging a crisis by devouring it.” Fortunately, in Europe and Canada, recent innovations in under- and overpasses have helped reduce the number of dead animals, and the author is optimistic about the roles of citizen scientists, self-driving cars, and achievements in Brazil, which “seem[s] to sit at road ecology’s forefront.”

An astonishingly deep pool of wonders.

**THREE ROCKS**

**The Story of Ernie Bushmiller: The Man Who Created Nancy**

Griffith, Bill

Abrams ComicArts (356 pp.)

$24.99 | Aug. 29, 2023

9781639365036

An illustrated biography of Ernie Bushmiller (1905-1982), creator of the cult-favorite comic “Nancy.”

This book is a triumph because it not only recounts Bushmiller’s legacy, but communes with his inimitable spirit. Employing meticulous pen-inked crosshatch drawings, Griffith, the creator of “Zippy,” achieves wondrous results with an experimental approach to his source material. He demonstrates Bushmiller’s creative process and inner thoughts, interpolating original “Nancy” illustrations into his own narrative. Characters appear in daydreams, and strips take shape as Bushmiller ruminates on a gag. This collaged technique creates an ineffable sense of posthumous collaboration between Griffith and his subject. Griffith traces Bushmiller’s storied career at the *New York World*. At age 19, he was asked to take over the comic “Fritzi Ritz” after its creator quit. Nancy, the spiky-haired goofball whose innocent follies captured the nation’s heart, first appeared in “Fritzi,” and she became the star of her own strip in 1938. “Nancy” was eventually syndicated in nearly 900 papers, and Bushmiller drew daily comics until his death. He had idiosyncratic work habits: He would always begin with a goofy final panel (what he called the “snapper”) and work backward to find a path to his punchline, and he had four drawing tables set up in his studio so he could work on pages in tandem. Reading “Nancy” can be similarly dizzying. In a series of asides, Griffith attempts to introduce highbrow elements to the strip’s lowbrow humor and sparse composition. Perhaps Bushmiller’s strips are “calling our attention to the form comics take—panels, balloons, composition.” Yes, it’s all funny, but “the joke is on us if we fail to see what Bushmiller is up to, namely, taking apart the comic strip & putting it back together again.” Griffith quietly invites readers to explore his own biography in the same critical way. This book is not simply a charming history of a plucky cartoonist, but a formal marvel, pushing at the boundaries of its medium.

**Firmly raises the bar for comics biographies.**

**TOLKIEN IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

**The Meaning of Middle-Earth Today**

Groom, Nick

Pegasus (448 pp.)

$29.95 | Sept. 5, 2023

9781639365036

A modern journey through Tolkien’s work, which has engendered a rich field of cultural activity.

Tolkien devoted his life to the creation of the vast, imaginary world of Middle-Earth, and books such as The Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings series have been popular since they were first published. However, notes Groom, a professor of English literature, the story did not end there. Tolkien’s novels have become the source code for films, music, games, spinoffs, and any number of imitators. In the first half of the book, Groom deals with how Tolkien created the books, drawing on a wide range of literary influences and personal experiences. He did not have a detailed plan for the Lord of the Rings but largely allowed the characters and the narrative to evolve within the Middle-Earth framework he had developed in earlier works. The combination of sweeping scope and personal journeys gives the books their resonance, but it also makes them challenging to understand. LOTR is much more than a story of good versus evil, and the author peels back the layers to prove his point. The second half of the book examines the numerous attempts of filmmakers to come to terms with the sprawling text; for most, it was simply too difficult. Groom applauds Peter Jackson’s films, accepting that parts of Tolkien’s stories had to be cut or amended to suit the screen. He pondered the reasons for the films’ huge success, arguing that many of the crises of our times are reflected in Tolkien’s books. He is on less firm ground here, and sometimes he struggles to make connections. But his point that Tolkien’s work will continue to have an enduring appeal is valid, and this book offers a thought-provoking examination as to why.

With the authority of extensive research, Groom unpacks the reasons for the appeal of Tolkien to a new generation.

**CREEP**

**Accusations and Confessions**

Gurba, Myriam

Avid Reader Press (288 pp.)

$27.00 | Sept. 5, 2023

9781982186494

A queer Latine author explores the multifaceted concept of a “creep.”

Gurba, the author of the acclaimed memoir *Mea*, begins her latest book with a memory of her and her friend Renee Jr.—daughter of Renee Sr., who gave the author her “second perm”—flinging “lesbian” Barbie dolls out of a 10th-story window purely to delight in the
When a high school teacher refused to believe that he wrote I’m stupid, not because I’m a masochist, and not because I’m insane. He did it because I’m a woman.” One of the most touching pieces traces how Gurba’s cousin’s search for basic safety ultimately landed her in jail, an outcome the author clearly connects to the racist war on drugs. Gurba’s lyrical prose forces us to face the sexism, racism, homophobia, and other systems of oppression that allow some Americans to get away with murder while the rest of us live in constant fear. Every piece is rife with well-timed humor and surprising conclusions, many of which come from the author’s staggering command of history. Profoundly insightful, thoroughly researched, incredibly inventive, and laugh-out-loud funny, this book is a masterpiece of wit and vulnerability.

A truly exceptional essay collection about safety, fear, and power.

AUGUST WILSON
A Life
Hartigan, Patti
Simon & Schuster (502 pp.)
$32.50 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781501180668

The life of an acclaimed American playwright.

Theater critic and arts reporter Hartigan makes an impressive book debut with an appreciative, well-researched biography of August Wilson (1945-2005), winner of multiple awards (including Pulitzers for Fences and The Piano Lesson and a Tony for Fences) for his plays about Black experiences in 20th-century America. Wilson grew up in Pittsburgh, the son of a single mother who had many children with married European baker Frederick August Kittel. The eldest, Frederick August Kittel Jr.—he changed his name as an adult—was an intellectually precocious child, bored in school, a loner who was often bullied. When a high school teacher refused to believe that he wrote an excellent paper, Wilson stopped going to classes, spending his days reading at the Carnegie Library. The incident, Hartigan writes, “was more than just a failure of an adult to encourage a singular achievement. It was a defining moment that would color his interactions as an artist later in life.” The author chronicles Wilson’s early financial and artistic struggles as a poet and playwright and the growing recognition of his talent: in Minneapolis, where he won a Playwrights’ Center fellowship, and at the Eugene O’Neill National Playwrights Conference, where he proved to be a startling success. In 1982, New York Times theater critic Frank Rich gave his new play a rave review. The connections he made there, notably with Lloyd Richards, the artistic director, shaped his “meteoric rise to success.” By the 1980s, Wilson was famous, constantly crisscrossing the country to oversee the productions of several plays. Travel, though, and serial womanizing caused the end of his second marriage; his first was short-lived and produced a daughter; his third wife survived him. Hartigan portrays Wilson as ambitious, stubborn, and self-absorbed, “fiercely protective of his work, passionately attached to every word.”

An authoritative portrait of a defiant champion of Black theater.

GROWING UP IN PUBLIC
Coming of Age in a Digital World
Heitner, Devorah
TarcherPerigee (304 pp.)
$26.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780593420966

A map to the social media maze for parents and their teenagers.

Parenting a teenager has never been easy, but social media has made it much more difficult. Heitner specializes in this field, and her 2016 book, Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive (and Survive) in Their Digital World, was widely praised. In this follow-up, she returns to some of her previous themes, punctuating the text with accessible advice and numerous anecdotes. She believes that trying to prohibit a teen from using social media is unlikely to work. After all, kids have grown up with the internet and can circumvent bans. She suggests that a mentoring approach is better than stern rules. Heitner acknowledges that finding the right balance in parental supervision and intervention is often a tricky matter of judgment. For example, some teens are opposed to being tracked by their phones, but others accept it as an appropriate security measure. Many teens see social media as a crucial part of their lives, especially in being part of a peer group. One major problem is that the rules about what is acceptable and what is not keep changing, and some teens constantly worry that a wrong word could see them shunned. Parents are often concerned that unsuitable posts might affect their teen’s application to a desired college, although research shows that such cases are rare. They can advise their kids to think before they post anything, and a useful guide is to think about whether they would put whatever they are posting on a T-shirt. In the end, the best ways to mentor are by examples and through communication. “Parents should shift their focus from consequences to building character,” writes Heitner, “and to teaching their kids to respect their own privacy and reputation by modeling that respect for them.”

Expert advice for parents and teens backed by relevant research and clear thinking.
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A Black comedian describes the racism that stymied her career in the U.K. as well as the perseverance that led to her success in the U.S.

Growing up in London and Brighton, Hughes had one dream: to be on TV. To that end, at a young age, she took on deprecation and frank social analysis. Despite her overreliance on exclamatory sentences, the author’s playful take on serious issues is irreverently charming, and the book will be especially appealing to Black women who have been gaslighted about the race and gender issues they’ve experienced in their own careers. Emboldened by the author’s confidence, many readers will be able to put these insecurities to rest.

A delightfully layered memoir about race, gender, and comedy.

A highly insightful work of French history.

Weaving a captivating account of the 1945 trial of the French marshal who had agreed to an armistice with the Nazi regime in 1940, Jackson, a professor emeritus of history and author of the prizewinning De Gaulle, reminds readers that Philippe Pétain (1856-1951) “was unanimously viewed as a savior when he took over as head of the so-called Vichy regime”—although opinion was far more divided by the end of the war. The trial was obviously a political event with a guilty verdict almost guaranteed, but it was not a charade. Pétain’s lawyers mounted a vigorous defense, and the trial that obsessed the nation was compared to those of Louis XVI and even Joan of Arc. Jackson begins with the events following August 1944 when, with Allied armies sweeping across France, the Nazis forcibly evacuated Pétain and many loyal followers to a castle in Germany, where they occupied themselves with fantasies about returning after Hitler recovered from this temporary setback. Leaving in April 1945, Pétain returned to France, where preparations for his trial in absentia were already in progress. Few French officials, de Gaulle included, welcomed his arrival. Readers will be intrigued by Jackson’s lucid explanations of the unfamiliar French legal system in which both judge and jury can quiz witnesses. He was tried for treason, and the author delivers a dense, informative account that confronts broad moral and philosophical questions, enlivened by the witnesses’ often bitter hatred of Pétain and each other. Convicted, he was sentenced to death, which de Gaulle commuted to life imprisonment, “as the court had recommended and as he had always privately intended.” Readers will not be surprised to learn that this was a controversial decision, and they will thoroughly enjoy Jackson’s final 100 pages, which recount the persistent, often grotesque efforts to rehabilitate Pétain and Vichy that continue to this day.

A highly insightful work of French history.
change their names, dress, and rituals. In the early years of communist rule, for example, “all herbal shops and practices were closed,” but herbalists’ knowledge and practices endured, as have myths, folklore, and spiritual traditions. Kassabova portrays in palpable detail the many “earth experts” she met along her journey, including Rocky the Enchanter, the ebullient purveyor of medicinal herbs; the “babi,” women who serve as midwives, wish-granters, spell-lifters, spell-casters, medicine dispensers and physio- and psychotherapists; fortunetellers; and guides through physical and metaphysical landscapes. The author creates a mesmerizing narrative of transformation and discovery, epiphany and “magical miracles.” She also charts her deep immersion in a place that seems outside of time. “Who were these people,” she asks herself, “so familiar yet unknown? Their faces talked to me. I had the odd feeling of having been among them.” The book includes delicate botanical drawings and maps by Faccini.

A radiant memoir of wonder and revelation.

EIGHTEEN DAYS IN OCTOBER
The Yom Kippur War and How It Created the Modern Middle East
Kaufman, Uri
St. Martin’s (320 pp.)
$32.00 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781250281883

A clinical dissection of the Yom Kippur War of 1973, published in time for the 50th anniversary.

In a book he has been researching for 20 years, visiting battle sites and poring over archival documents, Kaufman clearly delineates the conflict, both the immediate aftermath and the long-term effects. He examines the military buildup in terms of Israel’s use of aerial power to destroy Egyptian and Syrian forces and how Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser and Syria’s Hafez el-Assad calculated their revenge. Despite intelligence reports, the Israeli military high command, led by Moshe Dayan, under the auspices of Golda Meir, dismissed alarms of imminent attack and was completely unprepared for a Syrian commando attack on Oct. 6. As Kaufman recounts in a play-by-play narrative, there were no tanks on the ground and few planes in the sky, and everything relied on quick improvisation. “Prior to the war,” writes the author, “the dictionaries of the world defined the Hebrew word mikabbal as a ‘failure to carry out something important.’ After the war, the word took on a new meaning, one that survives to this day: a ‘fiasco as monumental as the IDF’s failures in the opening days of the Yom Kippur War.’” Although each side claimed victory, Kaufman underscores that Israel had achieved its primary goal: “Egypt’s days of waging war against Israel were over.” Moreover, on March 18, 1974, the Arab oil embargo was lifted. This subject has been covered from a variety of historical and cultural perspectives, perhaps most memorably by Michael Oren in Six Days of War, but Kaufman’s contribution is a valuable addition to the literature. The book should prove useful for students of modern Middle East history as well as anyone interested in the mechanics of how the Arab-Israeli conflict has remained seemingly intractable for decades.

Engaging, evenhanded account of a major Middle East conflict that still resonates today.

THE SISTER
North Korea’s Kim Yo Jong, the Most Dangerous Woman in the World
Lee, Sung-Yoon
PublicAffairs (304 pp.)
$30.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781541704121

In the dark labyrinth of North Korean politics, a princess has emerged as a major power.

Lee is a U.S.–based academic who has been studying and writing about North Korea and the Kim family for many years, so he is perfectly situated to provide a detailed examination of Kim Yo Jong (b. 1987), the younger sister of Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un and the likely heir apparent. She holds only a minor position in the government hierarchy, but her power, which includes the ability to sentence anyone to death for any reason, stems from being “First Sister” and a key member of the royal family. She first made headlines as North Korea’s representative at the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea, and since that time, her profile has increased. She now makes public statements about regime policy, especially regarding foreign affairs. The Kim family has always had a reputation for bellicosity, but Kim Yo Jong has taken it to a new level, with barrages of personal insults and threats delivered in a tone of vicious sarcasm. Lee is unsurprised by her behavior, as she was called “princess” in her childhood and learned the art of disdain at her father’s knee. As chief propagandist, she has cemented the power of the dynasty, emphasizing the mythical idea of the “Mount Paektu Bloodline” that began with North Korea’s founder, Kim Il Sung. Lee believes that she enjoys being feared and has a wide streak of cruelty. Sometimes she makes her brother look like the sensible and restrained member of the family. She can put on a charming face for media consumption, but the author warns commentators to be wary. She is, quite simply, an extremely dangerous person and would be even more threatening in the top position. It is a worrying but unavoidable conclusion.

A vivid portrait of a ruthless, egocentric woman driven by an unrelenting sense of entitlement and destiny.
“A lovely meditation on the hidden past and the blossoming present.”

UNEARTHING

SURVIVING OUR CATASTROPHES
Resilience and Renewal From Hiroshima to the Covid-19 Pandemic
Lifton, Robert Jay
The New Press (392 pp.)
$24.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781620978153

The renowned psychiatrist shows us how coming to terms with the pandemic requires a change in thinking.

National Book Award winner Lifton, now 97, has written scores of books, mainly dealing with the effects of trauma. He believes that our society has yet to fully come to terms with the Covid-19 pandemic and its enormous consequences. He draws on the stories of Hiroshima survivors (the subject of his classic 1968 book, Death in Life), Vietnam veterans, and Holocaust survivors to illustrate the importance of finding meaning as a crucial part of psychological recovery—and physical recovery for those dealing with the long-term effects of the disease. Recovery is by no means easy, and the Hiroshima survivors (known in Japan as hibakusha, “explosion-affected persons”) had to deal with feelings of guilt as well as the loss of loved ones. Some became activists campaigning against nuclear weapons, and others became artists or writers. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial, a half-destroyed building, provided a focal point for individual and communal mourning. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., is another example of how national traumas can be given expression. As such, a lasting monument to the pandemic victims, as proposed by the activist survivor organization Marked by Covid, among other entities, could help the nation move through the grieving process. A national day of remembrance would also provide a sense of unity. However, Lifton argues lucidly that the real key to recovery from the pandemic is a fundamental change in our collective mindset. We must move toward “the formation of a sense of self based significantly upon one’s connection to humankind.”

In a thoughtful, pithy, and inspiring narrative, the author shows how “catastrophe calls on us to bring the mind to bear upon the most unpalatable truths of our historical epoch, to expand the limits of imagination on behalf of survival.”

Written with the authority of experience, this book offers a viable path to true recovery.

UNEARTHING
A Story of Tangled Love and Family Secrets
Maclear, Kyo
Scribner (416 pp.)
$29.00 | Aug. 22, 2023
9781668012604

Playing on metaphors from her vocation as a gardener, Maclear chronicles her discovery of “a secret buried for half a century.”

The author’s Japanese mother closely held that secret until Maclear’s English father died, after which she learned that he

MOZART IN MOTION
His Work and His World in Pieces
Mackie, Patrick
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (368 pp.)
$30.00 | June 6, 2023
9780374606206

A unique, wide-ranging study of the canonical composer.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) lived “in a blur of needs and actions,” writes poet Mackie. He was a whirlwind of a man who was always on the move and whose music moved with him. Because our own time is as turbulent as Mozart’s—the latter poised on the brink between classicism and romanticism and, beyond that, a politically and culturally revolutionary era—“we listen in inexorable motion, too.” Indeed, Mozart’s heady blend of the serious and the sarcastic is a soundtrack for our time. “New sorts of dynamism and restlessness were the motors of Mozart’s style,” writes Mackie, perfect for the “ceaseless volatilization [that] has turned out to be the heart of modern living.” The author is a careful listener to the music on its own terms and in its own time, noting how challenging Mozart’s operas were when they found their first audiences, then how Mozart pivoted to write three symphonies that have “qualities of urgency, colour and imaginative extremity that traverse and test innumerable flickering ideas about the world, and they grab hold of their listeners with veering aplomb.” If nothing else, Mackie’s absorbing book, with its large dramatic personaes, makes it clear that Tom Hulce’s performance as Mozart in the film Amadeus was an understatement: The man himself was a bundle of ADHD tics, constantly drumming his fingers and humming, frequently picking up and moving from city to city. Mackie also emphasizes Mozart’s utterly groundbreaking blend of seriousness and giddiness, the sense that if apocalypse is around the corner, we might as well have fun with it. Throughout his short life, for all its tumult and the turbulence of the Europe around him, Mozart “kept creating.” Ambitious and brilliant: a book that rethinks Mozart’s place in history and one that should win him new fans along the way.
Admirably, McDonnell notes that Didion was a more complicated figure than many of her fans acknowledge. She grew up in “deep American conservatism,” “never lost her distrust of big government,” and voted for Barry Goldwater in 1964. She had a habit of “glamorizing consumption,” which her early stint at Vogue underscored. Also, “when it comes to being an icon for women, Joan Didion can be deeply problematic,” starting with her “mean-spirited attack on second-wave feminism,” which “revealed her blindered privilege”—although she would moderate these opinions in later works. Overall, McDonnell offers a thoughtful assessment of Didion’s importance but doesn’t shy away from Didion’s flaws—e.g., that she struggled with motherhood. During her childhood, Quintana Roo “made a list of her mother’s favorite sayings: ‘Brush your teeth, brush your hair, shush I’m working.’”

An appreciative portrait of an iconic author.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO JOAN DIDION
McDonnell, Evelyn
HarperOne (224 pp.)
$26.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780063289079

A biography of a significant American writer.

“Most of us have a Joan Didion origin story: the article, or book, or photograph, or quote that first made us want to know more about this quiet oracle,” writes journalist McDonnell, author of Mamarama and Women Who Rock. When the author was in college, she read Didion’s essay “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” which asked what happened to the American dream, “the theme of much of [her] work.” Thus was born a lifelong appreciation for one of America’s most noteworthy stylists. McDonnell covers all the relevant biographical details: Didion’s Sacramento childhood; her early years writing for New York magazines; and her family life, which included the tragedy of adopted daughter Quintana Roo, who died at age 39 in 2005 (the subject of Didion’s Blue Nights). The author also offers personal reflections on Didion’s importance to her life and career as well as interviews with people who knew her, including Calvin Trillin and Gay Talese and nephew Griffin Dunne.

was not her biological father. The identity of the person who was, an older man about town in London who raced cars and owned a restaurant, surprised her, her old-country English identity replaced by a Russian Jewish bloodline with hitherto unknown siblings all over the world. That discovery prompted this pensive meditation on what lies beneath the soil of ancestry as well as the ways in which people attempt to find happiness and meaning in life. While her mother had never intended to be a “good cultural ambassador or an Elegant Japanese Lady,” she did invest a great deal of herself in a wild patch of land that defined the minimalism of the idealized Zen garden. Maclear draws meaning from that habit of getting one’s hands dirty in the Earth while pondering the thought that, as her mother said, a person becomes a person not just by remembering, but also by forgetting. Maclear’s response, among many: “Dear parents, the deep knowledge you tried to bury and erase still managed to leave something behind.” Though seldom snarky, the author is often indignant, working hard to muster the sympathy needed to understand why her parents would have disguised a long-ago affair. Many memoirs have examined issues of paternity and parental infidelity, but Maclear’s stands out due to elegant writing and insightful musings on the making and shaping of identities, always with the garden behind her to provide an anchor. “I remember a filmmaker friend telling me we get new family in the middle of our life so we remember our identities are always dying and regenerating,” she writes. “To remind us: we can be green again.”

A lovely meditation on the hidden past and the blossoming present.
that respectfully challenge the disinforming perspectives of believers. This brief but impactful book offers trenchant commentary on the current war on truth and workable solutions to protect democracy in an increasingly chaotic world.

Thoughtful and illuminating.

**BUT YOU HAVE FRIENDS**

*McKenzie, Emilia*

Top Shelf Productions (116 pp.)

$14.99 paper | Aug. 8, 2023

9781603095273

A tender graphic memoir about the loss of a close friend.

In 2018, after her friend Charlotte died at 34 following a long struggle with depression, McKenzie began making sketches of her memories of their time together. “I was worried I might forget things without having her there to remind me,” she writes, clarifying that the book is not a biography of her friend but rather the story of their friendship. McKenzie and Charlotte became fast friends in high school, where they bonded over their love of music, goofy humor, passion for writing, and feminism. They were able to share challenging and intimate emotions that they found difficult to discuss with their classmates, including their struggles with mental health and feelings of alienation. “C was the first person I ever met who took an active interest in social justice,” writes the author, indicating her ongoing admiration for her kind, compassionate friend. After high school, they took a memorable trip to Finland, where, despite Charlotte losing part of her toe due to an infection, they bonded and felt closer than ever. During college, however, they struggled with the distance between their two schools. McKenzie fought loneliness and anxiety, and Charlotte “was up and down” as she battled mental health issues. Eventually, they found “a new rhythm” in their relationship. “All friendships evolve,” writes McKenzie, “but I reject the idea that friends should, by default become ‘less important’ as we get older and maybe partner up or have a family, and I know C felt the same way.” The author’s words and illustrations serve as a testimony to the intimacy of her friendship. The drawings simply yet effectively portray emotion, from the highs and lows of their relationship to the guilt and challenges of grieving a friend gone too soon. McKenzie offers a thoughtful, loving, and honest tribute.

A poignant tapestry of love and grief for an irreplaceable friendship.

**DREAM TOWN**

*Shaker Heights and the Quest for Racial Equity*

*Meckler, Laura*

Henry Holt (400 pp.)

$29.99 | Aug. 22, 2023

9781250834416

A study of the complexities of school integration.

Award-winning educational journalist Meckler, a national education writer for the *Washington Post*, makes her book debut with a thorough examination of the school system of Shaker Heights, Ohio, which for the last 70 years has been committed to fostering diversity. However, despite a “decades-long, nationally recognized track record of racial integration,” it has also experienced “a persistent achievement gap in education.” Black students, writes the author, “were doing worse even though they were taking easier classes. The higher the level, the whiter the class. Ninety-five percent of students in the lowest level were Black, and in Advanced Placement, the top level, just 12 percent of students were.” Herself a product of the Shaker Heights school system, Meckler augments her own experiences with more than 250 interviews, on-site visits, and research in school and community archives to tackle the question of why this gap persists. For a community intent on diversity, housing integration posed the first obstacle: Banks and realtors tried to block Blacks from buying homes in the once all-White neighborhoods; when Blacks did move in, those same institutions tried to incite Whites to flee. In 1957, the Ludlow Community Association formed with the explicit goal of maintaining the viability of a community open to all races and religions, and a funding initiative offered mortgage assistance to families. Meckler focuses each chapter on an individual—student, parent, school board member, administrator, teacher—whose experiences elucidate how the schools evolved to meet myriad challenges. One strategy with mixed consequences was busing students into and out of Black and White neighborhood schools. Still, the achievement gap persisted, raising concerns: “What happens,” for example, “when some kids can stay after school and play on the playground, fostering friendships while their parents trade gossip and news about the school—and others can’t?” Meckler applauds the community’s values while honestly revealing its pressures and problems.

A detailed, incisive portrait of a community’s shared quest.
A global disability rights advocate recounts his path to success. Ndopu’s life as a “disabled achiever” demands he maintain a precarious balance between endurance and exhaustion, resolve and resignation, even as he is constantly asked to account for his own worth. While any thread of the author’s story could fill an entire volume, the core narrative arc follows him to and through the hallowed halls—and cumber-some cobblestone paths—of Oxford University’s Somerville College, where he made history as the first disabled Black man to earn a master’s degree in public policy. Ndopu diligently recounts the many trials and tribulations of the intensive one-year graduate program, including head-slapping bureaucratic failures, infuriating systemic prejudices, and heartbreakingly misguided notions of philanthropy and assistance. “I was a disabled Black man,” he writes, “and Oxford, the bastion of knowledge, was where I had sought validation, only to be met with condescension and the weight of unspoken expectations.”

Alongside his frank account of his many struggles—from navigating fire drills to dealing with the onerous health-and-safety guidelines for personal care aids and the financial burden of meeting his basic needs—Ndopu proudly shares his many triumphs, including his experience as a speaker at the World Economic Forum in Davos. Throughout, the author clearly conveys the challenge of balancing “the daily grind of surviving ableism” and “the veneer of success.” He deftly shares his life story, he chronicles moments of awe and inspiration as well as dismay and embarrassment at the persistent ways that ableism has made his rise so difficult. One of Ndopu’s greatest strengths as an author is his ability to carry any reader as a collaborator and confidant without neglecting the appropriate indictments of the countless slights, assumptions, and micro- and macroaggressions that he faces. The text also serves as a powerful, personalizing context for Ndopu’s advocacy work with the U.N. and other international organizations.

A fresh, authoritative analysis of a pivotal election year.
The Industrial Revolution that shaped Victorian society gave rise to many euphemisms about women’s bodily functions, such as menstruation, as well as their function within the family. Terms like pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, and stages of life as well as male violence and patriarchy. She reveals, for example, that “vagina” began life as the Latin word for a sword’s scabbard,” creating an image of a penis as a dagger thrust into the vagina as sheath. Terms related to pregnancy reflect assumptions about whether the uterus served as a “passive carrier or active creator.” Connotations have changed through time. Nuttall notes that the term “breeding” as a synonym for pregnancy and childbirth, widely used in early English, seems dehumanizing today, and words like conception and pregnant carry double meanings—one referring to thought, another to growing a child. The Industrial Revolution that shaped Victorian society gave rise to many euphemisms about women’s bodily functions, such as menstruation, as well as their function within the family. Terms like housework and home-making, Nuttall shows, gained currency in the mid-19th century when middle-class women were relegated to the home while their husbands functioned as breadwinners. Although historically few words identified a woman’s stages of life, Nuttall has found sources for maiden, damsel (“the posher kind of unmarried woman”), and, from the 17th century, tomboy. As contemporary feminists claim, words matter: “It’s hard to escape a pattern which starts startlingly vivid” words used in reference to women and their bodies from Old English to the present. Delving into sources that include the Bible, midwives’ handbooks, and medical treatises, Nuttall traces how words evolved from a mixture of superstition, speculation, and scientific inquiry, informing and reflecting cultural attitudes about women’s anatomy, menstruation, sexuality, pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, and stages of life as well as male violence and patriarchy. She reveals, for example, that “vagina” began life as the Latin word for a sword’s scabbard,” creating an image of a penis as a dagger thrust into the vagina as sheath. Terms related to pregnancy reflect assumptions about whether the uterus served as a “passive carrier or active creator.” Connotations have changed through time. Nuttall notes that the term “breeding” as a synonym for pregnancy and childbirth, widely used in early English, seems dehumanizing today, and words like conception and pregnant carry double meanings—one referring to thought, another to growing a child. The Industrial Revolution that shaped Victorian society gave rise to many euphemisms about women’s bodily functions, such as menstruation, as well as their function within the family. Terms like housework and home-making, Nuttall shows, gained currency in the mid-19th century when middle-class women were relegated to the home while their husbands functioned as breadwinners. Although historically few words identified a woman’s stages of life, Nuttall has found sources for maiden, damsel (“the posher kind of unmarried woman”), and, from the 17th century, tomboy. As contemporary feminists claim, words matter: “It’s hard to escape a pattern which is presented to you as your very destiny in life and backed up by words themselves.”

A fresh, informative perspective on women’s lives through the centuries.

“Henry Aaron’s 715th home run is the most magical moment in baseball history,” writes Posnanski, author of The Baseball 100. It’s a tall claim, but it holds up, illustrating Aaron’s quiet resistance to White hatred and proving his repeated claim that in baseball, “All that matters is if you can play.” There are plenty of other noteworthy events in Posnanski’s pages—and well more than 50, in fact: He counts 108, coincidentally the number of stitches in a standard ball and number of years between Chicago Cubs championships. Some of the moments are well known, such as Babe Ruth’s calling the home run he was about to hit. Others are buried deep in baseball lore, including an appearance on the mound by Jackie Mitchell, a young woman who just so happened to strike Ruth out at an exhibition bout after Ruth loudly proclaimed that women were “too delicate” for the game. One of Posnanski’s winning ploys is to dig into the archives to find such hidden gems and especially to celebrate the mediocre players who, for one of those magical moments, pulled something out of their caps and hit a surprise homer—as with Bartolo Colón, the 42-year-old portly pitcher who smacked one out of the park and then took so long to round the bases that one announcer was moved to explain, charitably, “I think that’s how fast he runs.” Other of Posnanski’s diamond heroes, famed and obscure, have more hustle, including 15-year-old Joe Nuxhall, who pitched for the Cincinnati Reds when the grown-ups were fighting in World War II; J.L. Wilkinson, who introduced lights and night games to the field by way of the old Negro League; and Ichiro Suzuki, the ever smiling Mariner—“Has there ever been a more joyous player than Ichiro?”—who showed what love of the game is all about. A book for any baseball fan to cherish.
Most of the pieces in this collection are instructions reminding well-bred (and probably well-born) young people of how to live with humility and in service to society: “Do not best people with your words and so cut off their speech,” reads one dictum. “Do not talk unkindly to people, do not make them forget or fail to conserve those words which are good.” Instructions to young women give them slightly less room to roam: “Take charge of the spindle, the weaving tablet… In that way you will deserve a bit of atole, a folded tortilla, some greens, some cactus.” Purcell does a good job teasing out the Christian elements that Olmos may have inserted in an earlier example of syncretism, and while his discussion of Nahuatl grammar in relation to these texts can be a touch daunting—e.g., when he describes the language as “maximally omnipredictive”—the book reads fluently.

A strong contribution to our understanding of an important tradition of Indigenous ethics.

THE GIRL WHO SAW HEAVEN
A Fateful Tornado and a Journey of Faith
Reburn, Lisa & Alex Tresniowski
Simon & Schuster (336 pp.)
$28.99 | May 9, 2023
9781982189525

A spiritual memoir about a near-death experience that offered a young girl a glimpse of the afterlife.

Ari Hallmark was 6 years old when a tornado lifted the house where she and her family were sheltering and sent it spinning through the air. Ari survived, but her other family members did not. Ari emerged from this terrible ordeal with an incredible story, narrated by Reburn and Tresniowski. Ari remembers being ripped from her father’s arms and spun up by the tornado; then, she says, “I got to walk with my whole family up to Heaven.” Much of the imagery she describes sounds like a child’s vision of heaven, but the text struggles to communicate the ineffable—e.g., how angels fly, colors that don’t exist on Earth, a peaceful sense of perfect rightness. Ari believes that she was returned to this world to deliver a message: “You are going to see your loved ones again. Your time on earth with them is not your last time with them.” Ari’s first-person account of her experience takes up 13 pages. This is one of the only times we hear her voice, as most of the tale is related by Reburn, a retired educator who became close to Ari in the days after the storm. Much of what the authors write about seems superfluous. There’s backstory filled with details that clutter the narrative rather than illuminate it, and there is far too much repetition—including a chapter in which Ari describes her time in heaven once again. There is no doubt that some readers will be so inspired by Ari’s story that they will read the book in one sitting. Other readers will find that this could have been a long-form article rather than a 300-page book.

A balm for Christians but unlikely to move or inspire nonbelievers.

IN DEFENSE OF LOVE
An Argument
Rosenbaum, Ron
Doubleday (272 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780385536554

Probing the mystery of love.

Journalist and critic Rosenbaum, author of The Shakespeare Wars, among other books, contends that there is a fierce battle going on “for the soul of love.” He argues that it is under threat from a variety of fronts, including “brain-scan neuroscientists and their media popularizers”; “simpering pop philosophers”; “neo-Marxist dialectical materialists,” who see love as transactional; pop psychologists who consider love to be a “drive” rather than an emotion; the pornography industry; and, surprisingly, literary theorists. While scientists try to define love as a quantifiable chemical reaction, literary theorists seek to “historicize” love as an imaginative “construct,” positing that “the language of love is what has actually created love.” Rosenbaum is passionately offended by these efforts and devotes himself to defending love “as an irreducible ontological entity,” far different from the propositions emanating “from pseudoscience and sophistry.” Readers who don’t share his outrage may find his response overwrought. He focuses much ire on Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist who has been called the “Queen of Love Science,” whose findings have been widely publicized. Basing her conclusions on fMRI scans, Fisher explains love as chemistry. She has analyzed individuals’ “trait constellations” to conclude that there are “chemical types that determine who you can or should fall in love with.” Rosenbaum finds that conclusion preposterous; love, he asserts, “is not an algorithm.” The author draws on a wide range of sources—including philosophy (Plato, Thomas Nagel), poetry (Sappho, Shakespeare, Larkin, Yeats, Auden), and fiction (Lev and Sofiya Tolstoy, Austen, David Foster Wallace, and Chekhov, among others)—to make the case that love is “evanescent and contingent and unpredictable.” His own history of love bears out that conviction, and part of his motivation for exploring the meaning of love, he reveals, has been a fierce battle going on “for the soul of love.” He focuses much ire on Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist who has been called the “Queen of Love Science,” whose findings have been widely publicized. Basing her conclusions on fMRI scans, Fisher explains love as chemistry. She has analyzed individuals’ “trait constellations” to conclude that there are “chemical types that determine who you can or should fall in love with.” Rosenbaum finds that conclusion preposterous; love, he asserts, “is not an algorithm.” The author draws on a wide range of sources—including philosophy (Plato, Thomas Nagel), poetry (Sappho, Shakespeare, Larkin, Yeats, Auden), and fiction (Lev and Sofiya Tolstoy, Austen, David Foster Wallace, and Chekhov, among others)—to make the case that love is “evanescent and contingent and unpredictable.” His own history of love bears out that conviction, and part of his motivation for exploring the meaning of love, he reveals, has been finding, finally, the love of his life. “Love,” he is certain, “is a kind of entanglement between two consciousnesses.”

Impassioned but often strained.
The roots of right-wing politics on 1960s college campuses.

In her debut book, historian Shepherd draws on oral histories, archival sources, and interviews with 56 individuals to offer a deep examination of the reactionary movement on college campuses from 1967 to 1970. Students involved in organizations such as the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Young Americans for Freedom, and others benefited from financial support and mentorship from “anti-New Deal elders” seeking to foment “an astroturf mobilization against a so-called liberal establishment in higher education.” Shepherd investigates the many political, evangelical, libertarian, and “sizable and energetic” White supremacist clubs and organizations that reacted against peace and Black Power movements and that rallied in support of the Vietnam War. Some members of those groups became famous political figures, including Newt Gingrich, Bill Barr, Jeff Sessions, Karl Rove, Pat Buchanan, and David Duke. All became powerful leaders in business, law, higher education, and conservative think tanks, where they continued to promote the views that they honed in their college years, driving American politics and culture further to the authoritarian right. The author clearly shows how “the current panic from the Right over student culture; curricula; and faculty hiring, tenure, and promotion is part of a longer historical pattern.” Although she reveals some in-fighting and ideological splits within student groups, their demographic was largely cohesive. In the 1960s, she reports, 95% of college students were White, middle class, and, except in women’s colleges, male. They presented themselves as “heteronormative white Christians,” proud to call themselves squares, as opposed to their long-haired hippie classmates. The groups disseminated their ideas through magazines and campus media; carefully curated speaker events; and, after campus protest demonstrations in 1968, calls for increased punishments for leftist student activists. Shepherd presents compelling evidence for the ways that these groups, although a minority on campus, have exerted long-lasting influence.

A thoroughly researched, revelatory political history with abundant relevance for today.
Cell research has the potential to unlock a new generation of treatments, according to a leader in the field.

Medical research is a series of small steps, each one building on the lessons learned before. This is the story that gastroenterologist Stanger, who combines cutting-edge research with clinical work, tells in this book. Embryos have long been recognized as the initial phase of life, but they raise the intriguing questions of how cells multiply, how they differentiate and coalesce to form organs, and how they eventually die. Through a series of biographical sketches, Stanger traces the gradual development of the knowledge base, including the unlocking of the connection between genes and embryos. Ingenious experiments with frogs and flies provided an understanding of hereditary characteristics and mutations. Many of the breakthroughs came from strange places, such as studies of radiation poisoning, the structure of viruses, and the way that tumors grow. The discovery of DNA was a crucial step, and it paved the way for genetic engineering. Stanger has a particular interest in regenerative medicine, an emerging field that owes much to an understanding of embryo development. It uses cell-based procedures to repair damaged organs, potentially even spinal cords. There are also applications in the treatment of cancer and cognitive decline. The author also highlights important research into the development and transplantation of organs grown artificially. Stanger emphasizes that there is a long way to go, but the potential is huge. Due to the subject matter, parts of the book are complex and require a close read-through. An authoritative account of a critical area of medical research and the promises it holds.

A history and debunking of the health sciences’ embrace of precision medicine rooted in genetics.

Tabery, a professor of philosophy and health ethics, argues that the role of genetic research in a fundamental transformation of health care in America was not inevitable. In fact, he suggests, its promise of tailored medicine was not even all that revolutionary, and its current achievements are mostly exaggerated. To make his point, the author investigates the Human Genome Project and the scientists involved as they edged out the opposing environmental approach embodied in the National Children’s Study that fought—unsuccessfully—for more than a decade to offer an alternative data set. In an accessible narrative bolstered by prodigious research, Tabery reveals that victory for genomics was less about hard science and more about business interests, media fascination, and political leverage. The author admits his own belief in the superiority of the environmental approach, its attention to the social determinants of health, and its emphasis on prevention. However, Tabery does more to poke holes in the genetic approach than to validate the effectiveness of the environmental one, and comprehensive, detailed backstories are occasionally digressive and detract from the author’s primary argument. Still, even these details and the way they connect various scientific innovations serve to underscore concerns about how biological information is used, how quickly private industry and political interests can undermine the scientific community, and how cavalierly genetic medicine can play with patient expectations. Tabery succeeds in raising a compelling alarm about where things stand and making clear that the current situation could have been much different, all while laying the groundwork for an alternative future that better solves the disparities that personalized medicine has ignored—and, in some cases, exacerbated. The debates will continue, but the author provides a solid resource within that debate.


A libertarian TV personality defends comedy against a wide array of charges.

“When someone says ‘You can’t joke about that,’ what they really mean is ‘this is a subject that makes people sad or angry,’” writes Timpf at the beginning. In the “sad” category are the deaths of close relatives and pets. In the “angry” column are racism, sexism, transphobia, body positivity, and the like. “Candor and comedy really do connect us as humans,” writes the author. It’s a good point, but it’s difficult to ignore the politicized backdrop of the author’s commentary, featuring repeated references to her essays for the National Review and position with Fox News. Some of Timpf’s arguments are marred by logical fallacies. For example, a woman asked her how her mother felt about her
grandmother’s death. Sadly, Timpf’s mother had also recently died, and she felt awkward saying so. If you don’t understand why, she recommends, “the next time you’re at a party, just try breaking a small-talk silence with the question ‘So, who here do you think is gonna die first?’ ” The other person will likely “get weird,” as she claims, but this does not prove the point that there is a widely enforced social stricture against talking about death. Elsewhere, the author makes solid, well-researched points in defense of freedom of speech. For example, in an amply documented chapter about the removal of problematic past episodes of TV shows from streaming services, she writes, “Although some people may see erasing what’s become unacceptable as a sign of progress, signs of progress are exactly what you are erasing.” Timpf recounts plenty of dust-ups and scandals involving comedians including Chris Rock, Norm MacDonald, Dave Chappelle, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and more. “Comedy is my religion,” she writes, but the relentless politicization of comedy makes this a less powerful call for unity than it might be.

Those in the choir will enjoy the preaching; others may still find a few notes that resonate.

How the influential women’s organization evolved.

Historian Turk tells a lively story of the development of the National Organization for Women by focusing on three activist members: Aileen Hernandez, Mary Jean Collins, and Patricia Hill Burnett, women whose vastly different backgrounds shaped their views on feminism. Hernandez (1926-2017), a New Yorker, was the daughter of Jamaican immigrants. In 1965, after a decade spent organizing textile workers, she was appointed to the newly established Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. However, she soon became disillusioned “in her quest to make government power work for women.” Burnett (1920-2014), married to a wealthy Detroit businessman and the mother of four, was a frustrated artist, chafing against society’s “expectations for a moneyed white wife.” Collins (b. 1938) was raised in an Irish Catholic family that struggled financially, and after college, she worked in the corporate world, where sexism was rife. Turk traces the women’s careers and growing influence in NOW. Hernandez became its second president, succeeding Betty Friedan; Burnett led the organization’s international program; in the 1980s, Collins became one of NOW’s two vice presidents. The author also reveals the “smoldering disagreements,” internal rivalries, and financial problems that beset the organization from the start. Disagreements arose over NOW’s position on the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion; lesbian, transgender, and Black women felt excluded from NOW’s largely White, middle-class membership. Turk recounts NOW’s protests against sexism “in churches, law employment, beauty pageants, Little Leagues, advertising, toys, and more,” and she sets the organization’s goals and strategies in the context of an increasingly polarized political arena. Admitting that she considers herself a beneficiary of NOW’s achievements, she recognizes that she lives in a world “where elite women can scale the heights of influence while their sisters suffer crushing inequality and insecurity; a world where sexism thrives, but often in disguise; a world whose backlash to feminism is evidence of the movement’s continued power.” The book includes 16 pages of black-and-white images.

A thoroughly researched and well-balanced history.

A significant work about a horrifying example of widespread pharmaceutical negligence.

**THE WOMEN OF NOW**
**How Feminists Built an Organization That Transformed America**
Turk, Katherine
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (464 pp.)
$32.00 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780374601639

How the influential women’s organization evolved.

Historian Turk tells a lively story of the development of the National Organization for Women by focusing on three activist members: Aileen Hernandez, Mary Jean Collins, and Patricia Hill Burnett, women whose vastly different backgrounds shaped their views on feminism. Hernandez (1926-2017), a New Yorker, was the daughter of Jamaican immigrants. In 1965, after a decade spent organizing textile workers, she was appointed to the newly established Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. However, she soon became disillusioned “in her quest to make government power work for women.” Burnett (1920-2014), married to a wealthy Detroit businessman and the mother of four, was a frustrated artist, chafing against society’s “expectations for a moneyed white wife.” Collins (b. 1938) was raised in an Irish Catholic family that struggled financially, and after college, she worked in the corporate world, where sexism was rife. Turk traces the women’s careers and growing influence in NOW. Hernandez became its second president, succeeding Betty Friedan; Burnett led the organization’s international program; in the 1980s, Collins became one of NOW’s two vice presidents. The author also reveals the “smoldering disagreements,” internal rivalries, and financial problems that beset the organization from the start. Disagreements arose over NOW’s position on the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion; lesbian, transgender, and Black

**WONDER DRUG**
**The Secret History of Thalidomide in America and Its Hidden Victims**
Vanderbes, Jennifer
Random House (432 pp.)
$28.99 | June 27, 2023
9780525512264

A novelistic investigation of the shocking story of thalidomide in the U.S.

In 1962, an article in *Life* magazine alerted readers to the severe birth defects suffered by babies in Germany and England whose mothers had taken the allegedly safe sleeping pill thalidomide early in their pregnancies. What the piece didn’t mention was the fact that the drug was also circulating widely in the U.S. At the time, Cincinnati-based drug company William S. Merrell was not only pressuring the FDA to approve its version of thalidomide; it was also distributing samples of the drug to more than 700 doctors, who passed it on to approximately 20,000 patients as well as to other physicians. Although FDA approval of thalidomide was blocked—largely through the efforts of implacable medical reviewer Frances Kelsey, who, unusually for the time period, “held both an MD and a PhD and had forged a career in the hard sciences while married with children”—little effort was made to retrieve the drug samples that had been distributed to doctors. As a result, dozens of children were born with shortened limbs and a variety of other defects. In a wide-ranging, thoroughly researched, and suspenseful account, novelist Vanderbes creates a compelling cast of heroes and villains: Kelsey and the researchers she enlisted to help her study the drug on one side; and the unscrupulous administrators of the drug companies, both in the U.S. and Germany, where the drug was developed and insufficiently tested in a company run by former members of the Nazi Party, on the other. Interviews with those who were born with damage caused by the drug—some of whom were abandoned by their parents—add another compelling, emotional layer to the text. The author weaves the various strands of her riveting tale together with aplomb, and she clearly explains even the most puzzling aspects of it.

A significant work about a horrifying example of widespread pharmaceutical negligence.
A hospice nurse writes of the difficult—but sometimes sublime—moments surrounding the end of life.

As Vlahos tells it, she wasn’t cowed at the thought of tending to patients whose recoveries were off the table. With family in the funeral business, she writes, “I grew up with an understanding that death was natural, and it felt normal to me, not scary or mysterious.” One normal part of the deal, she notes, is that most of her time as a hospice nurse is spent simply on the way from one home to another, the places where most of her patients have chosen to end their days. That’s usually not fraught, though in one memorable account she tells the story of a man she tended to in a homeless camp who worried that she was in danger of being hurt in an auto accident—a prophecy that very nearly came true. Some of her patients are proud and aloof, others touch disconnected. From all of them, the author gleaned interesting lessons. One concerns “the surge,” a temporary revival of life force that signals not the restoration of health but instead the body’s last hurrah. Another is her conviction, after years on the job, that “we seem to have some control over when we die,” some choosing to wait until their loved ones have left the room, others until a loved one arrives from out of town. Particularly moving is Vlahos’ depiction of the stillness that comes when a person has died: Where it may have been two people in the room before, after the patient dies, it’s just her to document “the tangible shift in the air in that moment when a person leaves their body.” Although some of the author’s anecdotes run a touch too long and there’s a little repetitiveness to the book, one gets the sense early on that a person could do worse than die under her empathetic—not sympathetic, she takes pains to explain—care.

Gentle encouragement for all those who live under life’s running clock and for those who love them.

LIFE IN THE FAST LANE
The Eagles’ Reckless Ride Down the Rock & Roll Highway
Wallach, Mick
Diversion Books (304 pp.)
$18.99 paper | July 11, 2023
9781635768909

A veteran British rock journalist takes creative flight in a book about an all-American band.

In the acknowledgments, Wall, the author of When Giants Walked the Earth and other music bios, doesn’t thank the members of the Eagles or anyone in their orbits. Instead, he leans heavily on those who have written about the Eagles before, along with a “distillation” of his own “archive of interviews not just with members of the Eagles but with hundreds of other significant figures from the same period.” Much of the material feels secondhand and sometimes stale, and the narrative is often scattershot. However, it’s also entertaining and often edgy. At the very least, Wall captures the spirit of that era’s “fast lane” in a manner reminiscent of a highly caffeinated Tom Wolfe, creating the band in the manner that Wolfe did Phil Spector or the Merry Pranksters. In one early scene, Wall takes us to the Troubadour in LA, where you go “to get drunk, get loaded, and get laid.” There, he introduces us to “Linda Ronstadt—the cute cut-off denim shorts and sweet brown doll’s eyes, the Troubadour girl with the sunny small-town smile and the voice of a cactus mountain goddess, the super-groovy chick that all the would-be groovy guys want the most.” There’s still more to that sentence, about how Ronstadt (apparently) says, “there are two sets of Troubadour regulars, ‘the musician pool and the sex pool.’” As an exercise in style, the text provides most of the substance of the band’s stories, including the shifts in balances of power, management issues, and the passage of time that left leaders Glenn Frey and Don Henley at loggerheads. Then they vowed that they would never engage in a cash-grab reunion—until they did, with a “farewell” that has now lasted decades longer than the band’s original “long run.”

A serviceable rock bio in which nobody, including the author, takes it easy.

FLIRTING WITH DANGER
The Mysterious Life of Marguerite Harrison, Socialite Spy
Wallach, Janet
Doubleday (352 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 8, 2023
9780385545082

Biography of a secret agent, filmmaker, and socialite who “was always drawn to adventure, lured by the blurry beyond.”

Though hardly a household name, Marguerite Harrison (1879-1967) was at the center of consequential 20th-century global events. In her latest, Wallach, whose previous books include Desert Queen and The Richest Woman in America, tackles the life and professional contributions of Harrison, whose social pedigree and proficiency with multiple languages gave her international access and enabled her unlikely career in espionage. The daughter of a Maryland shipping magnate, by her late 30s, she was the widow of a stockbroker, a Baltimore socialite, and a society reporter for the Baltimore Sun. The first woman sent overseas as a military intelligence officer to spy for the U.S., she was also the first American woman to enter Germany after World War I. Harrison was later sent abroad to assess security situations in the newly independent Poland, the Baltics, and Russia, where she was detained for more than a year in the notorious Lubyanka prison. Later adventures took her...
to Manchuria, China, Turkey, and Persia, where she accompanied the Bakhtiari tribe on its annual 46-day migration across treacherous mountains. As “flirtatious in drawing rooms” as she was “unflappable in deserts,” Harrison met a full cast of international figures, including Queen Victoria, Leon Trotsky, Bertrand Russell, John Reed, Herbert Hoover, and King Faisal of Iraq. Wallach focuses primarily on Harrison’s spectacular yet largely unknown career in espionage. Her domestic life and family get only brief mentions, as perhaps befits her somewhat detached personality. Extensive endnotes make clear that the author relied heavily on Harrison’s own books, including her autobiography, There’s Always Tomorrow. Nonetheless, Wallach’s expert storytelling, which has the suspense and pacing of a good spy novel, is clearly her own, and it makes for engaging reading.

The globe-trotting exploits of “a confirmed wanderer” and top-notch spy finally get their due.

PLEASURE OF THINKING: ESSAYS  
Wang Xiaobo  
Trans. by Yan Yan  
Astra House (224 pp.)  
$26.00 | July 25, 2023  
9781662601255

First English translation of a collection by the prominent Chinese intellectual.

These essays, which Wang Xiaobo (1952-1997) wrote during the 1990s, cover a range of topics, from literature to sexuality to food. What binds them is a concern for the value of an examined life and a wry awareness of the diverse ways in which humans fail to reap the rewards of thinking deeply. “Stupidity is the worst sort of misery, diminishing the intellectual capacity of mankind is the worst sort of atrocity,” writes the author. “To teach ignorance is the worst crime committed by otherwise good people.” Wang is consistently insightful and often charming in his commentary, particularly in his consideration of the logic of censorship, the consequences of intellectual confinement, and the importance of individual resistance to tyranny. Most vivid are the descriptions of Chinese social relations at home and in expatriate communities in America. An essay on village culture memorably describes how information flows are managed by “aunts and grannies [who] are the deities of the earth, an omniscient network.” Another documents the popularity of inane health practices such as arm-shaking and transfusions of chicken blood. The author also conveys in searing detail the soul-crushing demands of the Chinese American restaurant industry, which the author came to know firsthand. Alongside philosophical reflections, the author provides numerous sketches of quirky characters. One highlight is the extended description of an aged, lonesome American farmer, nicknamed Old Lady Wolf, who attempts to teach Wang conversational English by having him recite Milton’s poetry. Less successful are the essays devoted to feminism and homosexuality, which can seem both platitudinous and antiquated in their approaches. Nevertheless, Wang offers an illuminating window on life in China—and Western life seen through the eyes of a Chinese traveler—at the end of the 20th century.

A wide-ranging, humorous, often sharp collection.

PROJECT 562  
Changing the Way We See Native America  
Wilbur, Matika  
Ten Speed Press (416 pp.)  
$50.00 | April 25, 2023  
9781984859525

Superb collection of images of Indigenous peoples throughout the U.S.

Wilbur, a Swinomish and Tulalip photographer, set out with the aim of developing “a documentary project dedicated to changing the way people see Native America.” She doesn’t present images of all of the 562 federally recognized tribes that give her collection its name, but it’s not for want of trying. Featuring hundreds of portraits, this book represents years of travel, conversations, and quiet negotiations, as when Wilbur ventured into the depths of the Grand Canyon to speak with the Havasupai people who live there and was put off for three days until she presented a gift of fry bread to a previously reluctant interlocutor. “We just remain within our people, hidden inside the Earth, inside the canyon,” said her interviewee. “Maybe we can find peace and quiet where we live.” Whether old or young, the people the author portrays speak to the difficult realities of Native life. Many have experienced the devastating effects of deracination imposed from the outside, with the suppression of Indigenous languages and cultural norms. “I’m the only one here that can speak the language...I talk to myself,” notes one Ojibwe elder. Sometimes it’s kind of funny—I don’t want them Crees to hear me talk to myself. They may send me out to the nut house!” Apart from portraying a vast array of individual people, Wilbur punctuates her portfolio with studies of events and themes; especially moving and memorable is her inside view of the water protectors of the Standing Rock Sioux. Some of the author’s subjects are well known, including the famed poet/musician Joy Harjo and the late John Trudell, and some are unknown but making their marks on the world nonetheless. All, Wilbur amply shows, take great pride in being Native even as they battle prejudice, sometimes on many fronts.

Essential for readers interested in modern Native American lives and traditions.
These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

GRUMBONES by Jenn Bennett .......................................................... 80
TOGETHER WE SWIM by Valerie Bolling;
illus. by Kaylani Juanita .............................................................. 81
REMEMBERING by Xelena González;
illus. by Adriana M. Garcia .......................................................... 89
BIG by Vashti Harrison............................................................... 91
MAKE A MOVE, SUNNY PARK! by Jessica Kim ......................... 94
TIGER DAUGHTER by Rebecca Lim ............................................ 96
SÍ. ¡NO! by Rhode Montijo ....................................................... 99
THE STORY OF GUMLUCK THE WIZARD by Adam Rex .......... 104
CONJURE ISLAND by Eden Royce ............................................. 106
LEARNING TO BE WILD by Carl Safina .................................... 106
A PLACE CALLED AMERICA by Jennifer Thermes ................. 110
PAUL BUNYAN by Noah Van Sciver & Marlena Myles ............. 111

THE STORY OF GUMLUCK THE WIZARD
Book One
Rex, Adam
Chronicle Books
(140 pp.)
$14.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781797213231

TESSA MIYATA IS NO HERO
Abe, Julie
Illus. by Karmen Lob
Little, Brown (368 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9780316448529

Thrown into a world of Japanese gods and spirits, Tessa must find the
courage and strength to defeat an evil samurai spirit.

Tessa Miyata is cursed. At the beginning of sixth grade, she began seeing a masked woman who’s invisible to everyone else, leading to her being shunned socially. A year later, an incident gets her expelled from summer camp. Gram, the maternal grandmother who has cared for Tessa and her sisters since their parents died, sends her to spend the summer in Japan with Ojiichan and Obaachan, her paternal grandparents. But Tessa’s grand Tokyo vacation plans get shut down when she’s forced to hang out with neighbor boy Jin, who is clearly reluctant too. The kids finally get to run an errand for Ojiichan in Tokyo, but it turns disastrous when bullies break the precious heirloom daruma doll entrusted to them, releasing the spirit of legendary samurai Taira Masakado, who died over 1,000 years ago. With the help of a kitsune, or nine-tailed fox, Tessa and Jin must work together, train to battle monsters, and try to save Tokyo from Lord Taira. In this exciting, action-packed story, Tessa struggles with loneliness and feels like she doesn’t belong anywhere, but she discovers true strength, bravery, selflessness, and resilience. The magical world of Japanese spirits is beautifully crafted, with cultural elements seamlessly woven throughout. A glossary and interspersed black-and-white illustrations provide additional context.

A delightfully spirited Japanese mythology-inspired adventure that’s full of heart. (Fantasy. 8-12)

THE NIGHTMARE HOUSE
Allen, Sarah
Illus. by Angie Hewitt
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (272 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9780374390952

An anxious 11-year-old girl must save her loved ones from the soul-stealing Fear Maker.

One Halloween four years ago, Penny Hope left candy as an offering for the
As I wrote my column for last year's Pride Issue, I reflected on the growing attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, from anti-trans legislation to attempts to ban books by and about queer people. Sadly, things are just as dire today. But LGBTQ+ authors continue to tell their stories and to make their voices heard. The recent picture books and middle-grade titles highlighted below will resound with many young people, but queer readers will find them especially reassuring. Some of the books explore how LGBTQ+ communities have persisted in the face of oppression; others allow readers space for joy, from a picture book about the unadulterated glee of a first crush to a pulse-pounding fantasy centered on a queer family.

In Ami Polonsky's World Made of Glass (Little, Brown, Jan. 17), set in 1980s New York, Iris becomes keenly aware of the stigma of HIV as her father dies of AIDS. Galvanized, she attends ACT UP meetings with her dad's boyfriend and channels her pain into activism. Though Polonsky tackles heavy subject matter, such as the federal government's refusal to acknowledge the AIDS epidemic, she threads her achingly poignant work with hope; this is an unflinching yet tender ode to the families we create.

Michael G. Long’s picture-book biography Unstoppable: How Bayard Rustin Organized the 1963 March on Washington (Little Bee Books, May 2) chronicles the life of a civil rights icon whose contributions have far too often gone overlooked. Taking an intersectional approach, Long explores how Rustin encountered discrimination as a Black gay man yet embraced his identities wholeheartedly. In Bea Jackson’s graceful artwork, Rustin comes across as determined and stalwart yet at times realistically uncertain.

Meeg Pincus’ Door by Door: How Sarah McBride Became America’s First Openly Transgender Senator (Crown, May 9), illustrated by Meridith McKeen Gimbel, opens with McBride as a young child eager to make the country a better place. The book details her entry into politics and her 2020 election to the Delaware state Senate. Throughout, Pincus uses the metaphor of doors opening and closing to convey McBride’s fears of coming out as trans and, later, her commitment to helping others succeed, too—an effective motif that anchors this uplifting picture-book biography.

The Indian American protagonist of SJ Sindu’s Shakti (HarperAlley, May 23), illustrated by Nabi H. Ali, is shocked to discover that bullies are using magic spells to rule the school. But Shakti has powers of her own and a strong link to the Hindu goddess Durga Ma, like every firstborn in her family. This vibrantly illustrated graphic novel follows a courageous young girl who, buoyed by the support of both her mothers, realizes there’s nothing she can’t face. With its depiction of a loving, multiracial queer family, this is a much-needed, welcome tale.

Finding a person who truly understands you takes time, as A.J. Irving makes clear with her picture book The Wishing Flower (Knopf, May 30). Contemplative Birdie prefers wishing on dandelions to playing with her more boisterous classmates, but new student Sunny is different. Though the relationship between the two girls isn’t explicitly referred to as romantic, Birdie’s responses to Sunny’s presence (heart fluttering, blushing), along with the swirling butterflies and stars in Kip Alizadeh’s illustrations, suggest the frisson of a first crush; many queer kids will feel quietly affirmed.

Newly diagnosed with Crohn’s disease, the protagonist of Andrew Eliopulos’ Will on the Inside (Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins, June 6) feels besieged as the list of things he can’t do or eat grows. He’s thrown into a tailspin when he learns that classmate Griffin asked out another boy—could Will be gay, like Griffin? And why is that a problem for so many in his Baptist church? Will may not have all the answers, but his eagerness to grapple with tough questions will endear him to readers.
monster under her bed. She receives a gift in return, but it’s only after she accepts it that she realizes it’s cursed, plaguing her with recurring nightmares. The daylight, Penny sees that everyone around her has blank, hollow eyes. She learns that the giver of the cursed gift, responsible for both her constant bad dreams and the vacant-eyed people, is the Fear Maker—and his power is quickly growing. Armed with her love of poetry and with new friend Aarush Banerjee by her side, can Penny conquer the Fear Maker before he reaps the souls of everyone around her? For much of Allen’s spine chiller, Penny’s struggles are internalized; her fear keeps her from reaching out to those around her. Slowly, she tells those she trusts most, and the narrative takes a turn, moving the needle to genuine scares as Penny and Aarush battle the Fear Maker at his terrifying haunted house. The horror aspects are immersive, but murky characterization and thin worldbuilding leave this novel feeling disjointed and faltering under its own weight. Prose and verse, including a variety of different poetic forms, are interestingly juxtaposed in short chapters. Penny reads White; Aarush is cued South Asian.

An ambitious premise that never quite coalesces. (Horror. 10-12)

In this adaptation of a memoir for adults, Arceneaux recounts becoming the first pediatric cancer survivor and person with a prosthetic body part to enter space.

At age 10, Arceneaux was diagnosed with osteosarcoma. She and her parents traveled from Louisiana to Memphis, Tennessee, so that she could be treated at renowned children’s hospital St. Jude. Treatment included chemotherapy and ultimately a prosthetic bone implant in her leg. Arceneaux candidly details nausea from chemo, painful physical therapy, and grief at losing her hair. Arceneaux’s descriptions of setbacks and surgeries, bullying, adults who treated her with kid gloves, and her growing acceptance of her scars will resonate with readers, especially those who have faced similar situations. Fortunately, St. Jude’s supportive staff and the friendship of fellow cancer patients bolstered her; she resolved to someday help kids with cancer herself. Fulfilling her resolution, Arceneaux studied to be a physician assistant and, at age 28, landed a job at St. Jude. Soon after, she was chosen to participate in Inspiration4: a mission sending four civilians into space to raise $200 million for St. Jude. Her accounts of astronaut training, including spinning in a centrifuge and climbing Mount Rainier, are eye-opening. Her time in space is alternately joyful and sobering as she twirls in the spacecraft sans gravity, contemplates Earth’s beauty, and honors friends and family who died of cancer, including her father.

Though the pacing occasionally feels uneven, the conversational narration makes this an accessible, engaging read. Informative and stirring. (Memoir. 8-12)
Waffles helps Grandpa clean out his memorabilia-filled basement along with Tanya, a girl his age who is working by his mom for his love of pancakes, shares the tale of a fighting, though Frank the turtle participates and even steals Grandpa worked doing special effects on all kinds of horror form the Secret Sisters club to try new things and help each other in school. But the girls end up on the bad side of the principal, who has firm attitudes about ladylike behavior, women voters, and the capability of rural students and threatens to expel them. Getting good grades on the upcoming midterm exams is critical. While maintaining a solid grounding in the 1920s, the novel tackles self-discovery amid challenging situations, including dealing with peer pressure, misogyny, classism, and general unfairness, in ways contemporary readers will find accessible and relatable. Historical facts are memorably and organically conveyed through Ida’s innate curiosity. Characters read White; one of Ida’s friends is from an immigrant mining community, and her name cues as having East European heritage.

One for smart, outspoken kids looking for their places in the world. (author’s note, glossary, bibliography) (Historical fiction, 8-12)

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**THE MONSTROUS ADVENTURES OF MUMMY MAN AND WAFFLES**  
Behling, Steve  
Illus. by Robb Mommaerts  
Harper/HarperCollins (288 pp.)  
$15.99 | Aug. 8, 2023  
978006254848

A spooky summer fueled by popsicle pancakes.

Wendell, ironically nicknamed Waffles by his mom for his love of pancakes, shares the tale of a summer spent at his grandfather’s house in Shriekport, Maine. Grandpa worked doing special effects on all kinds of horror movies back in the day, leading to a bond with his fanboy grandson. Waffles is helping Grandpa clean out his memorabilia-filled basement along with Tanya, a girl his age who is working to repay a window she broke. Beasts like Grandpa’s movie career, including zombie squirrels; Glaarg, a rampaging giant lizard; and their ringleader, a vampire clown named Count Wackula, come to life and antagonize the three of them. A resurrected mummy who dubs himself Mummy Man and a turtle sidekick named Frank arrive to help. The story, propelled by one narrow, light-hearted escape from danger after another, has frequent illustrations as well as pop-up boxes with trivia about the movies Grandpa worked on. Mummy Man does most of the fighting, though Frank the turtle participates and even steals the show a number of times. The invented movie trivia and menagerie of horror-inspired creatures are the rewards for following Waffles and Tanya’s wacky adventures; character development comes second to spectacle and humor. The human cast appears to be White. Final art not seen.

A popcorn bucket of a book, full of flavor if not substance. (recipe, movie list) (Humor 8-12)
looks forward to life in God’s eternal presence. Calm awe suffuses the tenderly encouraging text, complemented by the illustrations. Depictions of rays of light and warm glows symbolize the gentle presence of the deity. Though the story is set in a bustling city, the mother and child interact with nature, too—one scene shows them at the beach, while another shows them walking through a city park. Mama is light-skinned, while the child presents Black; other characters are racially diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Like a lingering hug. (Picture book. 3-7)

LOLA’S HEART
Boiger, Alexandra
Philomel (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9780399165900

In this wordless tale, Lola and a great white wolf encounter a blue butterfly on a train ride. Outside the train, a large red bird seems to guard Lola, a light-skinned protagonist of indeterminate age clad in a black dress and scarf. The bird accompanies Lola and the wolf when they leave the train and follow the butterfly. Three small, striped creatures with unusual twisted horns catch the butterfly and bring it to a tree, hung with many other cages holding red butterflies. The trio of friends arrive to see this sight, both beautiful and very sad, with its allusions to the loss of freedom and movement, and work to rescue the winged insect and inspire the horned creatures to release the others. Boiger employs pencil, colored pencil, and watercolor pencil to create a multitude of feathery, curvilinear, soft strokes that compose the various forest scenes, the animals (both real and imagined), and the human being, seen from different perspectives. This tale could invite multiple viewings, if only to struggle with its meaning. The story can be seen as an allegory about friendship, love, and liberty, but will young readers put the effort into understanding its subtle message? Perhaps with careful discussion with an adult reader, a child will enjoy the aesthetic pleasures of the book’s delicately textured illustrations and discern its significance. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Warmly buoyant. (Picture book. 4-8)

TOGETHER WE SWIM
Bolling, Valerie
Illus. by Kaylani Juanita
Chronicle Books (40 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781797212494

A Black family of four enjoys a day at the pool.

Readers may recognize two of the family members from Bolling and Juanita’s Together We Ride (2022), which centered on a father teaching his young daughter to ride a bike. This latest takes a similar tack, as the mother now helps her young son learn to swim. The child is uncertain, but with her encouragement, he dips a toe into the water and picks up the fundamentals: lifting his head above the water, floating, pumping his arms and legs. There are snafus along the way—the child initially sinks, but Mom is right there. Finally the boy strikes out to swim, “On my own, / in the zone.” The whole family is reassuring, cheering the child on. Big sister does the backstroke and a handstand, displaying the confidence the little one is still learning. Brief but upbeat rhyming verses will especially appeal to beginning readers. Juanita’s carefully composed, muted line illustrations shine in the details, from swim bonnets on Mom and big sister to a mermaid tattoo on Dad’s side. Touching moments in the art pair well with the text. Black family pride and joy abound—this is a family that allows its little ones the space to make forays into independence while supporting them every step of the way. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Warmly buoyant. (Picture book. 4-8)
There isn’t much going on in Clear Canyon City, the small Arizona town where Avalyn and her parents moved for the climate after her severe asthma nearly killed her. But all she needs are Dillon and Nan, her two best friends, and her passion for competitive spelling. Though she struggles with her asthma and food and environmental allergies, life is mostly normal—until, all at once, unprecedented dust storms hit and middle school bullying ramps up. These dangers are marked by the arrival of Adam, a sullen and withdrawn new student. He and Avalyn form a growing connection over a love of X-Men comics and feelings of isolation, and his presence and the increasingly severe weather seem to be connected. Avalyn must gather the courage to help protect Adam when no one else can and perhaps share her deepest secret: that she suspects she’s an empath, able to sense the emotions of others. This is a skill she’ll need to draw upon to confront the horrible truth of Adam’s family life. Despite many pop-culture references that seem to stand in for deeper characterization, Avalyn’s difficult, matter-of-fact daily negotiations with her health and the unforgiving desert surroundings are well realized. Her determined sleuthing will draw in readers, and the different abuses Avalyn and Adam each face are presented with care and not glossed over. Most main characters are cued White; Nan is Mexican American.

An investigation of hard choices and empathy. (author's note, discussion questions) (Fiction. 8-12)

Cordelia, Giles, and Rosalind, magical triplets raised in exile and now restored to the monarchy, discover the royal court is more dangerous than any wild creature in this sequel to The Raven Heir (2021). A great battle has restored Cordelia to the Raven Throne, so the 12-year-old triplets feel like everything ought to be easy now. Instead, it’s all worse than ever. Cordelia, now the Raven Queen, is surrounded by terrible advisers and kept away from her siblings. Rosalind, the young warrior, is tormented by cruel ladies-in-waiting and humiliated for her athleticism. Giles dreamed of becoming a bard, but now he’s convinced that indulging in either music or magic will tarnish Cordelia and make her seem unfit for the crown. One night, Cordelia falls into an enchanted slumber, and it’s up to Rosalind and Giles to go on a quest to save both their sister and the magical land itself—but they venture forth without their greatest strengths. An escalating series of arguments and misunderstandings means that neither the triplets nor their family members ever compare notes, so it is not until the climax that they realize how badly they’ve been manipulated by vicious nobles. Instead, they spent much of the adventure angry, shouting, and mutually distrustful. Despite the eventual rewarding character growth for Rosalind and Giles, the unnecessarily long communication failure is exhausting. Most characters read White.

A thrilling quest, but it would’ve been unnecessary if the protagonists had had even one calm conversation. (Fantasy. 9-12)

Zeus, a chocolate Labrador puppy, enjoys a simple life of food, lying in the sun, chewing sticks, and playing with his mom and siblings. But one by one, the others, his mom included, leave home with new adoptive families. Only Troy and Zeus, the two largest puppies in the litter, are left when Italian American paramedic Marco Ricci from the Oahu Search and Rescue team arrives. He takes them both for testing, evaluating their abilities and courage in situations including wave pools and waterslides. When single father Marco’s 13-year-old son, Kimo, returns from his Native Hawaiian mother’s house in Indiana, Zeus immediately bonds with the boy: “Every dog has a person. This one was mine.” Training dogs for search and rescue is his business, yet Marco feels moved by his son’s love for Zeus. Additional complications arise when Bear, a dog Marco kept after he failed a critical search and rescue test and couldn’t be sold, struggles with hearing loss and depression. Written from Zeus’ first-person perspective, this novel offers fascinating details about the lives of working dogs and explores relatable themes of purpose, love, and finding family that will resonate with middle-grade dog lovers.

An absorbing read celebrating canine courage and heart. (reading group guide) (Fiction. 8-12)
TINY TORNADOES
Carr, Jan
Illustrated by Kris Mukai
Peachtree (80 pp.)
$14.99 | July 11, 2023
9781682635353
Series: Buddy and Bea, 2

Buddy, Bea, and their second grade classmates find a perfect class name.

By Friday of the first week of school, Buddy is feeling confident, but he's still getting used to his exuberant classmate Bea and his new teacher, Ms. Maple. Ms. Maple has done something intriguingly unexpected, though, removing the classroom books from their baskets and scattering them around the room. Ms. Maple asks the class to sort them—a challenging activity for enthusiastic, recently fledged readers. The second graders step up with interest and determination, each taking charge of a category and a labeled basket. Bea has her own strong ideas. She insists that books that don’t rhyme can’t go in the poetry basket and that it would be fine to have a basket just for the books she personally wants to read. Questions arise: Is a graphic novel with an African American character supposed to go in Amber’s African American basket or in Omar’s graphic novel basket? Lunchtime brings some interesting intel: The other second grade class is choosing a class name! This information galvanizes Ms. Maple’s class, resulting in a lively exercise in idea sharing, cooperation, and compromise. Carr persuasively conveys the sparkle, earnest enthusiasm, and occasional boisterous silliness of second graders, and these funny school moments feel genuine. Buddy is Asian, Bea is light-skinned, and Ms. Maple is of Filipino descent; other children and teachers are depicted as racially diverse in the energetic cartoon art.

Genuinely funny, convincing, and in tune with its audience.
(Chapter book. 6-9)
**THE WAVE**

Charlton, Tyler  
Roaring Brook Press (40 pp.)  
$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2023  
9781250842039

A boy caught in a dark wave learns how to stay afloat.

Whenever the wave unexpectedly carries him away, the tan-skinned child wishes he could run away, but he can’t fight it or outrun it—“All I can do is take care of myself until it passes.” Though he feels frustrated, he tells readers that as time passes, he calms down once more. The inky black wave is a straightforward metaphor for depression; kids coping with similar feelings will find this a poignant and validating work of bibliotherapy. Charlton’s advice is simple, sound, and heartfelt but never didactic. He notes that those swept up in the wave should guard their hearts, using the term to mean not letting one’s heart harden or hurt others. The author never implies that this or other tips included here are a fix for depression, merely that they will help readers cope. The illustrations are shadowy and evocative, effectively expressing the protagonist’s helplessness and despair. This would be a helpful, reassuring read for children in the same situation as the boy as well as a discussion starter for friends, siblings, and even adults in the child’s life who may not completely understand. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Helpful insights for children dealing with depression and those who care about them. (author’s note, resources)  
(Picture book. 4-8)

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**STUFF KIDS SHOULD KNOW**

The Mind-Blowing Histories of (Almost) Everything  
Clark, Josh & Chuck Bryant with Nils Parker  
Illus. by Carly Monardo  
Henry Holt (208 pp.)  
$19.99 | Aug. 1, 2023  
9781250622440

Essays on random pop-culture topics from fashions in facial hair to pet rocks, distilled from a title for adult readers based on a podcast.

Predicated on the stated notion that “there’s something interesting about everything” and the unstated contradictory one that certain topics are off limits for children, the podcaster drop about half of the chapters from *Stuff You Should Know* (2020)—including, for instance, those on cyanide pills, Jack Kevoarkan, cargo cults, and the earliest historical records of guns—then edit most mentions of smoking, drinking, and death from the remaining 14. What’s left isn’t quite as compelling as the original but may well interest general readers (of any age) who enjoy easily digestible looks at, say, the history of demolition derbies or the origin of doughnuts, the superiority of dog senses to human ones (and why dog feet smell like Fritos), and the ever elusive Jersey Devil. Insights into how people should and actually do behave when they are lost in the wilderness or elsewhere as well as why dowsing has always been and continues to be a universal practice notwithstanding the lack of objective evidence that it works provide food for thought...as does the strong case for regarding Mr. Potato Head as “the toy of the American century.” Closing lists of sources and of relevant podcast episodes lend credibility to the enthusiastically presented facts and claims, and Monardo’s rare monochrome spot images add snarky notes plus some images of people of color in a gallery of child prodigies.

Maybe “safer” than the original but less interesting for it.  
(Nonfiction. 10-13)

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**TWO TRIBES**

Cohen, Emily Bowen  
Colorist: Lark Pien  
Heartdrum (256 pp.)  
$24.99 | $15.99 paper | Aug. 15, 2023  
9780062983596  
9780062983589 paper

A coming-of-age tale about the beauty and challenges of embodying two cultures.

When a school bully declares that Mia is “not a real Indian” because she doesn’t conform to his stereotypes, the tween questions her right to claim a Native identity. Since her Jewish mother separated from her father when she was 3, Mia’s contact with her Muscogee relatives has been limited. Seeking to reconnect with that side of her heritage, Mia lies about attending a school trip and takes the bus from Los Angeles to visit her dad in Tulsa. The weekend goes well until her mom discovers her lie. Torah study with the rabbi, one of Mia’s punishments, helps her reflect on her actions, leading to frank conversations with her mom and stepfather about the importance of keeping her father and her Muscogee heritage in her life. Cohen depicts an authentically complicated Muscogee homecoming for Mia: a warm welcome that includes boundaries, with some spaces where she is not yet permitted and some knowledge her father cannot pass down. Yet within these restrictions lies space to grow, as modeled by Mia’s cousin, who shows her that there are different ways to live and express Muscogee identity. The story is well crafted, with Jewish and Muscogee beliefs integrated to great effect and art that enhances the text.

A powerful graphic novel about honoring every part of our identity. (author’s note, Muskoke glossary, note from Cynthia Leitich Smith)  
(Graphic fiction. 9-13)
A friendship slowly develops, Lawrence—a light-skinned child who apparently lives alone in a digitally.)

about the other's welfare that they both undergo great trans-

a blue owlish bird whose nesting tree is just outside that fence.

are horrified when they arrive at the precinct to find an empty

to a tale that quietly applauds both the efforts and the rewards

illus. by Brian Cronin
Rocky Pond Books/Penguin (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9780593618301

Lawrence is full of people and animals children can name in Spanish and English. The colorful illustrations provide sufficient detail to stimulate the imagination without overwhelming and include enough nods to typical characteristics of a Hispanic Caribbean town to make the setting familiar to readers from such a background. Human characters are brown-skinned. In the backmatter, Deedy explains that many cultures around the world have their own version of the story. (This book was reviewed digitally)

A delightful Cuban-inflected retelling of a classic folk tale.

A selfish cat whom readers will love to hate swallows anyone who questions her behavior. The trouble starts when Pepe the parrot attempts to woo Carina Felina with home-baked Cuban crackers and coffee. When the cat devours the crackers, leaving only one for Pepe, the outraged parrot demands an explanation. "I do what I like and I eat what I wish," Carina replies with what will become the book's refrain. "Step out of my way, or be my next dish!" After Pepe declares he is not afraid of her, she swallows him and proceeds to roam the Caribbean town, gobbling whomever she pleases and growing larger with every meal until a pair of land crabs hatch a plan to save their friends. Carina's escalating audacity will have children eagerly turning the pages to find out whom the cat will eat next and when someone will put an end to her rampage. Each encounter introduces an italicized Spanish word, immediately defined, and by the end, Carina's belly is full of people and animals children can name in Spanish and English. The colorful illustrations provide sufficient detail to stimulate the imagination without overwhelming and include enough nods to typical characteristics of a Hispanic Caribbean town to make the setting familiar to readers from such a background. Human characters are brown-skinned. In the backmatter, Deedy explains that many cultures around the world have their own version of the story. (This book was reviewed digitally)

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A delightful Cuban-inflected retelling of a classic folk tale.
Musicians Tegan and Sara Quin team up with illustrator Tillie Walden to create a graphic novel of middle school life

BY D. ARTHUR

**Behind the Book**

**Tegan and Sara: Junior High**

Musicians Tegan and Sara Quin are no strangers to collaboration. They have been writing music together since junior high, and in 2019 they released *High School*, their co-written debut memoir. The duo recognizes that their music is a collective effort with input from producers, sound engineers, band members, and others. “Each layer of the creative process gets more exciting because you’re bringing in a new set of eyes and brain and ears [to] tell you what they hear,” Tegan Quin says. “[We] have found that to be really helpful in our exploration of our creativity.”

The Quin sisters’ latest collaboration comes in the form of *Tegan and Sara: Junior High* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, May 30), a middle-grade graphic novel illustrated by Eisner Award winner Tillie Walden (*Spinning, On a Sunbeam*). The novel blends fiction and memoir to tell the story of 12-year-old twins Tegan and Sara navigating school, crushes, first periods, and more in the present day. Early readers have praised the endearing graphic novel. “Walden’s illustrations are, as usual, wonderfully expressive,” Kirkus said. It “tugs at the heartstrings like a well-tuned guitar.”

On a video call with Kirkus, the Quin sisters and Walden discussed the harmonious creative process of working on both *High School* and the sequel being drafted now. Walden says she appreciated the Quin sisters’ detail-laden script, which allowed her to play with visual elements, including jokes like a “Witches’ Parking! All Others Will be Toad” bumper sticker that the twins’ mom actually had.

The visual storytelling moves between bustling panels of busy junior high halls and a stripped-down space dedicated to the inner monologues of the young twins. “That’s all Tillie,” Tegan shares. Walden, a twin herself, came up with the idea as a way to illustrate the emotional story. “They just need to talk to each other in a separate space,” she observes, “because so much about being a twin people don’t understand.” The addition of this liminal space leads to moments both tender and funny, like the twins’ junior high rules (“Shave legs for gym class???”), while unlocking a new creative element for the Quins’ writing process. “It also allowed us to go back into the script for Book 2,” Sara says. “It gave us more texture and space to add to our own story.”

While *High School* was strictly memoir, *Junior High* pushed the Quin sisters to reimagine their own experience and set it in the present day. “What would Tegan and Sara...be like now if we were growing up?” Sara asks. “With social media, with TikTok?” This time shift allows for a playful mix of references that are both retro and current; Nirvana and Taylor Swift both get space on the page along with smartphones and PlayStation. Walden enjoyed playing with this visual specificity: “It was really fun for me to be able to draw you guys in this cartoony way, to draw modern children who have AirPods [and] to inhabit this pseudo-fictional space but then access what was important to [you].”

The contemporary setting also gives a new lens through which the twins, especially Sara in this volume, explore...
queerness. Setting the book in the present day gave “opportunities to explore our sexuality in a more transparent way” according to Sara. While there is still the awkwardness and confusion of realizing you’re different, “It’s totally plausible that little Tegan and Sara have...this open-minded community of adults and kids,” says Sara, who describes this openness as “aspirational”—especially as a new parent herself. “It doesn’t have to have that scary, homophobic, I’m-afraid-of-what-might-happen kind of feeling.”

The Quins and Walden recognize that the present-day setting provides more openness and opportunity for telling a story where kids can be LGBTQ+ but are also just kids. At the same time, the authors and illustrator are aware of the unfortunate threat of book banning and censorship we are seeing in the United States. (In 2021, a Texas lawmaker released a list of 850 books he aimed to remove from schools, including Walden’s Spinning.) The trio agrees, however, that this book is about more than just the elements that some people would like to censor. “I do also hope that people just see this book as a book about kids going through stuff every kid goes through,” Walden says. “It’s a book about friendship, it’s a book about sibling relationships, about being twins, about music, about school, about all of these things,” Tegan adds.

“The book to me is an opportunity for kids and parents to read like, Hey, this is just life,” Sara says. “I think it’s a way of normalizing what other people sometimes are afraid of.”

D. Arthur is a freelance writer living in Brooklyn. Junior High was reviewed in the April 1, 2023, issue.

Fiona has a vivid imagination...or does she?

Although Fiona has been fascinated by winged horses, gnomes, unicorns, mermaids, and ogres, now she loves fairies. They’re all she can talk about. When her teacher suggests building a fairy house so fairies will visit, Fiona asks her family to help, but her parents are occupied tending to the cat (several comical scenes depict the feline making a mess and being bathed), and her brother tells her fairies aren’t real. So she forages alone for supplies and finds the perfect location, an old sycamore tree with great roots and a round hollow. Unfortunately, as Fiona inventories her supplies, the traumatized cat zooms by, followed by her family, and all the supplies are lost. Fiona despairs. What if her brother is right and fairies and the other mythical creatures aren’t real? Luckily the tree hollow has an answer, and Fiona’s “imaginary” creatures emerge one by one with everything needed to build a fairy house...everything, that is, except a way to glue the pieces together. But the group finds a solution, and soon the fairy house becomes party central for Fiona’s creature friends. Ogre even saves a seat for Fiona’s doubting brother. Readers with scoffing siblings will be empowered by Fiona’s persistence and success. Cartoonish illustrations portray an idyllic setting with downright endearing mythical creatures—even the pea-green ogre appears pleasant. Fiona, her brother, and her mother are tan-skinned; her father is lighter-skinned. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Sure to strike a chord with imaginative youngsters. (Picture book. 3-8)

Spider-Man soars thanks to an unconventional illustrator.

Steve Ditko (1927-2018) loved comics as a kid growing up during the Depression. Unsurprisingly, his passion became his profession. His unusual artistic style, featuring grotesque creatures, appealed to Stan Lee, head of Marvel Comics. Lee hired Steve, assigning him to illustrate a new comic, “Spider-Man.” Like other Marvel figures, Spiderman was written as a muscular adult, but Steve thought differently. He envisioned this new character as strange, too, i.e., a lithe, slender personality who employed intellect, not brawn. Steve developed the idea
“A gentle, winning tale featuring the sweetest skeleton.”

SKELEANOR THE DECOMPOSER

A Graphic Novel

Ettlinger, Emily

Penguin Workshop (64 pp.)

$12.99 | Aug. 8, 2023

9780593519448

A music-loving skeleton desperately wants to join the town band. Skeleanor thinks music teacher Ms. Ratsimiziva—a brown-skinned, older human—is “basically the coolest person alive!” because she is part of the band that performs at the Summershine Festival in their town of Little Caske-ton. Typically, Skeleanor sleeps during the day in the graveyard on the outskirts of town and spends her evenings hanging out with her friend Batima, a bat, but one day she overhears the band talking about holding auditions for a new member. Trying instrument after instrument, from an organ to a xylophone, Skeleanor attempts to win over the racially diverse townspeople, but they just slam their windows or run away in terror. It’s not until she actually meets Ms. Ratsimiziva that Skeleanor gets her chance and finds her confidence. Divided into short chapters, this boldly colored comic is lighthearted and silly. Such delicious descriptions make this an ideal read-aloud for large groups, while Rohmann’s art plays up the crew’s wild apple-eating fantasies with a colorful combination of stained paper and relief printmaking. For all this, it’s quite satisfying when the fallen fruit finally ends up in the paws of an opossum, willing to share with a worthy worm. This one has all the trappings of a storyline classic—don’t be surprised when young readers eschew its central message and declare this book itself unshareable and definitely “mine!” (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Crisp and tart by turns, this is one book worth fighting over. (Picture book 3-5)

MINE!

Fleming, Candace

Illus. by Eric Rohmann

Anne Schwartz/Random (40 pp.)

$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Aug. 1, 2023

9780593181669 PLB

Prepare to savor this title’s original yet familiar feel.

This rhythmic read features a slew of greedy animals, all with their eyes on a prize. A single red apple hangs at the “tippy-tippy top” of a tree, poised to fall at any moment. Its precarious position isn’t missed by the hungry animals below, each determined to make the fruit their own. One by one, a different animal expresses his covetous desires in rhyme (“Mmm-mmm, how divine. / When it tumbles to the ground, / it’ll be all mine”). This is followed immediately by different descriptions of how each animal hides. Mouse “zippety-eked” beneath a leaf to wait, while Hare “hoppety-boinged,” and fox “waggety-dashed.”

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A grief-stricken boy finds a renewed sense of family and purpose on a secret expedition into the rainforest.

Jack has been on a downward spiral since the death of his beloved father. Depression mutes his emotions, and he feels drawn to risky endeavors with a crew of troublemakers. Mum suddenly announces they’re going away for two weeks over the Christmas holidays, but what Jack assumes is a vacation turns out to be a life-changing expedition for her work. Written in the first person, this story is anchored by Jack’s vivid emotions. Grief, anger, and hurt are deftly drawn as his emotional world expands and his passion for environmental and human rights grows. While Jack’s strong voice carries the story despite shallow supporting character development, even he can’t really explain why he was given no training before being thrust into the dangers of the rainforest. The covert expedition in the third...
The little one visits through a special hedge-gate to bring Mr. Mornington is diminished, but the child visits often and Mr. M.'s memory is not what it was, though: He forgets to get Mornington sweet treats: “We have a deal. Mr. Mornington fills dressed properly before going shopping, for instance. But he and Mr. Mornington’s neighbor, a small brown-skinned child. characters’ favorite things are delightfully evoked in a stream eliciting the ghost of a smile, as he perhaps remembers. Both their favorite song. Without his cap, sax, or cherry cake, he'll get the care he needs. Before visiting him, the child practices their favorite song. Without his cap, sax, or cherry cake, Mr. Mornington is diminished, but the child visits often and plays for him, sometimes without much effect but sometimes eliciting the ghost of a smile, as he perhaps remembers. Both characters’ favorite things are delightfully evoked in a stream of images flowing from the saxophone horn: Mr. Mornington's house, dog, and more; the child’s cat (featured in many separate frames), mom, and friends. George has crafted a simple yet moving and child-friendly tale enhanced by understated watercolor-esque vignettes. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A strong emotional arc grounds this uneven survival story exploring environmental and human rights. (Fiction. 10-14)

**MR. MORNINGTON’S FAVORITE THINGS**
George, Karen
Welbeck Flame (32 pp.)
$14.95 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781801301022

A child acknowledges an older friend’s memory loss.

A craggy-faced, red-capped, pale-skinned elder, Mr. Mornington (reminiscent of John Burningham’s characters) is “the best saxophonist in the world,” according to the book’s narrator and Mr. Mornington’s neighbor, a small brown-skinned child. The little one visits through a special hedge-gate to bring Mr. Mornington sweet treats: “We have a deal. Mr. Mornington fills our garden with music and we fill his tummy with cherry cakes!” Mr. M.’s memory is not what it was, though: He forgets to get dressed properly before going shopping, for instance. But he offers to teach the child to become the world’s “second-best” saxophonist. By the time a child-size sax arrives, however, he’s gone; he even forgot to say goodbye. Mom (also brown-skinned) explains that Mr. Mornington has moved to a new home where he’ll get the care he needs. Before visiting him, the child practices their favorite song. Without his cap, sax, or cherry cake, Mr. Mornington is diminished, but the child visits often and plays for him, sometimes without much effect but sometimes eliciting the ghost of a smile, as he perhaps remembers. Both characters’ favorite things are delightfully evoked in a stream of images flowing from the saxophone horn: Mr. Mornington’s house, dog, and more; the child’s cat (featured in many separate frames), mom, and friends. George has crafted a simple yet moving and child-friendly tale enhanced by understated watercolor-esque vignettes. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**THESE OLIVE TREES**
Ghanameh, Aya
Viking (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9780593525180

A young Palestinian refugee helps her mother harvest olives outside their camp.

The canvas tent in the Balata refugee camp near Nablus, Palestine, is the only home Oraib and her younger siblings have ever known. Before war broke out, Mama lived in Al-Tira, where for years the family cared for the olive trees. The family still relies on the trees—their trimmings are kindle for fire; the oil from the olives can be used to cook with and make soap. Ghanameh captures Oraib’s sadness when she learns war has found its way to Nablus and the family must pack their belongings and leave the olive trees behind. Oraib’s hope of returning is evident as she plants a pit, saying, “Wait for me. One day, when we’re older, I’ll return to you for harvest.” In this poignant yet child-appropriate perspective on warfare, Ghanameh’s hand-drawn illustrations full of green landscape and white tents bring to life the refugee experience. References to Palestinian culture can be found throughout, from endpapers with stitched, embroidered patterns to Mama’s thobe. In an author’s note, Ghanameh discusses how the book was inspired by her grandmother, who was born in 1953 shortly after the Nakba, or the displacement of thousands of Palestinians. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**REMEMBERING**
González, Xelena
Illus. by Adriana M. Garcia
Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781534499638

In González and Garcia’s latest collaboration, a Latine child builds a loving altar for the family dog. When faced with the death of a beloved pet, the unnamed young narrator of this striking picture book methodically collects materials to construct an ofrenda, an altar associated with Dia de los Muertos consisting of photos, candles, foods, and other items to remind loved ones of the departed. The narrator “[gathers] all your treasured toys and bring[s] you the brightest flowers.” In the acrylic illustrations, swirls and paw prints representing the canine’s spirit surround the family as they mourn and remember. They spread flower petals to make a path to their front door “to guide your way home, on this sacred night… / when we welcome back our loving, loyal friends.” Even the most cynical reader might find themselves choking back tears at the beautiful, plaintive text and the lush, realistic illustrations in which the beloved dog is too memorable and too large to even fit within the borders of photo frames. If that doesn’t put a reader over the top, emotionally, the author’s and
illustrator's notes will; both of them drew inspiration from the losses of their own pets. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A gorgeous, deeply touching exploration of grief and remembrance. (Information on building an ofrenda) (Picture book, 4-8)

REVISION
Graff, Lisa
Philomel (256 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9781524738624

Is going back in time about changing outcomes or changing perspective? McKinley's going to find out.

Sixth grader McKinley is excited about Time Hop, her town's annual history celebration, which this time is celebrating the year 1993. In 1993, her father was also a sixth grader—and at the same school where the event is held. Taught to sew by her Grandma Bev, a talented seamstress even after suffering a stroke in 1993 that affected her speech and left half her body paralyzed, McKinley creates a fabulously retro outfit for the fashion show. But on the big day, her single father needs to work, and he asks McKinley to stay home to give Grandma Bev her medications. Instead, she decides to bring her grandma to the Time Hop, but it's a disaster. McKinley has a fight with her best friend, then her father shows up and orders her off the runway. McKinley runs away—and right back in time to 1993. The third-person voice is bright and energetic, while vivid descriptions capture the cast of predominantly White characters as their present and past selves. McKinley is especially endearing, ringing true as a confused, creative, well-meaning tween who realizes she may have been sent back in time to solve a problem—but which one? Or is this journey all about gaining insight so she can better handle her life? The philosophical questions are delivered with a light touch.

Quirky and smart. (Fiction, 8-12)

ALL THE LOVELY BAD ONES
A Ghost Story Graphic Novel
Hahn, Mary Downing
Adapt. by Scott Peterson
Illus. by Naomi Franquiz
Colors by Brittany Peer
Clarion/HarperCollins (160 pp.)
$24.99 | $15.99 paper | Aug. 22, 2023
9780358650133 paper

Innocent mischief goes awry for siblings in this graphic novel adaptation of Hahn's 2008 novel.

Travis, nearly 13, and his sister, Corey, who's a year younger, enjoy a good prank or 2. Having been banned from camp for all the pranks they pulled last year, they'll spend this summer at their grandmother's Vermont inn. After learning about the inn's haunted reputation, the siblings decide they've found the perfect outlet for their mischief: pretending to be the ghosts that have gone quiet since their grandmother took over. While they play at haunting the inn's guests, Travis can't help feeling ill at ease as he catches glimpses of something in his peripheral vision while wandering the inn grounds. The "hauntings" bring plenty of attention from the living. But when a staff member experiences a presence that has nothing to do with the siblings' fun, they must confront the inn's troubled history and try to lay its ghosts to rest. This examination of how children can do bad things without being bad at heart and how adults can wield their power over the young will resonate with readers. The illustrations are captivating. Light and shadow are used to great effect to depict the sun-dappled forest and a chilling grove of trees. Characters' faces are emotive, and the ghosts are spooky and sinister. Sepia tones are effectively used to portray past events. Travis and Corey are tan-skinned; most characters are light-skinned.

Atmospheric illustrations give this retelling extra chills. (Graphic paranormal. 8-13)

I CANNOT DRAW A BICYCLE
Harper, Charise Mericle
Union Square Kids (48 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781454945956

In this sequel to I Cannot Draw a Horse (2022), an attempt to depict a bike results in hilarious chaos.

In the prequel, the offstage narrator was unable to draw a horse for a demanding feline protagonist, but in a twist, an equine character emerged by book's end anyway. Harper closed that story with the horse wishing for a bicycle—a conclusion that serves as the catalyst for this picture book. Lo and behold, the narrator cannot draw a bicycle. Hijinks ensue as the horse and the skateboarding cat are confronted with substitutes, culminating in the revelation that no one—neither the narrator, the cat, nor the horse—actually knows what a bicycle looks like. It's a silly surprise sure to inspire laughter in more knowledgeable readers. When attempts at making a bicycle fail, the pair decide to build a car from odds and ends provided by the narrator. Alas, "I cannot drive a car," reads the last line of text, another punchline delivered by the horse. Will there be a trilogy with drivers ed steering the wheel of Book 3's plot? Time will tell....As in the previous installment, Harper constructs characters out of simple shapes set against graph paper, giving the tale a DIY feel that will appeal to readers similarly uncertain about their own drawing prowess. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Witty, fourth-wall-breaking fun. (Picture book, 3-7)
ROOTING FOR PLANTS
The Unstoppable Charles S. Parker, Black Botanist and Collector
Harrington, Janice N.
Illus. by Theodore Taylor III
Calkins Creek/Astra Books for Young Readers (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781662680199

A look at the life and work of an early-20th-century African American botanist.

Charles S. Parker, a young plant enthusiast from Spokane, grows up to do pioneering research on ferns and fungi and educate a generation of Black botanists at Howard University in Washington, D.C. This straightforward account of his life covers his experience as a lieutenant in the segregated U.S. Army in France during the First World War and, later, his explorations in the Pacific Northwest, along the banks of the Potomac in Maryland, and even in northern Canada. His studies of one genus of fungi—Hypholoma—yielded new species that now bear his name. Like Harrington and Taylor’s previous collaboration, Buzzing With Questions (2019), another picture-book biography of a Black scientist, this one is similarly thorough. Along with Parker’s contributions to the field of mycology, Harrington emphasizes his encouragement of young Black scientists. The digital illustrations, done in flat colors with black outlines, help readers understand his studies and depict mostly people of color with varying skin tones. Broken up into paragraphs and set directly on the artwork, the text looks more accessible than it actually may be to younger readers, but the backmatter includes a helpful glossary for the technical terms. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Sure to inspire a passion for all things plant to take root among aspiring scientists. (more information on Parker, timeline, information on other Black botanists and mycologists, photographs, bibliography, photo credits) (Picture-book biography. 7-10)

BIG
Harrison, Vashti
Little, Brown (60 pp.)
$17.99 | May 2, 2023
9780316353229

A young Black girl who is told she is too big learns which labels to keep.

When she was a baby, being a “big girl” was good. But at a certain point, getting bigger becomes tinged with negativity. Adults are frustrated with the girl because of her size. Other children tease her. On the playground and in ballet, where she used to feel joyous and free, the girl is humiliated. On wordless spreads, all alone, the girl fills the tightly constricted pages, as if trapped by their borders. She lets her feelings out in tears that form a puddle of words—the criticisms of others as well as more positive ones: imaginative, creative, compassionate. Finally, she is able to see clearly, and she decides “to make more space for herself” by pushing the boundaries of the page in a powerful fold-out spread. After that, she knows how to separate the words that do and don’t belong to her and what to do with them. Textured illustrations in a soft, predominantly pink palette endear the protagonist to readers, while spare, carefully crafted text delivers an important message of self-acceptance and combating anti-fat bias that never feels preachy or overdone. Bestselling creator Harrison has produced another classic that belongs on every child’s shelf—this is one that will nurture little ones and help them to see the beauty in themselves.

A healing balm with the power to make the world a bit kinder. (author’s note) (Picture book. 4-9)

SONNY SAYS NO!
Hart, Caryl
Illus. by Zachariay OHora
Bloomsbury (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
978-1-476-1190-4

Sonny faces a tough decision.

One beautiful fall day, Sonny, an anthropomorphic red fox whom readers may remember from previous titles, finds some paint in the garden. He begins slapping bright colors on bushes, pumpkins, and a fallen tree as his pal Meemo, a dog, looks on. But when Boo, a yellow rabbit, asks to try, Sonny refuses to share. Honey, a pink bear, arrives with balloons to blow up. Boo, Honey, and Meemo have little luck infating the balloon. They ask Sonny for help, but he just wants to paint and responds with an angry “NO!” The friends take the hint and retreat to a nearby tent to try again. All alone, Sonny remembers that it’s Meemo’s birthday and guesses that the friends are setting up the party in the tent. Unfortunately, all they are doing is creating a mess. The big question is will Sonny help his friends with the birthday party preparations? Four pages of comic tension lead to his answer. “YES!” Young listeners will appreciate this simple yet sweet story. OHora’s signature illustrations depict adorably squat, bigheaded characters with flat colors and small black dashes to add texture to fur. Little ones will likely see themselves in Sonny—and will hopefully take a page from him as he learns valuable lessons in sharing and caring. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A relatable story about being a good friend that will ring true among young audiences. (Picture book. 3-6)
GIANTS ARE VERY BRAVE PEOPLE
Heide, Florence Parry
Illus. by Merrill Rainey
Holiday House (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9780823450411

A young giant learns to be brave.
Bigelow, a blue-skinned giant with dark hair, is scared of just about everything except his mom: clouds, rain, baths, and alphabet soup (“What if I swallowed the letters that spelled a magic word that would turn me into a mushroom?”). One day he’s out for a walk when he encounters a tan-skinned, brown-haired human named Mrs. Pimberly, who is similarly terrified to come across the oversized youth. There is an extended back-and-forth on the nature of perspective; both refuse to be characterized as large or small, each stubbornly claiming the title of “regular size.” Then Bigelow and Mrs. Pimberly get down to the task of overcoming the giant’s timidity—she suggests the traditional chant of “Fee Fi Fo Fum!” and Bigelow realizes that by pretending to be courageous, he can in fact become brave. He ends by bathing and eating alphabet soup without fear and then helps Mrs. Pimberly overcome some anxieties of her own. This lengthy story feels like it belongs to an earlier time thanks to both the text-heavy pages and the simple fairy-tale setting. Children may enjoy following Bigelow’s example and shouting “Fee Fi Fo Fum!” at the things that scare them, but as an exploration of anxiety it comes off a bit flat, and the worldbuilding leaves open a lot of questions. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Fee fi fo fine. (Picture book. 5-7)

IN THE DARK
Hoefler, Kate
Illus. by Corinna Luyken
Knopf (40 pp.)
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Aug. 29, 2023
9780593372838
9780593372845 PLB

Prejudice collides with neighborly goodwill when love and truth overcome superstition.
“The came in the dark and took the narrow path that only witches used. Everyone said that’s what they were.” A suspicious text laden with ill will and shadowy scratch-lined art full of foreboding imagery fills the top half of the page. On the bottom half, however, a different narrative takes place. The top is told from the perspective of villagers who eye the people in the woods with suspicion bordering on outright accusation (“They brought cloaks and brooms—so many brooms”), while the bottom half is a gentle counterpart (“We brought cloth and wooden handles”). Turns out, the people in the woods are constructing beautiful bird kites to fly. And when harsh winds tear away those kites, the now remorseful villagers bring supplies of their own to help the people of the woods fly their birds again. Certainly the resolution to the conflict between the two groups comes with unrealistic ease, so the true lures here are the art and design. The split pages, containing two conversations at once, require a certain level of sophistication on the part of young readers. Meanwhile, Luyken imbues her art with a palette of blacks, greens, purples, and golds that hint at more than just misunderstandings in the shadows. Characters are diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A marvelous mix of autumnal spirits with a deeper call for understanding. (Picture book. 6-9)

BOG GONE! #1
A Graphic Novel
Jones, P. Knuckle
Penguin Workshop (112 pp.)
$13.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9780593519851
Series: Finder’s Creatures, 1

Mysteries abound when an unassuming swamp suddenly becomes deserted. The residents of Belly Acre Bog are missing, but the Belly Acre Detective Agency is on the case! Second grader Finder the frog, Keeper the turtle, and Chopper the beaver search high and low through farmland, a forest, secret basements, a beverage factory, and the internet for clues. Meanwhile, the world’s greatest detective, Seymour Warts (Finder’s personal favorite), and his sidekick, Toady, are pursuing an entirely different set of clues through grayscale scenes, as if inhabiting a separate black-and-white film. Early suspicion over the disappearances points to the radical organization C.R.O.A.K. and its goal of ensuring that all species live separately from one another. It’s all in good fun, though, as a consistent sense of humor permeates every chapter, from visual gags like Chopper’s accidentally setting things on fire while the trio go camping to Seymour’s increasingly convoluted yet ingenious deductions. The young detectives’ clues do eventually combine to form a coherent, if fantastic, explanation for everything they find. Finder, Keeper, and Chopper each contribute their own strengths to the case and work well together. The anthropomorphic animals cut endearing figures in the thick-lined, exaggerated cartoons. Color-coded speech bubbles always make it clear who is speaking, even when the speaker is off-screen.

Two hilarious investigations for the price of one. (Graphic fiction. 7-10)
WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN, LITTLE CAT?

Jones, Richard
Peachtree (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781682635643

Each time a little gray cat returns from an outdoor sojourn, her owner asks her about the trip—and imagines what may have happened.

“We have a little cat,” a dark-haired, beige-skinned child wearing tights and a floral-printed skirt tells readers. “When she wants to come in, she taps on the front door.” The cat’s adventure begins with a realistic squeeze under a hedgerow and soon becomes increasingly more whimsical. The young narrator’s initial questions concern where the cat has gone and what she’s seen and heard. Joyous images of felines singing and dancing during the apparent coronation of an orange cat and a red crown are followed by a hint of danger when a dog appears. The questions then allude to the cat’s feelings and possible reactions: “Were you happy? Were you scared? Were you brave?” Imaginative art inspires answers from readers. From start to finish, painted illustrations on generously sized pages combine various patterns, colors, and shapes. Spare strokes add sweet expressions to a host of cats, the dog, a mouse, some birds, and the young narrator. Though the felines peacefully coexist with the birds, in real life, outdoor cats are linked to declining songbird populations—adults may want to help slightly older children separate fact from fancy.

A frolicsome feline fantasy. (Picture book. 3-6)

THE INVISIBLE STRING BACKPACK

Karst, Patrice
Illus. by Joanne Lew-Vriethoff
Little, Brown (32 pp.)
$18.99 | July 11, 2023
9780316402286

As they did with The Invisible String (2018), Karst and Lew-Vriethoff offer encouragement to kids coping with separation anxiety, this time tackling the back-to-school blues.

Mila is worried about her first day at her new school. What if she misses her parents and they need to come get her? Her mother has a solution. “There’s an Invisible String of love that connects us all day long. When you miss us, just tug on it and we’ll tug it right back.” Her brother, Jordan, tells her she also has an Invisible Backpack full of superpower solutions. What if no one likes her? She can look in her Invisible Mirror and remind herself that she can do anything. Mila worries about being too nervous to speak up in class, but an Invisible Microphone will give her the confidence she needs. Mila relies on these and other tools, and her first day goes smoothly. That night, as Mila drifts off to sleep, she realizes that everyone has a personalized bottomless Invisible Backpack. While the book is a bit text heavy and enumeration of the items in the backpack slows the story, readers feeling jittery about their own first days are sure to find much-needed reassurance. Splashes and swirls of color enhance the lively digital artwork. Mila and her family have brown skin and brown hair; her classmates are racially diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Will give kids the resources they need to make the first day of school a rousing success. (Picture book. 4-7)

GROWING FEELINGS
A Kids’ Guide to Dealing With Emotions About Friends and Other Kids

Kennedy-Moore, Eileen & Christine McLaughlin
Illus. by Cathi Mingus
Beyond Words/Simon Pulse/Simon & Schuster (208 pp.)
$16.99 paper | July 11, 2023
9781582708782

The duo behind Growing Friendships (2017) return to offer kids more advice.

Anger, jealousy, sadness—big feelings often arise in friendships, both among casual acquaintances and BFFs. Kennedy-Moore and McLaughlin consider the nuances of various emotions—for example, the section on anxiety is broken down into chapters on embarrassment, shyness, guilt, and more. Using the concept of “Feelings Stories,” the authors offer concrete examples of how people’s actions can impact others’ emotions. They also encourage readers to develop social-emotional habits, such as prioritizing trust and self-forgiveness, taking responsibility for one’s actions, having “a good cry” when needed, and treating others with kindness. Ultimately, the book stresses, you can’t control what others do, only what you do. Each major section ends with reflective questions and advice for using the strategies introduced to help others. The authors frame positivity as a “good practice” and suggest reserving the negative stuff for discussions with close friends. The book only briefly mentions a neurodivergent perspective. All additional resources listed in the back are ones Kennedy-Moore, a psychologist specializing in parenting and child development, has co-authored. Line illustrations throughout depict diverse characters; a cartoon dog and cat provide humorous, animal-themed commentary that at times seems to make light of the serious issues covered.

A helpful primer for navigating the emotional ups and downs of friendship. (glossary) (Nonfiction. 8-12)
MAKE A MOVE, SUNNY PARK!
Kim, Jessica
Kokila (352 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780525555001

When Sunny joins the school dance team, she discovers some important things about friendship—and about herself.

Sunny Park, a Korean American seventh grader, has been best friends with Bailey Stern, a White girl, since third grade. Sunny prides herself on being a good friend. She is always there for Bailey, supporting her through her parents’ divorce and being available at a moment’s notice. She doesn’t even let Bailey’s disparaging remarks about her Korean identity or her love of K-pop bother her. It’s always been just the two of them, doing everything together, like taking ballet—and then both quitting right after Sunny landed the lead in The Nutcracker. Now, Bailey wants to try out for Ranchito Mesa Middle School’s dance team, and Sunny, who suffers from social anxiety disorder, agrees to do it too. But when she makes the team and Bailey doesn’t, Sunny begins the journey of discovering her own resilience, making new friends, and realizing what really makes for strong relationships. Kim does a stellar job of portraying different types of friendships, illustrating how healthy and unhealthy ones can differ and creating an authentic road map for tweens who are navigating the social complexities of middle school. At the same time, she infuses Sunny’s growth as a friend, an artist, and a leader with fun and joy—especially during the dance scenes.

Make a move on this book—it’s heart will cheer your soul.
(Fiction. 8-12)

NEWTON AND CURIE TAKE FLIGHT!
Kirk, Daniel
Abrams (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781419749636
Series: Newton and Curie

The dream of flight knows no boundary.

When young Curie the squirrel encounters baby robins in faltering flight, she wants to learn to fly herself. For her first, failed, experiment she creates makeshift wings out of found feathers. A good scientist, Curie then observes children from a nearby school playing on a trampoline and decides to take flight by bouncing on a mushroom; she uses sticks to record how high she leaps but concludes that jumping is not flying. She and her big brother, Newton, hypothesize together, realizing that they need lift from air as well as energy. Seeing the kids fly a paper airplane spurs the pair to try further experiments as they—and readers alongside them—learn about air pressure, lift, and airflow. After constructing a glider, they build a gravity-defying catapult to launch it and then a better, slingshotlike, launching catapult. Subsequent experiments allow the scientifically minded squirrels to learn and improve their results. The STEM concepts are effectively elucidated in the narrative and further expanded on in the backmatter. The anthropomorphized squirrels wear clothes and have hands to replace paws but are recognizably rodents. As in their first foray into physics, Newton and Curie (2020), they are slightly softer cousins of the characters in Kirk’s Library Mouse (2007). Science could hardly have cuter advocates. (This book was reviewed digitally)

A clear, appealing blend of science and sibling strategizing. (glossary, websites) (Picture book. 5-9)

DREAM BY DREAM
The Story of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise
Kolesar, Geri
Illus. by Sofia Moore
Kar-Ben (32 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781728467931

American Reform Judaism’s founder dreamed big.

Isaac Mayer Wise, born in Bohemia in 1819, loved studying and began rabbinical training at age 16. At university he learned different languages and studied music, literature, science, and other religions. In ensuing years, Isaac married, was ordained, then headed his own synagogue, where congregants disagreed with his nontraditional ideas that women and girls deserved equal treatment in synagogues and Jewish schools and that families should worship together. Isaac believed America would welcome new ideas about Judaism, so in 1846 he and his family sailed to New York. At the time, there were few trained rabbis in the United States. Leading congregations in first Albany, then Cincinnati, Isaac promoted modernization. He believed Jews should adapt older practices to the modern world and accept the coexistence of science and religion. Isaac started a Jewish newspaper and published novels and plays featuring Jewish characters and themes. More Jews embraced his forward-thinking ideas. He built a bigger synagogue and a rabbinical college open to young women (though women wouldn’t be ordained until years later). This straightforward, well-written life of a visionary whose work continues to inspire will resonate with many. The colorful illustrations, featuring a fiery-haired Isaac, have a delicate, folkloric look. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Proof that big dreams can lead to big changes and important progress. (author’s note, timeline) (Informational picture book. 5-9)
“Stylishly spooky and outrageously fun.”

HELLAWEEN

“Illus. by Lauren Paige Conrad
Dial Books (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780593326336

A doctor explains the heart’s parts and functions in poetic language.

Our hearts, LaRocca writes, are “singular”—beating about 54 million times before we take our first breath and continuing to beat “every second / of every minute / of every hour / of every day” until our last one—and also “cooperative” as the “captain of / Team Cardiovascular.” In the same vein, she goes on to show how it is at once “simple and complex,” “constant and changeable.” Readers learn that though the heart is “hidden,” protected by the ribs, it’s also “noticeable”—we can easily feel and hear it. LaRocca makes clear that this organ shares a number of seemingly contradictory characteristics and thus “does / Everything / it’s supposed to do / Just like you.” In screen print–style illustrations, Conrad reinforces the theme with a racially diverse cast of actively posed children (including one who uses a wheelchair) putting their hearts through their paces by playing, resting, dancing, and studying stylized diagrams of cardiac chambers and flows. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Will leave readers marveling at the versatility of one of the body’s most essential organs. (Informational picture book 3-5)
TIGER DAUGHTER
Lim, Rebecca
Delacorte (192 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Aug. 15, 2023
9780593648971
9780593648988 PLB

In this award-winning Australian import, a young Chinese immigrant fights to forge her own path, inspiring change in her loved ones in the process.

Thirteen-year-old Wen Zhou feels stuck in an insular world, kept in motion by equal parts rage and fear. Having been a medical doctor in China, her father bitterly resents managing a restaurant. Ruling with an iron fist, he places unreasonably high expectations on Wen and her mother. A recent Chinese immigrant to Australia, Wen's best friend, Henry Xiao, has his own share of struggles. With fierce determination, he convinces her that they can escape their circumstances by entering a prestigious school on the other side of town. Just two weeks before the entrance exams, however, tragedy befalls Henry's family. To support her friend and keep their dream alive, Wen must have the courage to take risks and be resilient enough for the two of them. Lim weaves a powerful and empathetic account of the complex struggles of the immigrant experience from a child's perspective. Tough topics like poverty, grief, and domestic abuse are explored with poignant honesty and sensitivity. Despite the harsh realities faced by the characters, the book hums with an infectious sense of hope that is bound to empower readers who see themselves in Wen.

Tough but uplifting and, above all, heartfelt. (author's note, note to teachers and librarians) (Fiction. 11-15)

HOW TO SPEAK IN SPANGLISH
Mancillas, Mónica
Illus. by Olivia de Castro
Penguin Workshop (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9780593521809

A Latine child speaks both Spanish and English.

Sometimes, Sami speaks both at the same time! Sami uses Spanglish—a blend of English and Spanish—at home and at school. The child runs into trouble, however, when Abuela voices her disapproval of combining the two languages—she thinks that Spanish should be reserved for home and English for la escuela; otherwise, Sami will get confused. After being misunderstood by others and then being marked down for using Spanglish on a school assignment, Sami starts to think Abuela might be right. Though the teacher should know better than to criticize a multilingual student for not using “proper English,” Sami decides to listen to Abuela. But this new, self-imposed one-language-at-a-time rule makes Sami unhappy. A chat with brown-skinned neighbor Mrs. Bell reminds Sami that two languages can be more expressive.

A gentle tale brimming with love and warmth. (Picture book. 5-8)
than one. Suddenly, Sami is teaching Mrs. Bell and other community members how to speak in Spanglish, and, just like that, Sami’s confidence returns. Sami is instantly likable; this depiction of the challenges of feeling understood will resonate with many children, particularly those who speak two languages. Bold, lively illustrations bring to life Sami’s uncertainties and eventual triumph. Sami’s family is brown-skinned; the cast is diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A celebration of a bilingual childhood. (author’s note, glossary) (Picture book 4-8)

YOUR FREEDOM, YOUR POWER
A Kid’s Guide to the First Amendment
Matulli, Allison with Clelia Castro-Malaspina
Illus. by Carmelle Kendall
Running Press Kids (192 pp.)
$16.99 | July 25, 2023
9780762478385

Two lawyers unpack the “five monster freedoms” supposedly guaranteed to all U.S. citizens, regardless of age.

Following preliminary chapters on how the Constitution and its Bill of Rights were originally thrashed out and on the federal court system, the authors analyze each clause of the First Amendment (in what they describe as “regular-person speak”) by presenting notable legal challenges and case studies in which young people were involved—mostly as plaintiffs or defendants but also as participants in labor strikes or other protests. The authors properly note many areas where the law is unclear and that some victories have been at best partial ones, but along with general encouragement, they argue truly that “by knowing your rights, you are more likely to use them.” And if they neglect to mention that minors can’t actually file lawsuits on their own, their profiles and brief interviews with “First Amendment heroes” highlight the rewards as well as the costs of taking personal or legal action to redress perceived wrongs. And, along with frankly acknowledging the existence of gray areas around parental rights, privacy, and other issues, they offer procedural guidelines for young activists, remind readers that they have a right to record official police actions, and tuck into one of several invitations to “Be the Judge” a cogent suggestion to think about whether responses to the events of Jan. 6, 2021, would have been different if some of the armed rioters had been Black or brown. Illustrations accompanying the eye-straining blue and orange text mix stock photos with views of diverse groups of young protesters by Kendall.

Current, insightful, and savvy. (selected sources) (Nonfiction. 11-18)

SQUASH, THE CAT
Mayer, Sasha
Random House Studio (40 pp.)
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Aug. 29, 2023
9780593566544 PLB

Squash the cat and his owner, a little girl named Maggie, are BFFs until Squash commits a big blunder. While Maggie, a light-skinned child with a head of tousled reddish curls, is a bit more exuberant than nap-loving Squash, the two are nevertheless “perfect-for-each-other best friends.” Each day they share a wonderful breakfast (Squash knocks a box of doughnuts off the top of the fridge, with Maggie waiting below to catch them), and Squash puts an end to Maggie’s boring music lesson by coughing up a hairball on the minuet, to the music teacher’s horror. The giggles will only increase—along with some apprehension—when Squash mistakes Maggie’s new toy tunnel for a big snake about to devour the girl…and acts accordingly. With the tunnel now slashed to ribbons, Maggie is furious, and Squash is “a can’t-eat, can’t-sleep…can’t-face-his-Maggie kind of cat.” After several funny but sad pages depicting Squash’s reaction to Maggie’s anger, the narrator gently asserts that friendship is not perfect, and in a satisfying conclusion, the two literally and figuratively mend their rift. The colorful, sketchy, cartoonish art complements and extends the delightfully playful text that’s full of alliteration and understatement as well as engaging strings of hyphenated words that describe the protagonists. This tale would make an excellent read-aloud in small groups so that little ones can pick out details in the artwork. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Funny, clever, and heartwarming. (Picture book 4-8)

WE ALSO SERVED
True Stories of Brave Animals in the Military & Other Heroic Tales
McGill, Erin
Sourcebooks eXplore (40 pp.)
$18.99 | July 4, 2023
978-1-72827-111-8

A celebration of animals who served heroically.

Though the book mostly focuses on achievements that occurred on the battlefield or in times of active combat, some profiled animals provided civilian support (a pair of guide dogs who kept their owners and others around them calm as they exited the World Trade Center on 9/11) or peacetime service (such as dogs retired from combat who become therapy animals or marine animals who help in surveying the ocean floor). Accompanied by endearing cartoon illustrations, the profiles are succinct, hitting high points and giving specifics without delving into age-inappropriate details. Both world wars are well represented, of course, but McGill also covers other conflicts, such as U.S. participation in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq as
well as British involvement in the Chinese Civil War. The text praises the animals for the lives they saved or improved (mostly human, but one entry highlights a World War II search and rescue dog who saved pet cats in London following a night of bombing) and avoids discussions of human politics and morality (on war, the use of animals in war, or the pets donated for the war effort). The final sections provide global and historical context to the use of animals in war.

A topic bound to appeal to many readers presented in a sensitive, kid-friendly way. (Nonfiction. 5-10)

**ARK**
McKetta, Elisabeth Sharp
Paul Dry Books (328 pp.)
$11.95 paper | Aug. 29, 2023
9781589881792

Arden isn’t happy that her family traded their big house for a tiny one.

Her parents recently downsized for personal fulfillment and career flexibility, and the lack of space means Arden’s dog will live half the time with her aunt. Then her best friend announces she’s moving from Idaho to Massachusetts. More difficult changes occur when the pandemic hits and Arden’s family is locked down in the limited space 24/7. Eleven-year-old Arden’s big sulks upset them all, and she realizes she isn’t the only one affected: Her 5-year-old brother is stressed too, her parents lose their jobs, family members get sick, and abandoned dogs roam the streets. Narrated by Arden, the story captures the rapid changes and uncertainty people felt during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the virus the characters are dealing with is not named, readers will recognize the descriptions of quiet streets, social isolation, and constant worries about health, safety, and loved ones. The challenges are recognizable but not extreme—Arden struggles but admiringly develops a coping strategy, taking control of the only thing she can, as she starts rescuing and caring for stray dogs, giving them their own little backyard house to sleep in.

By extension, she learns to recognize the needs of others and be there for them, and as the months pass, she sees a brighter future and redefines the meaning of home. Main characters read White; Arden’s best friend emigrated from Syria. Infectiously hopeful. (readers’ guide) (Fiction. 8-12)

**TERROR IN SHADOW CANYON**
McMann, Matt
Putnam (224 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9780593530757
Series: Monsterious, 3

A group of intrepid young backpackers stumble into a living nightmare when their trail markers disappear.

Twelve-year-old Tegan’s mother was meant to help supervise his and his friends Marcus and Ning’s backpacking trip. He tries to make the best of things when she has to work and his hapless, disengaged father steps in, but it isn’t long until his dad’s immaturity causes problems. Though athletic Ning and her mom, Yanay, are experienced hikers, they all lose their way in the unforgiving wilderness when the markers along their trail disappear. Strange stonelike objects, moving tree roots, and too many glowing eyes begin to coalesce into a terrifying adversary no one could have imagined, and it looks like the kids may have to save the adults. A strength of the series and this title in particular is the tight focus on plotting while characters also work through complex problems. Tegan learns to speak up about how his father’s haphazard parenting and inattention make him feel, and his father makes clear efforts to discuss and correct his mistakes. McMann strikes a balance between suspenseful storytelling and strong characterization in another quick-moving, action-packed story with plenty of gore and terror. Tegan and Ed are cued White, while Marcus presents Black. Ning is cued as Chinese, while Yanay is described as tan-skinned.

A creepy camping catastrophe that will give even the most stoic readers the shivers. (Fiction. 8-12)

**ALWAYS SISTERS**
A Story of Loss and Love
Mir, Saira
Illus. by Shahrzad Maydani
Simon & Schuster (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9781665901567

A young girl copes with the loss of a baby sister who passes away in utero.

Raya’s mother is having a baby, and Raya can’t wait to meet her new little sister, Nura (Arabic for “beautiful light”). Although she loves her brother, Samir, Raya is excited at the idea of having a sister—she can’t wait for the two of them to play dress-up and watch cartoons together and to give her sister piggyback rides. Dreaming about the future, Raya delights in imagining her future sister’s love of chocolate ice cream and dolphins. Everything changes when her parents return home after a doctor’s appointment with the news that “Nura won’t be coming home.” The news plagues Raya into grief, and she wonders if her love for Nura is now “trapped inside” her heart. When Raya’s father gently counsels her to spread all her love,
“A rousing yarn.”

SEASON OF GOLD
Mone, Gregory
Illus. by Berat Pekmezci
Amulet/Abrams (256 pp.)
$15.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781419756832
Series: Sea of Gold, 1

An impoverished Irish farm boy finds himself among pirates on the hunt for a fabled treasure.

Revising the text of his 2010 fish and, to a lesser extent, the cast, if not the storyline’s general drift, Mone plunks 12-year-old Maurice Reidy aboard the Scarey Mistress. Dubbed Fish for his love of swimming, the boy, while literally learning the ropes and enduring rough treatment from brutal first mate Scab, helps treasure-hunting Capt. Walter Cobb solve a puzzle that leads to a golden chain big enough to encircle a city. Readers familiar with Treasure Island will feel a distinct sense of déjà vu as, along with the glittering MacGuffin, certain members of the ragged, knavish, racially diverse crew turn out to have mutinous agendas of their own and the climactic action takes place on or near a remote island. On the other hand, the author does retain his protagonist’s resolute pacifism and the cast’s strong, active women from the previous edition (notably Fish’s knife-throwing young ally, Nora, and ruthless rival pirate Lady Swift). He also adds a list of several more hidden pirate treasures to set up the sequels. A cutaway view of the sloop heads up a fresh set of spot art at the chapter heads for this redesigned reboot.

A rousing yarn. (Adventure. 9-12)

THE LIGHT INSIDE
Miseda, Dan
Penguin Workshop (40 pp.)
$8.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9780593521625

Cartoonist Miseda constructs a quest replete with Halloween motifs in this nearly wordless, picture book–graphic novel hybrid.

Troubled at bedtime by imagined scary beings—a skeleton, a green-skinned witch, a ghost, and even more monsters under the bed—a personified little jack-o’-lantern finds comfort with a treasured toy mouse. Next day, a whooshing wind separates the protagonist from the toy, engendering a seek-and-follow adventure. The Jack-child spies a black, fanged cat with the pilfered toy and pursues the feline in a motorboat across a river where a giant octopus makes its home. Reaching land, the child reunites a skull with its bones. The protagonist tucks the skull under their arm like a football and runs toward the skeleton. Realizing that the missing feline is also the thief, the Jack-child’s off again to put things right. Miseda’s narrative can be read as a child’s dream or a hero’s fulsome adventure. Featuring a muted palette of charcoal gray with orange, yellow, and blue tints, this debut’s rounded-edged panels compress zigzagging emotions into an adroitly constructed tale using classic folkloric tropes. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Appealing, for Halloween or anytime. (Picture book/graphic fiction hybrid 3-7)

SÍ. ¡NO!
Montijo, Rhode
Little, Brown (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9780316464932
Series: Skeletown, 1

Down in Skeletown, a pair of tricksters get into mischief and hijinks in this monochromatic-flavored romp.

Time to prepare for a birthday! A round-headed little skeleton, similar to those seen in Dia de los Muertos imagery, lies on the floor with a card splayed open. The word Sí hovers above this scene. A page turn reveals that the young scamp is actually blocking the lane near the card rack. A frowning adult hovers nearby, with the word No atop the page. It’s a story of comical opposites, with text made up of only two words, as two young Skeletown hellions bring harmless, fun trouble to a birthday party. A big present for the birthday recipient certainly seems sweet (“Sí”), but then a jack-in-the-box pops out to cause a fright. “No” indeed. Take a small bite out of a slice of birthday cake (an easy “Sí” for most), but perhaps don’t gulp down the rest of the cake (a “No” if there ever was one). And bash the piñata, but watch out for a nearby beehive! It all culminates in a daredevil
“Contemplative fare for thoughtful young worriers.”

**MAY’S BRAVE DAY**

*Morris, Lucy*

Bloomsbury (40 pp.)

$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2023

978-1-5476-0290-2

A first-day-of-school book focused on the quiet side of worry.

May, a light-skinned, red-haired girl, can’t eat her toast—the butterflies in her tummy are fluttering too hard. So she heads to the garden, where she lets a ladybug run over her hand, watches a bee fly by, and gazes at the goldfish in the pond, wishing she could trade places with the creatures she observes. Though she jumps, skips, and hops, she can’t banish the butterflies. It takes readers some time to learn the source of May’s fears: school. But when she finally goes, she finds a new friend, and the butterflies slowly subside. Matter-of-fact prose pairs with poetic musings (“butterflies like to live in gardens much more than they like to live inside children”) and will resonate with adults and more introverted kids. Morris’ muted illustrations, rendered in watercolor, collage, crayon, and colored pencil, make effective use of negative space; the sharp reds of the wallpaper and the jelly on May’s toast offer hints to the source of her inner turmoil, while calm blues, yellows, and greens bring to life an idyllic garden setting and a classroom populated by diverse students. (*This book was reviewed digitally.*)

*Contemplative fare for thoughtful young worriers.* (Picture book. 4-8)

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**THE LITTLEST TURTLE**

*Mullady, Lysa*

Illus. by Erica Salcedo

Magination/American Psychological Association (32 pp.)

$18.99 | Aug. 15, 2023

978-1-4438-07660

“Some break apart and, / hopefully, / eventually, / mend and grow / strong and grow / stronger in new ways. / Because we are made to be together”

Maxims of this type are repeated throughout the book, framed as conclusions even when their connection to the preceding text is not always clear (“Families give us a / place to live. / A place to grow. / A place with strong roots for reaching branches and colorful blooms. / Because we are braver together”). Still, overall, the artwork is effective, the tone is reassuring, and readers seeking diverse familial representations will find this offering helpful. (*This book was reviewed digitally.*)

*Sweet and inclusive.* (authors and illustrator note) (Picture book. 3-8)

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**A FAMILY LIKE OURS**

*Murphy, Frank & Alice Lee*

Illum. by Kayla Harren

Sleeping Bear Press (32 pp.)

$18.99 | Aug. 15, 2023

9781534111868

The author-illustrator team behind *A Boy Like You* (2019) collaborates with new author Lee in this earnest celebration of families of all kinds.

“There are so many families in the world….Each one is different from the next,” the authors open, against a backdrop of a joyful picnic populated by people of myriad sizes, skin tones, abilities, and ages. A truly wide range is depicted lovingly through Harren’s soft illustrations and sometimes explicitly through the text, which references families separated by distance as well as chosen families at various stages in life. Hardships, while acknowledged, are glossed over in a way that may not bring much comfort to young readers in similar situations (“Some break apart and, / hopefully, / eventually, / mend and grow / stronger in new ways. / Because we are made to be together”).

Over the course of the book, framed as conclusions even when their connection to the preceding text is not always clear (“Families give us a / place to live. / A place to grow. / A place with strong roots for reaching branches and colorful blooms. / Because we are braver together”). Still, overall, the artwork is effective, the tone is reassuring, and readers seeking diverse familial representations will find this offering helpful. (*This book was reviewed digitally.*)

*Sweet and inclusive.* (authors and illustrator note) (Picture book. 3-8)
FOLLOW THE FLYWAY
The Marvel of Bird Migration
Nelson, Sarah
Illus. by Maya Hanisch
Barefoot Books (32 pp.)
$9.99 paper | Aug. 8, 2023
9781951836672

Nelson gives readers a peek at the routes that birds follow as they migrate each year.

In spring, birds of all kinds make their nests and lay eggs. The author makes clear the diversity of birds and their habits and habitats, describing birds that nest in trees or by the water, amid reeds or in tree cavities, and the babies are varied, too: “Bald ones, fuzzy ones, / plump and round / and long and leggy ones.” Each learns their own individual call, some learn to run or swim or dive, and eventually, “every baby learns to fly!” In autumn, the birds fly south, remaining “until they feel the pull of / springtime.” This book is focused on the Mississippi Flyway, though the facts in general hold for the Atlantic, Central, and Pacific as well. But the book does not specify that not all birds migrate, nor do all of them head for the ocean, though the focus Migration routes that birds follow as they migrate with kindness and encouragement. Physical descriptions of characters are minimal.

An uplifting tale that will especially resonate with horse lovers. (author’s note) (Fiction. 8-14)

GET READY FOR SCHOOL
Nolan, Janet
Illus. by Maria Neradova
Whitman (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9780807528334

School staff anticipate elementary school students’ arrival in an idyllic anthropomorphic animal world.

The elephant principal cheerfully prepares activities for the upcoming school year, while a mouse secretary scurries to test the PA system and file mail, but even with many tasks out of the way, “There’s more to do” for all the helpers in the red brick building. A joyful color scheme helps convey the enthusiasm of the school’s staff as they ready the library, gymnasium, and classrooms for fresh learning. It feels like the crew are assembling a big party, which will prompt students to reflect on all the efforts that go into making their school days happen. Young or newer pupils may even find themselves getting excited instead of jittery when they think about their first days. There is a just-right amount of urgency in the efficient prose, which at times reads more like a checklist. “Exercise balls. Board games. Sensory bins,” reads the text as readers see vignettes of physical, speech, and occupational therapists (a caterpillar, an owl, and a walrus, respectively) diligently tending to their responsibilities. Though the illustrations have a classic, Richard Scarry feel, a Wi-Fi kerfuffle makes clear this is a modern school. A bustling cross section of the school in action offers a delightful seek-and-find opportunity. Adults can use this book to spark conversations with kids about their own schools or to simply introduce them to the idea of attending school for the first time. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Energetic, instructive, and endearing. (Picture book. 4-6)

THE FLYING HORSE
Nir, Sarah Maslin
Illus. by Laylie Frazier
Cameron Kids (192 pp.)
$16.99 | March 14, 2023
9781951836672
Series: Once Upon a Horse, 1

The stories of a horse named Trendsetter and a girl named Sarah unexpectedly intertwine.

The first foal of the season born to his farm in Luttelgeest, Netherlands, Trendsetter is viewed as exceptional from the start, and he’s expected to become a talented show jumper. But between the pressure of competition and unfeeling trainers, stubborn Trendsetter refuses to perform at two crucial events, and a new owner takes him to America to train as an Olympic horse. Meanwhile, over 3,000 miles away in New York City, Sarah, a horse-loving 10-year-old, struggles with her schoolwork because she has trouble spelling. As years go by, she decides to stop doing her homework altogether, but when her beloved grandmother falls ill, Sarah is inspired to try again in order to write Grandma Frieda’s story of fleeing Austria to escape Jewish persecution. Chapters alternate between Trendsetter’s and Sarah’s perspectives and include life lessons within the context of the story. As their stories move closer to their linked destiny, Trendsetter and Sarah finally meet in an ending that will melt hearts and leave readers dabbing away happy tears. Readers will readily draw parallels between the two characters, both of whom struggle with doing what’s expected of them and who flourish with kindness and encouragement. Physical descriptions of characters are minimal.

An uplifting tale that will especially resonate with horse lovers. (author’s note) (Fiction. 8-14)
BIPHOBIA

Deal With It: And Be More Than a Bystander

Nore, Gordon
Illus. by Kate Phillips
James Lorimer (32 pp.)
$24.95 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781459417212
Series: Lorimer Deal With It

An introduction to biphobia and how to confront it.

After noting that biphobia is rooted in the “belief that everyone is only truly attracted to one sex or gender,” the author discusses different identities under the umbrella of “bi+,” such as pansexual, omnisexual, and polysexual, noting their similarities and differences with bisexuality and providing reasons why someone might identify with a particular label. Though the text is unengaging and a bit didactic—readers may feel as though they’re receiving a lecture from a teacher—it does contain useful information, such as scenarios that bi+ young people might encounter (being asked to sleep in a separate room on a sleepover, hearing classmates make offensive jokes) and ways to respond. Competent illustrations depict characters who are diverse in terms of race and ability but do little to enrich the decoration, her mother decides to teach her what a true apology entails. Her mother writes the numbers 1, 2, and 3 on several pieces of paper and places them on the floor. Jumping on the number 1, Hannah learns to first admit she did something wrong. As Hannah jumps onto the number 2, her mother tells her the next step is feeling remorse. And number 3 is promising to do one’s best in the future. Hannah progresses through the apology, learning how to make amends, and everything culminates with loving hugs all around. Colorful, bold drawings made up of geometric shapes depict a tan-skinned Jewish family; human characters have oversized round heads, while the family dog has a triangular-shaped face. The book ends with a brief note on Yom Kippur, and though this is a good story to share in anticipation of the Jewish Day of Atonement, it’s also a sound year-round message for any child figuring out how to contend with negative emotions. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An enlightening, child-friendly exploration of what it really means to say “I’m sorry.” (Picture book. 4-7)

SNOWFLAKES ON OUR TONGUES

Ornstein, Mike
Illus. by Pauline Gregory
Sleeping Bear Press (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 14, 2023
9781534111950

There are animal shenanigans on Pumpernickel Farm whenever it snows.

The animals of Pumpernickel Farm (and perhaps their tan-skinned, brown-bearded farmer?) have a peculiar habit whenever flakes start to fall. “We are the cows and we like to say Moo! / We stay warm in the winter with a thicker hairdo. / When the snow comes down, / we like to have some fun. / So we open up our mouths / and stick out our tongues.” A page turn shows the cows doing just that: “Snowflakes on our tongues! / Moo! Snowflakes on our tongues! / When the farmer isn’t looking, we catch snowflakes on our tongues!” This jaunty refrain repeats for each of the animals that follows—horse, piglets, sheep, chickens—differing only in the animals’ sounds, which little listeners will love to provide. Indeed, this is prime storytime fodder. The jazzy rhythm of the verses makes it perfect for a read-aloud, and the gloriously silly illustrations will give children the giggles, from the animals’ personal spaces to their gleeful jumps and leaps with tongues extended. A final page looks at how real-life animals on the farm adapt to the chilly winter weather and provides a few more facts about snow and snowflakes. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Read this when snow is in the forecast and kids can head outside, tongues hanging out. (Picture book. 3-7)

THREE JUMPS TO SORRY

A Yom Kippur Story

Novit, Amy
Illus. by Ana Zurita
Kar-Ben (24 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781728460277

A bad mood prompts a lesson on proper apologies. Hannah is a charming child—most of the time. On the eve of Yom Kippur, she starts the day by being mean to her brother and making a mess in her already cluttered room. When her mother objects, Hannah offers an insincere “Sorry!” After Hannah accidentally breaks her mother’s favorite Rosh Hashana decoration, her mother decides to teach her what a true apology entails. Her mother writes the numbers 1, 2, and 3 on several pieces of paper and places them on the floor. Jumping on the number 1, Hannah learns to first admit she did something wrong. As Hannah jumps onto the number 2, her mother tells her the next step is feeling remorse. And number 3 is promising to do one’s best in the future. Hannah progresses through the apology, learning how to make amends, and everything culminates with loving hugs all around. Colorful, bold drawings made up of geometric shapes depict a tan-skinned Jewish family; human characters have oversized round heads, while the family dog has a triangular-shaped face. The book ends with a brief note on Yom Kippur, and though this is a good story to share in anticipation of the Jewish Day of Atonement, it’s also a sound year-round message for any child figuring out how to contend with negative emotions. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An enlightening, child-friendly exploration of what it really means to say “I’m sorry.” (Picture book. 4-7)

A SONG SO BLACK, SO PROUD!

Owens, R.J.
Illus. by Keisha Okafor
Sleeping Bear Press (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781534112704

This unique look at James Brown’s “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud!” is told from the perspective of the song itself.
“I’ve been flowing strong since I was born in 1968,” the tune informs readers, “like the Mississippi River running up and down the States.” Black people of various shades appear in the illustrations. Infused with energy and life, text and art explain that the song is a testament to Black history and pride. Owens and Okafor celebrate protest and activism. “I’m free to inhale, exhale, / take a breath, breathe / Free to take a stand / on one foot or two,” the text asserts, accompanied by an image of a child standing beside an athlete kneeling. Author and illustrator also speak to the song’s continued relevance (“I’m topping charts on Spotify, I’m on the evening news. / I’m tumbling out of Usher’s mouth / and rolling with the times”). Backmatter notes that Brown, eager for his message of Black pride to resonate with young people, arranged for children to sing the chorus, making it a fitting topic for a picture book. The illustrations pop with striking yellows, pinks, greens, and blues; the refrain (“I’m a song so black, so proud. / Sing it strong! Sing it loud!”) is presented in large text against arresting, bright backgrounds; little ones will eagerly join in, chanting it aloud. (This book was reviewed digitally)

A fun and informative examination of a pivotal song in Black history, (author’s note, timeline, photographs) (Informational picture book. 4-8)

**THE NAMELESS WITCH**

Parker, Natalie C.
Razorbill/Penguin (272 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9780593203989

Every werewolf pup knows the rule—never give a witch your name, or she’ll bind you to her spell.

Last summer, 13-year-old White girl Riley Callahan defeated the Devouring Wolf with the help of her new prime pack. After the five wolfless pups transformed on the first full moon of winter, Riley thought the other packs would finally accept them, but all the kids resent their “special treatment.” When the Winter Pack shares a vision of a young witch pleading for the safety of every wolf in the Hackberry Hill Alliance. If they can’t help the witch before the spring equinox in two weeks, a violent chapter of history may repeat itself. Picking up a couple months after the conclusion of The Devouring Wolf (2022), this sequel expands on the magic of werewolves and witches through a fast-paced, suspenseful adventure. Alongside the supernatural conflict, Riley confronts the shifting relationships in her family, an emerging crush, prejudice, and how to determine the difference between right and wrong. Although some of the relationship tension has a hasty resolution and the recurring poetic verses don’t always flow smoothly, fans of the first book will devour this addition and look forward to more. The cast of characters reflects queerness and racial diversity in the world around Riley.

An endearing and page-turning sequel. (Fantasy. 8-12)

**FIELD OF SCREAMS**

Parris, Wendy
Delacorte (356 pp.)
$8.99 paper | $12.99 PLB | Aug. 1, 2023
9780593569986 PLB
9780593570005

Ghosts and a family secret haunt this middle-grade novel.

Twelve-year-old Rebecca is reluctantly traveling with her mom from Chicago to visit her paternal uncle’s family. When her father died six years ago, Uncle Jon’s family lived in Seattle, but they have since moved to Iowa. Now, Uncle Jon and Aunt Sylvie want to reestablish a closer family connection. They’ve offered Rebecca’s mother a quiet place to work on her Ph.D. Rebecca will be babysitting her 2-year-old cousin, Justin, but she’d much rather be going to summer camp with her best friend, Jenna. As a parting gift, Jenna gave Rebecca a book titled Heart-Stopping Heartland Hauntings; ghosts and ghost stories are a fascination of Rebecca’s, something she shared with her late father. Maybe, she hopes, the house in Iowa will be haunted. This competently plotted story includes many genre staples—a tween crush, flawed adults, a mean girl with a backstory, and even treasure of a sort. The writing, however, lacks confident originality and relies on standard tropes and metaphors (e.g., thunderstorms frequently presage ghostly encounters). The plot explores family themes around birth, death, and divorce but eschews deeper nuances that could lift it from ordinary to extraordinary. Nevertheless, it is interesting enough and likely to sustain the interest of younger readers in particular. Characters are cued White.

Solid but lacking distinctive flair. (Paranormal. 9-12)

**THE BIGGEST MISTAKE**

Pintonato, Camilla
Trans. by Debbie Bibo
Eerdmans (48 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780802856111

Is this little lion ready for his first hunt?

In this idealized version of life on the savanna, a young lion cub is told by his father that it’s time to catch his first gazelle. After finding his target, the lion tries leaping, then running, next scheming, and asking politely, as well as various other strategies. Nothing seems to work! Warm, simplified pictures of the lion and gazelle are full of action and gentle humor, while clear, minimal text describes the action. The tale comes to a head when the little lion fails yet again and, realizing that the other gazelles are laughing at him, disappears. The gazelle is triumphant but soon grows bored and, after searching, gets a little too close to the lion, which allows him to catch…and release her, so she can take a turn and try to catch him. While not realistic—no bloodshed
here—this cheeky Italian import effectively explores themes such as recovering from a mistake, resilience, motivation, and strategizing, and youngsters will appreciate the fun of the chase, the joy of solving a puzzle, and the satisfaction of finding a playmate. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A fast-paced savanna adventure embedded with solid social-emotional messaging. (Picture book 2-6)

THE FIRE, THE WATER, AND MAUDIE MCGINN
Pla, Sally J.
Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins
(336 pp.)
$19.99 | July 11, 2023
9780063268791

An autistic girl weathers a summer of changes.

Thirteen-year-old Maudie McGinn is desperately looking forward to leaving Houston and spending the summer with her dad in Molinas, California. Unlike Mom, a YouTube influencer who exploits Maudie’s autism, Dad doesn’t treat her like she’s helpless or berate her for having meltdowns or panic attacks. And unlike Ron, her stepfather, he doesn’t erupt in rages or leave bruises on her arms. But when a wildfire forces them to evacuate, Maudie and Dad find themselves scraping by in Conwy, Dad’s hometown on the Mexican border. It’s overwhelming, especially when Maudie’s secret burns inside her alongside Mom’s and Ron’s demeaning words, like incapable and ridiculous. If she tells Dad about Ron’s abuse, though, she could be taken from her family altogether; Mom said so. But as Maudie makes friends, including Paddi, a bubbly girl with ADHD, and Etta, an easygoing woman who teaches her to surf, she wonders: Is keeping secrets good? Is she stronger than she thinks? Through Maudie’s earnest, occasionally poetic narration, Pla vividly explores the ways that physical and verbal abuse can distort self-perception. Notably, she illustrates how pressure to comply with neurotypical authority figures can complicate self-advocacy. Though Mom’s ableism is less firmly addressed than Ron’s abuse, Dad, who’s also neurodivergent, provides a compassionate counterpoint by consistently reaffirming Maudie’s self-worth. Most characters read White; Dad’s mom was from Venezuela, and Paddi is cued South Asian.

A perceptive, poignant tale of self-discovery. (Fiction. 9-13)

MORE TALES TO KEEP YOU UP AT NIGHT
Poblocki, Dan
Illus. by Marie Bergeron
Penguin Workshop (272 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780593387504

Eerie episodes abound in this tightly plotted sequel. Following Tales To Keep You Up At Night (2022), this carefully crafted follow-up introduces Gilbert Campbell, who, after receiving a cryptic message from his brother, Antonio, learns that Ant has been in a terrible accident and is in the intensive care unit. In the message, Ant warns Gilbert, “don’t listen to the tapes”—but a mix of worry and curiosity gets the better of Gilbert, and he listens to the 13 ominously titled tales. As Gilbert settles down with the cassettes, which he finds alongside a vintage yellow Walkman, the line between reality and fiction starts to blur. Spanning a wide spectrum of topics and including a spooky susurring seashell, a maniacal mannequin, an alarming amusement park, and an insidious ice cream truck, the stories explore both new and classic horror tropes. The early entries feel somewhat underbaked, some concluding with a frustrating abruptness or seemingly not wrapping up at all, but it is imperative for readers to continue. Poblocki weaves an intricate yarn, cleverly mixing the two narrative threads with an adept hand. Reading like a mashup of Goosebumps and The Twilight Zone with a healthy dose of Black Mirror, this series (which begs for both installments to be read together) is a surefire hit for horror aficionados. Expect the shivers to last long after the final page is turned.

Ultimately rewarding and wholly satisfying for close and patient readers. (Horror 8-12)

THE STORY OF GUMLUCK THE WIZARD
Book One
Rex, Adam
Chronicle Books (140 pp.)
$14.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781797213231

The adventures of a kindly if naïve wizard who wouldn’t mind being crowned this year’s Harvest Hero.

In a tale that will charm the pants off readers, moony young Gumluck—looking a proper “buggy-bumper” in the acid words of surly raven narrator Helvetica—uncomplainingly dishes out magical favors to unappreciative locals in hopes they’ll vote for him for Harvest Hero at the upcoming Harvest Dance. It doesn’t look likely, as “Prince Whoop-de-doo,” who looks like “a fancy toilet brush” (Helvetica, again), always wins because his royal dad counts the votes. But after venturing into the Haunted Forest and emerging with both a lost child and a tiny ghost, enduring a disheartening visit from the Truth Fairy, and
saving everyone when the king’s castle falls off its steep hill, all comes right for Gumluck in the end. Meanwhile, Gumluck has time to consider deep questions like whether a lie can be good and a truth bad. “Truth is good,” the wizard concludes, “but I think helping is better.” By the end he’s even won over Helvetica, who Christens him a “darling old noodlehead.” So he is, in the finest tradition of noodleheads the world around. His short, beardless, light-skinned figure shares space with lightly caricatured companions and townsfolk (some of whom appear to be of color) in the monochrome pencil drawings that decorate or sometimes fill nearly every page.

Rejoice, noodlehead fans! Here’s a tale to treasure. (Fantasy. 8-10)

**STUNTBOY, IN-BETWEEN TIME**

Reynolds, Jason  
Illus. by Raul the Third  
Caitlyn Dlouhy/Atheneum (272 pp.)  
$14.99 | Aug. 29, 2023  
9781534418226  
Series: Stuntboy, 2

Portico “Stuntboy” Reeves, once “the greatest superhero you’ve never ever heard of,” is back—with a super group of friends and new challenges in his life.

Because of his parents’ divorce, Portico had to move from the fourth floor of Skylight Gardens—his beloved apartment building filled to the brim with eclectic neighbors—to both the third and fifth floors. Portico is feeling the toll of the split even in his surreal but revealing dreams. When the elevator breaks down in real life, Portico’s mom trusts that he can make it down to the third floor on his own, but distractions abound. The episodic storytelling with cleverly illustrated asides documents the building’s residents and even takes metanarrative shots at the creators in a charmingly relatable account of an adventurous kid pursuing hijinks with best friend Zola and new friend/former bully Herbert. On the surface, the kids’ art project in an empty eighth floor apartment is the primary source of delay, but savvy readers will eventually notice the signs of avoidance. The in-between time is poignantly where the bulk of this outing takes place and where it packs its biggest punch, as the chasm between drifting parents is easy to get lost in. But with supportive friends, thoughtful (and peculiar) neighbors, some space to express himself, and undeniable heroes, Portico eventually finds his way, even if he only finds what he wants most in his dreams. The cast reads majority Black.

Fun and emotionally perceptive. (additional sketches) (Adventure. 7-12)

**THE GREAT TEXAS DRAGON RACE**

Ritter, Kacy  
Illus. by Pétur Antonsson  
Clarion/HarperCollins (400 pp.)  
$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2023  
9780063434792

Thirteen-year-old Cassidy Drake enters a dangerous race to save her family’s dragon sanctuary.

Cassidy lives on her family’s dragon ranch in Texas with her Grandma Lynn and her Pa; her mother, the first woman to win the Great Texas Dragon Race, was killed by a Texas coral viper. When a representative from massive energy company FireCorp, who cruelly use dragons for oil production, offers to buy their ranch, Cassidy seizes her chance to save it—and their rescue dragons—by entering the race. With hospitalized Gran’s signature on the application (but without Pa’s permission), Cassidy and her dragon, Ranga, become the 31st team to enter, joining some corporate-sponsored riders. The sponsored riders are similar to the Careers in The Hunger Games. Cassidy and her allies, Laura, Colt, and sisters Rose and Viv, are as scrappy and motivated as Katniss Everdeen—and they face equally high stakes as they fight powerful forces that abuse dragons for profit. “Our choices reveal our character” reads the inscription on the compass, a family heirloom, that Gran gives Cassidy. And this proves true of Cassidy and the other riders—especially FireCorp-sponsored competitor Ash—as the tasks become ever more dangerous. Cassidy is a take-action hero with a strong moral compass, and Ranga, though small, is equally tough. Cassidy and Colt, who is gay, read White; Laura is Latina, and Rose and Viv are cued South Asian.

A high-stakes, fast-paced, dragon-filled underdog story. (guide to dragons) (Fantasy. 9-13)

**THE FEARS YOU FEAR**

Rooney, Rachel  
Illus. by Zebra Hicks  
Magination/American Psychological Association (40 pp.)  
$18.99 | Sept. 6, 2023  
9781433841927

What’s there to be afraid of?

This picture book follows two Black children along with a supporting cast that is racially diverse and includes one brown-skinned child who uses a wheelchair. The unnamed characters, along with readers, learn about different kinds of fears, ways to handle and understand fear, and how fear can sometimes be helpful. The language will validate young children’s concerns, explaining that fears are different for everyone and that they can involve real or imaginary things. The book is written in rhyming verse; the rhymes are comfortable, and the meter, while occasionally imperfect, is smooth enough for reading aloud without awkward pauses. The cute, colorful illustrations...
ASTONISHING AND EXTINCT PROFESSIONS
89 Jobs You Will Never Do
Rottmann, Markus
Trans. by Ashley Curtis & Sonia Curtis
Illus. by Michael Meister
Helvetiq (88 pp.)
$24.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9783907293935

Can you imagine what people once did for a living?

From “walking toilets” to balladeers “who belted out the daily news,” Rottmann covers dozens of professions that were once perhaps not popular but possible. Short entries ranging in length from one to three pages describe each profession and when and why it died out. Callouts illuminate noteworthy facts, provide historical or social context, or give more logistical details. Some jobs could be found in multiple cultures and countries; a few crossed gender lines. Some, like bematists (step counters who measured vast distances), disappeared due to advancements in technology and tools (hodometers in this case). Others went out of vogue with changing social, geological, or political dynamics: “What people find useful is always changing. So, certain professions disappear, but new ones come into being.” Alchemists fell out of favor, superseded by chemists; natural historians, biologists, archaeologists, and professional treasure hunters are modern-day explorers. Rottmann notes that some jobs, such as professional mourners, might be making a comeback. Bold, almost caricature-esque, cartoony illustrations capture the gamut of professions featured in this Swiss import, from the bleak, beak-wearing plague doctor to the showy festival pyrobolists. Occasional anecdotes provide wry commentary—alchemists brewed Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, an elixir of life only to accidentally kill him with poisonous mercury. A handful of summary spreads break up the selection of extinct professions.

An entertaining, brief survey of professions past. (Nonfiction. 9-12)

LEARNING TO BE WILD
How Animals Achieve Peace, Create Beauty, and Raise Families
Safina, Carl
Roaring Brook Press (224 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9781250838254

Chimpanzees, scarlet macaws, and sperm whales all have cultures worthy of respect.

Science writer Safina investigates social learning to prove that animals, like humans, have cultures—they learn how to be who they are. Learned cultures provide skills, identity, a sense of belonging, and traditions. He describes chimps learning ways to survive and make peace within their communities, macaws learning where and how to forage, and sperm whales growing up and thriving in family groups. In Uganda, the Peruvian Amazon, and Dominica, the author joins scientists studying each of
We can't change it now!' "When Zebra tries to make some

Becoming Wild (2020), a reframing that is less political and philos-ophical and more focused on the animals and their intriguing
behaviors than on the many, many threats they face. The
immediacy and detail of these observations bring readers right
into the experience of field science. Most thought-provoking,
perhaps, are Safina’s explanation of culture and his observation
that, “without some original innovator...there is no knowledge,
skill or tradition that could get shared; no culture to copy and
conform to.” Black-and-white photographs of the scientists and
their subjects are interspersed throughout the text.

A well-crafted adaptation offering an extraordinary look
at animal worlds. (bibliography, index) (Nonfiction. 10-16)

HORSE AND ZEBRA
BAKE A CAKE
Sanderson, Whitney
Illus. by Angelika Scudamore
North Star Editions (48 pp.)
$6.99 paper | Aug. 1, 2023
9781631637117
Series: Horse and Zebra

A pair of bakers work together on a
special oatcake recipe.

Although the title mentions only one

A simple story with compromise baked in. (Early reader 4-7)

WHEN I BECAME
YOUR GRANDMA
Shane, Susannah
Illus. by Britta T eckentrup
Nosy Crow (24 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781536207590
Series: When I Became...., 1

A panda grandmother and her grandchild move through the
world.

Anthropomorphic, nameless pandas are the lone charac-
ters in this rhyming message of love. “I’ve seen you grow a
little bit each day since you were small,” says Grandma joyfully,
and “I’ll be watching over you as you grow big and tall!” Though
Grandma loves telling the little one stories, she also assures
the child that she will “listen when you share your dreams with
me,” a brief but needed reversal of narratives where only elders
offer wisdom. This refreshing morsel will be most appreciated
by adults sharing the book with a child. T eckentrup’s signature
blocky art style is gentle and spare throughout, depicting the
pair trudging through a winter storm before finding warm shel-
ter a spread later (“just know I’ll be beside you / and will always
keep you warm”). In another scene, the duo gaze at clouds, with
Teckentrup employing some truly gorgeous pink hues. However,
it’s unclear if any of this will be enough to hold readers’ inter-
est. There’s little action, making this one suited for one-on-one
reading between a caregiver and child. Grandmothers may dive
in emotionally and connect with the message, but otherwise it’s
a toss-up. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Tender but unlikely to capture readers’ attention. (Picture
book 0-3)

THE FIRST DAY OF PEACE
Shuster, Todd with Maya Soetoro-Ng
Illus. by Tatiana Gardel
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781536207590

One brave act of kindness can be a
catalyst for peace.

Mountain families and valley families live in a lush envi-
ronment, surrounded by terraced farms and verdant meadows.
They both depend on water for sustenance and survival, using
it to grow crops, wash clothes, and more. But the changing
climate causes the water level to rise and fall, wreaking havoc
on this bucolic existence and causing strife. Neither group
wants to help the other, preferring to guard their own precious
resources. When severe floods put the valley people in a pre-
carious situation, a mountain child insists that the mountain
people step in and help their neighbors. This first step begins a
cascade of subsequent acts of kindness that eventually restore
peace. Using simple and somewhat didactic prose, Shuster
and Soetoro-Ng present the lesson of the golden rule in, fittingly,
the form of a parable. Gardel alternates between warm and


KIRKUS.COM | CHILDREN’S | 15 JUNE 2023 | 107
“Fans will eat up this sweet treat.”

ONE SMART COOKIE

Song, Mika
Random House Graphic (112 pp.)
$12.99 | $15.99 PLB | Aug. 15, 2023
9780593479759
9780593479766 PLB
Series: Norma and Belly, 4

Norma, Belly, Gramps, and Little Bee are at it again! Brown squirrels Norma and Belly are dismayed to discover that a fortune cookie factory has just been built on top of their acorn stash. As consolation, they sneak a stray plastic-wrapped cookie back to their burrow, where they marvel at the paper fortune inside the cookie. Conferring with literate squirrels Little Bee and Gramps, they learn that “people find a fortune in a cookie and believe whatever it says.” And thus, their newest food-finding caper is born: They will infiltrate the cookie factory, insert all-new fortunes that influence humans to give their cookies to squirrels, and reap the rewards! Of course, not everything goes to plan, and the group has to dodge the factory’s burned-out fortune writer and contend with cookie consumers’ disregard of the fortunes. But readers shouldn’t worry—the squirrels always manage to get their desired snacks in the end, and this is no exception. While this fourth episode involves slightly less peril than previous volumes, readers will be no less invested in the squirrels’ newest quest. Song’s charming dialogue is filled with humor and heart. Loose lines and soft watercolors in natural colors continue to provide a calmer—but no less silly—alternative to louder graphic novels for the same audience.

Fans will eat up this sweet treat. (Graphic fiction. 5-8)

SKANDAR AND THE PHANTOM RIDER

Steadman, A.F.
Simon & Schuster (496 pp.)
$18.99 | May 2, 2023
9781665912761
Series: Skandar, 2

Unbonded unicorns are being killed, and the Island is destined for destruction unless Skandar and his friends can stop it. Skandar and his friends are in their second year at the Eyrie, the Island’s school. In their first year, the quartet and their bonded unicorns thwarted the Weaver’s plan to attack the Mainland, as related in Skandar and the Unicorn Thief (2022). They were shocked to discover that the Weaver is Skandar’s estranged mother—and now they suspect she’s behind the present terrors. The violent murders of the wild unicorns are gruesomely described. Adding to the chaos, young riders are being possessed, causing them to harm others. Lastly, the Weaver has brought Kenna, Skandar’s sister, to the Island as part of her nefarious plan. In the meantime, the Island is self-destructing due to imbalances in its magic, which is deeply interwoven with the wild unicorns’ well-being. Whether Skandar and his friends can save the Island depends on whether they can decipher the clues in a bard’s ominous truesong. The backstory of this world is expanding, and readers must have read the first volume to understand the developments here as the Weaver’s schemes are slowly revealed and the web grows increasingly dense. Eager fans will remain committed to the intrigue that is sure to deepen in the next installment.

Riveting. (map) (Fantasy. 8-12)

LET’S FILL THIS WORLD WITH KINDNESS

True Tales of Goodwill in Action

Stewart, Alexandra
Illus. by Jake Alexander
Thames & Hudson (120 pp.)
$19.95 | June 27, 2023
9780500653104

Two dozen true stories encourage readers to choose kindness. A brief discussion of the science of kindness, which touches on neurotransmitters and hormones, is followed by moving vignettes of real people responsible for extraordinary—or everyday but no less admirable—acts of goodwill. Some figures, like Harriet Tubman, will likely be familiar. Many others may be lesser known: Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld, who, in 1906 Germany, explained that love between two men should be just as accepted as that between a man and a woman. Sometimes, kindness determines the course of a life, as with Henri Durant, a Swiss merchant whose ideas helped launch the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement; other examples focus...
on a single moment, such as a German fighter pilot’s refusing to shoot down an enemy pilot in World War II. The kindness of ordinary people is celebrated, like that of the residents of Gander, Canada, who hosted passengers from planes grounded in the wake of 9/11, or the volunteers all over the world who provided help in the wake of a tsunami, earthquake, and nuclear meltdown in Fukushima, Japan. Each chapter is followed by three thought-provoking questions, potential discussion catalysts. A quick look at “kindness stars,” like scholar and poet Rumi and philosopher Martha Nussbaum, closes out the book. The profiles are well crafted with intriguing, often inspiring details. Realistic full-color illustrations add to the appeal.

**Bravery, compassion, and initiative go hand in hand in these concise, compelling stories.** (glossary, references, index)  
(Nonfiction. 9-12)

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**OUR BLUE PLANET**  
Stewart-Sharp, Leisa  
Illus. by Emily Dove  
Paula Wiseman/Simon & Schuster  
(64 pp.)  
$19.99 | July 18, 2023  
9781665928021

A tour of our planet’s largest habitats (by far), with glimpses of prominent residents.

Sandwiched between statements from David Attenborough and couched throughout in the same distinctly avuncular tones, this offshoot from a BBC nature documentary series offers both the requisite messages about plastics pollution and care for our environment and a set of undersea scenes with brief but lively captions, from the “delicate underwater ballet” of a kelp forest to a battery of bluntnose sixgill sharks chowing down on a dead whale “like hungry teenagers arriving for dinner.” In mixes of vignettes and larger seascapes, Dove ably evokes the beauty of the series’ digitally enhanced video work, if not its grandeur, with painted galleries of gracefully posed, accurately detailed flora and (more often) fauna from tiny plankton to walruses, whales, siphonophores (“giant trailing death nets”), and like “bruisers and cruisers” in coastal rockpools on down to deepest depths. It’s a tempting invitation to dive in—notwithstanding one startling aerial view of a stylized Palm Beach with swarms of sharks lurking just offshore. (*This book was reviewed digitally.*)

A refreshing dip thanks to lively imagery in both art and narrative.  
(Informational picture book. 7-9)

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**ONE MORE JAR OF JAM**  
Sumovich, Michelle  
Illus. by Gracey Zhang  
Dial Books (40 pp.)  
$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2023  
9780593112670

“If you ever have a mulberry tree, you’ll learn / there’s nowhere sweeter to sit / than on branches, heavy with warm berries.”

Cycles and regeneration are significant themes in this tale that traces a child’s love of jam and the nearby mulberry tree that produces the fruit for it. A repeating refrain (“If you ever have a mulberry tree...”) gives the text a lilting, poetic quality, while loose and colorful illustrations evoke a warm, rural setting. The text is narrated in second person and addressed to a brown-skinned child who lives with a light-skinned father. The two make jam together, step by step, from adding beads and baubles to the tree (an attempt to keep birds away) to collecting berries that are shared (just a little) with those birds to gathering, crushing, and boiling them, which ultimately results in many jars of delicious jam, just right for sharing with brown-skinned Grandma and a diverse group of neighbors. When a storm knocks down the tree, the child grieves, but when spring comes, the young protagonist finds ways to celebrate at its stump with loved ones. So is this the end? An emphatic no! “If you ever have a mulberry tree, you’ll gasp / when suddenly silent, shiny leaves burst— / From stems / to shoots / to branches.” (*This book was reviewed digitally.*)

A warm tale of grief, resilience, trees, and, of course, jam.  
(Picture book. 3-8)

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**THE LITTLE GREEN ENVELOPE**  
Sze, Gillian  
Illus. by Claudine Crangle  
Groundwood (32 pp.)  
$19.99 | Aug. 1, 2023  
9781773066813

When a child’s friend moves away, an eager envelope gets the opportunity to embark on a journey.

Olive Zhi, a pale girl with dot eyes and black hair tied into two blunt pigtails, is not her cheery self when she visits Grandpa (also pale with dot eyes) one day. Her friend has moved, so Grandpa suggests sending a letter. Cut-paper illustrations in a natural pastel palette aptly highlight the real hero of this story: a green envelope who overhears their conversation from a desk drawer. This envelope, differentiated by two googley eyes on its flap side (allowing the flap’s lines to create wonderfully expressive faces), dreams of traveling to faraway places like other envelopes. After a moment of suspense, it is indeed chosen to accompany Olive’s letter to her friend. This sets off a montage of the letter’s travels, incorporating the clever use of paper products to create images of a mailbox, many hands of various shades, a mail truck, and a carrier’s bag. There are no
facts about how the postal service works—the emphasis here is on how delighted the recipient is to see the envelope once it arrives. Future correspondence is sure to come. The book ends with a diagram for making your own envelope. Olive is cued as Chinese. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A sweet and straightforward homage to old-fashioned letter writing. (Picture book. 4-8)

BILLIE BLASTER AND THE ROBOT ARMY FROM OUTER SPACE
Taylor, Laini
Illus. by Jim Di Bartolo
Amulet/Abrams (208 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781419753848

A giant robot army in space? What could go wrong?

Billie Blaster is a genius. She has all the things a genius needs: genius parents, home laboratories (including a secret one, of course), a team of superintelligent animal engineers, a sassy goat sidekick, and, most importantly, a nemesis. Tiny Hector Glum, who is 4 1/2 inches tall (thanks to his Irreversible Shrinking Ray) and who’s been Billie’s rival ever since he came in second to her at the Kindergarten Science Fair, has set his sights on world domination and taking Billie down. Meanwhile, a robot alien arrives bearing a message of “grave galactic importance”: Evil aliens from the planet Bonk are planning to take over Earth, and it’s (kind of) Billie’s fault! Can Billie and her ragtag band of robotic and furry friends stop the invasion? Will Tiny Hector Glum finally succeed in taking over Earth? Energetic and upbeat, this graphic novel refuses to take itself too seriously even when it touches on topics such as access and opportunity in STEM. The story, though not particularly original, is laugh-out-loud funny in places and heartwarming in others; it keeps a consistent momentum throughout. Its partially unresolved resolution gives it an episodic feeling, as though another installment is just around the corner. Bright, vibrant art adeptly underscores the movement of the narrative and brings new heights (and sewer depths) of humor to the quirky cast and world. Human characters present White.

An intergalactic joyride. (Graphic fiction. 8-12)

A PLACE CALLED AMERICA
A Story of the Land and People
Thermes, Jennifer
Abrams (64 pp.)
$22.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781419743894

A map-based view of American history.

Opening with a carefully shaded, watercolor-and-colored pencil depiction of a green-and-blue Earth, Thermes, a map illustrator, describes how early humans “moved across the land and around the world in search of animals and plants to eat, fresh water to drink, and safe shelter to rest—as living creatures do.” These themes persist throughout as she focuses on how methods of survival become multilayered systems of oppression. It’s as if Howard Zinn wrote a children’s book — instead of focusing on presidents and other White men, Thermes demonstrates how Indigenous people, African Americans, and immigrants form the foundation and framework of American history. Describing the founding of the United States, she writes, “European colonizers came to North America and struggled over who could claim the Native peoples’ homelands as their own.” Devoting a full spread to U.S. territories like Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, the author/illustrator names the Indigenous peoples who still live there. Far too often history classes for children relegate Black, Indigenous, and immigrant history to side units, but this book can—and should—replace any text that doesn’t rightfully center those narratives. One flaw is that the work skips over everything between 1965 and 2001 (including the AIDS crisis), but this is nevertheless a necessary addition to any educational institution or the personal library of any kid who wants to “work toward a better future for all who live upon the land.”

History made relevant. (afterword, selected sources, timeline) (Nonfiction. 8-13)

PROBLEM SOLVED!
Thomas, Jan
Beach Lane/Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)
$15.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781665939997

Porcupine Pete knows just how to fix Rabbit’s problem.

Rabbit’s room is a mess—Rabbit can’t go “hippity-hoppity” without stepping on something. But Porcupine Pete is here to help. Porcupine Pete’s ideas range in success. Carefully folding all of Rabbit’s shirts is a good idea, but feeding those shirts to the goldfish is not—despite Porcupine Pete’s enthusiastic “PROBLEM SOLVED!” Luckily, Rabbit steps in and places the shirts neatly in the dresser. Stacking all the blocks helps tidy the room, but Pete’s suggestion of flushing them down the toilet is less than ideal. Again, Rabbit catches
Pete in time and stows the toys safely. It’s unclear whether Pete has poor problem-solving skills or is using reverse psychology, but either way, Rabbit modifies each of Pete’s giggly suggestions, and soon every object is in its rightful place. (Caregivers may pick up ideas for encouraging little ones to clean up their own rooms.) It looks like Pete is out of a job until the friends read a newspaper reporting that scientists on Mars are in need of help. Will the scientists there be able to cope with Porcupine Pete’s wild ideas? This goofy tale has just a few well-selected words per page; the text is primarily made up of speech bubbles. Thick-lined cartoon illustrations set against solid backgrounds are rich with emotion, action, and humor. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Will help parents solve a perennial problem with humor and empower children to turn cluttered rooms into neat ones. (Picture book. 3-7)

**ALONE**
The Journeys of Three Young Refugees
Tom, Paul
Trans. by Arielle Aaronson
Illus. by Melanie Baillarge
Groundwood (144 pp.)
$21.99 | May 2, 2023
9781773069272

In this novel based on the award-winning documentary *Seuls*, three young refugees journey to Canada.

Fearless, bug-loving Afshin lives in war-torn Tehran, Iran. As Afshin approaches the age to enlist, his parents become fearful for him and decide to send him to a new country. Contemplative loner Alain, who lives in Bujumbura, Burundi, worries about his father, who’s serving in the army, and savors moments with his beloved mother. After his father’s sudden imprisonment, Alain and his family receive threats and must flee. Patricia yearns for a life where she can attend school and access the wealth she sees around her instead of helping her mother sell drinks to rich people in Kampala, Uganda. When she joins a softball team and falls in love with another girl, her parents send her away to escape the persecution that’s sure to follow. Although their reason for leaving differs, each of the protagonists seeks asylum in Canada. With considerable care, Tom succinctly conveys not only their pain, but also their joy and hope. Their stories slowly come to life through alternating first-person perspectives. The author also makes use of the second person to reel readers in and immerse them in the characters’ feelings of turmoil. Baillarge’s dramatic illustrations add depth to Tom’s words, translated from French. Information on the real Afshin, Alain, and Patricia is appended.

Quietly awe-inspiring. (glossary) (Fiction. 8-12)

**PAUL BUNYAN**
The Invention of an American Legend: A Toon Graphic
Van Sciver, Noah & Marlena Myles
TOON Books/Astra Books for Young Readers (48 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781662665226

The Paul Bunyan tall tale gets felled.

In the winter of 1914, a steam locomotive chugs along through Minnesota until an accident halts the journey. The passengers—diverse in skin tone—exit the train and gather around a fire. Soon, stories start flowing to pass the time—tales of larger-than-life strong men Joe Mufferaw, Otto Walta, and George Knox. But these “small fry” are nothing compared to Paul Bunyan, who a timber advertising executive alleges “shaped this land himself.” As the details about Bunyan get more and more outlandish, some listeners cry “malarkey.” Others remain rapt. As the tracks are cleared and the crowds die down, a few passengers confront the executive with the truth: The timber industry’s success comes at the cost of land stolen from Native Nations, and the Bunyan legend was a carefully constructed marketing ploy to justify the razing of trees. The introduction and backmatter delve more deeply into the myth and include multiple contemporary Native perspectives; young people are urged to “acknowledge...those who actually were living on that land,” and a map charts villages, burial mounds, and sacred sites of the Mdewakanton Dakota. Readers will come away ready to question what other falsehoods they’ve been fed about the history of marginalized people. Full-color illustrations effectively use smoke cloud panel borders to delineate the tall tales. A heightened sense of scale makes Bunyan practically leap off the page in grandeur.

An accessible and important reminder of how easily the truth can be co-opted. (bibliography) (Graphic nonfiction. 8-12)

**GIRLS ON WHEELS**
Venkat, Srividhya
Illus. by Kate Wadsworth
Kokila (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9780593529287

A group of skateboarding girls in India help their friend overcome uncertainty.

At the crack of dawn, Damini leaves her modest home on her skateboard after doing her chores. On her own board, Sana winds through the bazaar. Anila climbs into the back of a car. All three meet at the skate park, where Anila wonders if she’s brave enough to skate after finally recovering from a broken arm. But when the boys at the skate park taunt her, Anila, with the support of her friends, finds the strength to show them that she is more than capable and to prove to the boys—and herself—that she is stronger than her fear. This book tells a
compelling story about the power of friendship and the importance of courage in the face of adversity while highlighting a trio of girls who are very different but are united by their love of skateboarding. Damini appears to live in poverty, Sana is a Muslim hijabi, and Anila comes from a family wealthy enough to drop her at the skate park in a car. Anila’s journey is both inspiring and relatable. At times, the prose can feel clunky, but overall, it’s an entertaining read with a solid message brought to life by vivid artwork. In an author’s note, Venkat states that she was inspired to write this tale because of the increasing popularity of skateboarding among Indian girls. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An engaging portrait of resilience. (facts about skateboarding) (Picture book. 4-8)

TRUSTY TOWN HALL
A Community Helpers Book
Ward, Lindsay
Harper/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780063081406

Introductions to the government workers staffing a (generic) city hall and the work they do.

Ward opens this people-centric overview with a gallery featuring dozens of small figures occupying positions from mayor and mayor’s assistant to law director and landscape supervisor for the fictive town of Honey Hill. What each actually does goes mostly unexamined, but the author does invite readers to count them, match them to the gear they use and services they provide, and seek out equivalent workers in their own communities. As the organizational structure appears to lack a school board, the town council deals only with “new laws, ideas, and events” rather than specific issues, and there seems to be only one mayoral candidate (this tour is set on election day), so Honey Hill feels a bit distant from the real world. Still, it’s an upbeat, inclusive depiction. The officials are racially diverse, the town council includes a member wearing a hijab, and local residents in the background include two figures who use wheelchairs. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Positive reinforcement for the notion that government is by, as well as of and for, the people. (glossary) (Informational picture book. 6-8)

OUT AND ABOUT
A Tale of Giving
Wiemer, Liza
Illus. by Margeaux Lucas
Kalaniot Books (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781623541613

Daniel becomes curious about his parents’ mysterious early morning outings. After observing his parents carrying boxes in the snow on several occasions, Daniel asks his mother and his older siblings, Ezra and Leah. He’s told that his parents “went out and about.” Not satisfied with this vague answer, Daniel is determined to discover the truth, but after overhearing a conversation between his neighbor Mrs. Cohen, who recently lost her job, and his mother, he realizes that his parents have been secretly leaving the Cohens food and other necessities before the weekly Shabbat observance. Daniel remembers a time when his grandmother was ill and a box of treats was left on the family’s porch without a card; his mother explained, “Surprise acts of kindness are the best.” The Maimonides quote that opens the book—“Giving is most blessed when the donor remains completely anonymous”—feels particularly fitting now as Daniel joins his father early the next morning, carrying a box to the Cohens’ porch with a simple note: “Shabbat Shalom.” Though simple, the story imparts an important lesson, one that young people will easily pick up on. Soft, lovely illustrations depict an observant Jewish home with several Judaic objects prominently displayed amid snowy winter suburban scenes. The author’s note explains that Maimonides was a 12th-century rabbi known for his “eight levels of Tzedakah,” or giving. Characters are tan-skinned. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A beautiful and thoughtful message woven into a brief yet poignant story. (Picture book. 5-9)

BEAR HELPS THE FOREST
(MAYBE YOU HELP, TOO)
Williams, Karen Lynn
Illus. by Andrés Landázabal
Charlesbridge (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781623544163

A bear cub learns how the forest changes from season to season.

Bear is excited to play in the fallen leaves. But as the weather grows colder, she must crawl into her cozy den with Mama and hibernate. When she wakes up in spring, she is sad to see that the leaves are gone! Where did they go? Mama’s calm reply is repeated throughout: “The forest did its work.” This story of seasonal change takes a gentle, contemplative look at the forest floor. Williams zooms in on the smallest of helpers (“Bacteria and fungi grew, / while earthworms nibbled and chewed. // Beetles and mites and slugs / and snails munched, too”) while also acknowledging the larger ones: deer, squirrels, and, of course,
Bear. Everyone works together to help the leaves decompose, producing rich soil that feeds the forest. Deep browns, bright greens, and the saturated golden rays of the sun evoke the distinct earthy aura of nature. Varied vocabulary lifts the text: “Snowmelt ran in rivulets and ruts. / Tree sap began to flow again. // Deer and squirrels and possums squished / and squooshed in springtime muck.” A detailed author’s note adds more context to the abrupt ending directive: “Maybe you help, too.” (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A lush, lyrical look at the science of a forest renewed. (Picture book. 3-7)

**WEST OF THE SEA**
Willing, Stephanie
Viking (352 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780593465578

Amid literal and emotional droughts, two sisters must find their mother and themselves during a road trip. Eleven-year-old Texan Haven and her older sister, Margie, are connected in odd ways to magic by their Scottish heritage. Their maternal grandparents came from Orkney, and Margie and Mama share red hair and eyes that change color with their moods. Meanwhile, Haven has started seeing the ghosts of prehistoric animals whenever she touches fossils, which her mom has an uncanny knack for finding. Her mom has been depressed and distant since her parents died a year ago, and after Haven glimpses her looking frighteningly inhuman, Mama leaves in the middle of the night. Meanwhile, Haven discovers that whenever she comes into contact with salt water, she transforms into a kitskara, or scaly cryptid that can breathe underwater. To get answers and find Mama, Haven and Margie (who has her learner’s permit) join new neighbor Rye, who volunteers his dad’s coffee truck for the search. Black and Mexican Rye, who’s upset that his parents moved them from Austin to the middle of nowhere, is up for an adventure. On their journey to the Gulf of Mexico, Haven’s developing powers dovetail well with themes of preserving past love while making room for change. Though Haven’s closeness with Rye feels rushed, the sometimes-contentious but overwhelmingly supportive sibling dynamic grounds this story about healing and growth.

Intriguing mythology with a prehistoric twist and an endearing family focus. (Fiction. 9-13)

**LEAN ON ME**
A Children’s Picture Book
Withers, Bill
Illus. by Rachel Moss
Akashic (32 pp.)
$16.95 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781616141091
Series: LyricPop

Singer/songwriter Withers’ encouraging lyrics form the text of this upbeat picture book. The late musician’s supportive song, released in 1972, is the backdrop to a story about a quartet of racially diverse young friends sharing various life experiences. The kids explore the outdoors, go camping, and share life events—some happy, some less so—occasionally with parents. The book makes clear that supportive friendship, or “leaning on,” is mutual: “Lean on me / When you’re not strong / And I’ll be your friend / I’ll help you carry on... / For it won’t be long / Till I’m gonna need / Somebody to lean on.” It’s clear everyone needs help now and then and that it isn’t a sign of weakness to reach out for assistance. As the book proceeds, the illustrations subtly depict the foursome becoming adolescents who still care about one another. The cartoonish artwork is colorful and
lively, though undistinguished. The nature of song lyrics is there’s a repetitive element to them, so these important words and the overarching messages about support, outreach, and the permanency of friendships are easy to recall, absorb, and, hopefully, emulate. Readers eager to hear Withers’ uplifting song will be pleased by the inclusion of a QR code that allows them to listen to it on platforms such as Spotify or Tidal. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A positive, inspirational message for children to lean on and into. (Picture book. 4-8)

**VIVIAN VAN TASSEL AND THE SECRET OF MIDNIGHT LAKE**
Witwer, Michael
Aladdin (368 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781665918190

There’s a reason the popular role-playing game Beasts and Battlements originated in Midnight Lake, Wisconsin. Twelve-year-old Vivian Van Tassel has extraordinary fencing skills, a short temper, a passion for Harry Potter books, and a dead mother—for which she blames herself. Moving to her mother’s hometown of Midnight Lake just exacerbates her negative feelings, as she endures bullies and nasty teachers at her new school. Still, despite insisting she doesn’t want friends, Vivian does gradually connect with four Beasts and Battlements gamers. Then, while doing a local history project, Vivian discovers unusual connections between B&B and Midnight Lake. Are the game beasts... real? She soon learns that vulturebears, leer spheres, and canimen belong to an “unholy alliance” fighting for Arborem, an ancient druid determined to eradicate humanity. Perhaps only Vivian, thanks to her mother’s special Silverthorn family heritage, can stop him. This fantasy adventure shines in Vivian’s struggle with grief and guilt and in its creatively crafted gaming elements. Following the prologue, though, active fantasy components disappear for many chapters, slowing the start, and some plot mechanisms feel contrived. As well, in our environmentally aware time, some readers might feel surprised to find a protective nature entity cast as the villain. Vivian and most human characters read White; one gamer is Black, and one has a Latine name.

This earnest but uneven fantasy will appeal most to role-playing-game fans. (Fantasy 9-12)

**BENI’S TINY TALES**
Zalben, Jane Breskin
Christy Ottaviano Books (144 pp.)
$21.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9780316331777

Join Beni the bear and his family as they celebrate a full year of Jewish holidays.

On the first night of Hanukkah, Beni and his observant Jewish family share food, remembrances, and presents for all the young ones. Beni gives each cub a calendar highlighting the Jewish holidays. His plan is to introduce each holiday in turn and make up a “tiny tale” for each one, beginning with Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year, which usually occurs in September. Beni starts the discussion of every holiday with information about its meaning and origins and the manner in which it is observed. These facts are followed by the promised tiny tale describing an amusing holiday memory and emphasizing loving, multigenerational family dynamics involving everyone from great-grandparents down to babies; often, a gentle moral is included. Mouthwatering recipes, activities, and songs round out the chapters. The clear, simple, and accessible narration is peppered with Yiddish and Hebrew expressions that add zest to the proceedings. Softly hued, detailed artwork subtly depicts the bears’ emotions and provides touches of humor as they take part in rituals and celebrations and interact at home, in the community, and in the synagogue. An illustrated holiday calendar, a family tree, and a portrait naming all the members of Beni’s family add depth to the work. Young readers and their grown-ups will find much to savor here.

Family, food, and festivities—what more could readers want? (glossary, index) (Activity book/religion. 5-10)
In 1995, Massachusetts high school senior Gibran’s ambivalent about attending a mostly White prep school. When a talent show performance by White students uses Black rapper aesthetics for cheap laughs, Gibran, quite literally, pulls the plug on it. This small act results in a strong warning: one more “disruption” before he’s expelled. His sympathetic mother reminds him to focus on his Howard University scholarship: “The question is, do you deserve the punishment you’re going to get for giving them what they deserve?” But when Gibran and others who wish to honor the upcoming Million Man March clash with administrators, his choices place him in jeopardy. In 1968, the day after Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, Columbia University student Kevin is organizing with the Society of Afro-American Students. They oppose Columbia’s expansion into Harlem, which would displace residents, and, as the Vietnam War rages, they want the university to renounce ties to war research. After reading sensationalized headlines, Kevin’s parents try to dissuade him from further participation in the lengthy, increasingly hostile student-led campus occupation. Allen constructs a vivid narrative that balances both timelines seamlessly and pointedly highlights often overlooked history. The crisp, succinct prose and fully realized characters make this a shining example of how principled research in lock step with exceptional writing creates an unforgettable reading experience.

An electric debut: a must-read for all. (acronyms and organizations, author’s note) (Fiction. 12-18)
Although censors continue to attack, publishers are putting out a richly diverse bounty of LGBTQ+ books that model inclusivity, ground and inspire young queer readers, and embrace allies. In the face of ongoing hatred and hostility, they proudly celebrate resilience.

Readers seeking humor will appreciate the following titles.

*The Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* by Deya Muniz (Little, Brown, May 9): an adorably punny graphic novel filled with bright, irresistible illustrations celebrating young queer love—and dairy products.

*Gay Club!* by Simon James Green (Scholastic, June 6): a hilariously over-the-top account of a British school’s complicated, drama-filled, high-stakes search for their next LGBTQ+ Society president.

*Darkhearts* by James L. Sutter (Wednesday Books, June 6): a funny, banter-filled story populated with engaging characters that centers two former band mates who fall in love following an estrangement.

Genre fiction is a perennial favorite for its strong storytelling; teens will enjoy getting lost in these absorbing reads.

*I Like Me Better* by Robby Weber (Inkyard Press, May 2): an engaging love story in which a star soccer player gets into trouble but discovers a bright side to mandatory community service.

*You Don’t Have a Shot* by Racquel Marie (Feiwel & Friends, May 9): a compelling coming-of-age story as growth in self-awareness and love unfolds on the soccer pitch when two rival girls must work together.

*Time Out* by Sean Hayes and Todd Milliner with Carlyn Greenwald (Simon & Schuster, May 30): an uplifting story about a young basketball player who comes out in a spectacular way and encounters both homophobia and unconditional acceptance, co-authored by Will & Grace star Hayes.

Knowledge of history, connection to elders, and awareness of wider communities can help young people who are feeling unmoored; these books help readers see beyond their own immediate circles.

*Only This Beautiful Moment* by Abdi Nazemian (Balzer+Bray/HarperCollins, May 9): an unforgettable intergenerational story following an Iranian family in Tehran and Los Angeles that explores sexuality and more through a cross-cultural lens.

*From Here* by Luma Mufleh (Nancy Paulsen Books, May 16): an inspiring, heartfelt memoir by a gay, Muslim, Arab immigrant, the founder of a non-profit supporting young refugees, who shares her remarkable story.

*I Like Me Better* by Abdi Nazemian (Balzer+Bray/HarperCollins, May 9): a celebratory romance with queer teens on a mission to help one girl’s grandmother reunite with her long-lost lesbian lover.

*Pedro & Daniel* by Federico Erebia, illustrated by Julie Kwon (Levine Querido, June 6): a deeply moving fictional work following two gay brothers, one of whom dies of AIDS, inspired by the author’s life. (Read our interview with Erebia on Page 122.)

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
FRONTERA
Anta, Julio
Illus. by Jacoby Salcedo
HarperAlley (240 pp.)
$26.99 | $18.99 paper | July 18, 2023
9780063054950
9780063054943 paper

Undocumented and recently deported Mexican national Mateo Renteria sets out on a harrowing journey across the Sonoran Desert to return to the United States for his senior year of high school.

Mateo is shocked to learn that his parents, in order to provide a better life for him, brought him to the U.S. at a young age. But the family can no longer stay. After a judge sends the Renterias back to Guadalajara, Mateo’s parents prepare to reunite him with his grandmother in Phoenix. Too impatient to follow the advice of the coyote his parents hired, Mateo runs headfirst toward the border—and into trouble. He finds help in the unlikeliest of places: Guillermo, the ghost of a queer young man who died nearly 70 years ago. Mateo is equal parts determined and naïve, while Guillermo’s presence and moving backstory provide relevant historical context for the plight of those crossing the border. Warm, vibrant colors deftly wash over the interestingly varied panels, depicting the brutal, inescapable heat and the intensity of being on the move in a geographically and politically hostile environment. There are also scenes of startling natural beauty and emotional vulnerability. A caption notes that the dialogue, presented in English, is assumed to be Spanish unless otherwise noted.

A stirring supernatural framing of an all too common and heartbreaking reality.

FORGIVE ME NOT
Baker, Jennifer
Nancy Paulsen Books (400 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780593406847

Violetta wanted a classy night of connection and affection with boyfriend Pascal; instead, the night ends up being one of destruction, despair, and death. Fifteen-year-old Violetta Chen-Samuels’ decision to drive drunk caused the death of her 7-year-old sister, Vivian. Now she’s incarcerated in a juvenile justice facility, and her family has declined to forgive her, instead requesting that she participate in the Trials, interactive experiences ostensibly designed to teach her the severity of her actions. In chapters told from the alternating perspectives of Violetta and Vincent, her older brother, the circumstances that led up to the night of Vivian’s death are explored, as are Violetta’s experience of incarceration and her realization that forgiving herself may be more important than attaining the forgiveness of others. Central themes include questions of what constitutes justice, the state’s role in achieving it, and the ways that power and privilege corrupt the pursuit of it. Baker’s writing excels at showing rather than telling through vivid details that contribute to pacing that drags in the middle, although the last quarter of the book feels rushed. Violetta and her siblings are Chinese American on their mom’s side, and their dad is Black. Vincent and an aunt are unapologetically queer, as are some other supporting characters.

A multilayered, if uneven consideration of family, justice, the pressures teens face, and the power of forgiveness.

(author’s note) (Fiction. 14-18)
DAMNED IF YOU DO
Brown, Alex
Page Street (345 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781645679998

A week before the 100th anniversary of a Massachusetts town’s founding, demons emerge.

Urban legend has it that Ruin’s End founder Ryeland Jones made a deal with a demon to establish the town. Deal Day, the eve of the town’s anniversary, is said to be a time when one person’s wish is granted. Skeptic Cordelia Scott does not buy it. That is, until Fred Williams, a demon masquerading as her cheesy high school guidance counselor, confirms that not only is Deal Day real, but Cordelia actually made a bargain with Fred when she banished her abusive father seven years ago. As the stage manager for Our Demon Town, a musical about the town’s founding, Cordelia is heading into a grueling tech week when Fred tasks her with a seemingly impossible mission that will require her to literally face her inner demons of guilt and self-hate and very real monsters—like an aswang from Filipino folktales. She is helped by many, including best friend and love interest Veronica, and also turns to her Catholic church for support. Fans of black comedy will enjoy the quirky plot, preposterous premise of a demon trapped in a Precious Moments Maleficent figurine, and scenes of gory violence sprinkled with sardonic commentary. However, the story is let down by confusing plot gaps and repetition that impedes deeper character development. Cordelia and Veronica are FILipina; most other characters are cued White.

In need of refinement. (Paranormal. 13-18)

LOVE & RESISTANCE
Chen, Kara H.L.
Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins (352 pp.)
$16.99 | July 4, 2023
9780063237834

Olivia Chang knows how to navigate a new high school. Her mother is in the military, and they’re constantly moving, so she’s comfortable being known as The New Girl. Olivia knows exactly how to be invisible and avoid attention from the popular crowd. But in her junior year in Plainstown, Ohio, in what she hopes will be her last new school, she finds herself violating her own rules and bantering with a guy from French class—and landing right in the crosshairs of No. 1 popular girl Mitzi Clarke. Events take a turn for the unexpected as Olivia learns of (and eventually helps lead) a movement to topple the school’s social power structure. The story’s blend of romance, action, humor, and social issues comes together with mixed success. Olivia’s invocation of her Taiwanese immigrant grandfather’s experiences as she faces anti-Asian racism is heartfelt and effective (the school seems to be predominantly White). The neat pairing off of central characters feels convenient to the plot, but the romances are endearing. While there are allusions to more serious incidents, the novel largely avoids showing the deeper impacts of bullying, making its tackling of tough topics feel inconsistent in tone. Still, the narrative’s quick pace and creative turns should keep readers’ interest all the way to the thoughtful ending.

An entertaining, if lightweight exploration of high school social hierarchies. (Fiction. 12-18)

WHERE THE LOCKWOOD GROWS
Cole, Olivia A.
Little, Brown (352 pp.)
$16.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780316449120

A company-town dystopia laced with a climate change message.

Set in an unspecified future time, this novel follows 12-year-old Erie, who was named after one of the two Great Lakes that hasn’t dried up yet; her 16-year-old sister, Hurona, was named after the other. Erie works in the branches of the lockwood trees that surround her town of Prine. The fireproof, human-invented lockwood, planted after the devastating Arborklept fire, grows so quickly that each morning, Prine’s younger kids cut away top branches to let the sun in and harvest the pods the tree produces. Each week, FOLROY company trucks from the wealthy city of Petrichor pick up the pods and pulp, paying the townspeople a pittance. The grim lives of Prine’s residents are well described, but readers will wonder why Erie dreads growing too big to work in the tree; it’s not explained why that’s preferable to being safer on the ground, where Hurona works. After Hurona and Erie discover something sinister about the lockwood, they smuggle themselves to Petrichor to find the scientist who developed it. At least that’s Erie’s intent; the one surprising plot twist is what Hurona’s actual mission is. Erie’s thoughts often interrupt the narrative flow with strained metaphoric connections and ultimately come across as telling readers rather than letting them figure things out for themselves. Erie and Hurona are White, and Hurona is queer; the supporting cast is diverse in race and sexuality.

Earnest but heavy-handed. (Dystopian. 12-14)
Three teen psychics attempt to uncover the supernatural mystery of Elias Thornfield and Fairfax Hall in this modern reimagining of Jane Eyre.

Jane Reye is utterly and effectively alone. Without anything—or anyone—in her life to keep her in Indiana, she accepts a job investigating the strange happenings at Fairfax Hall in Derbyshire, England. Jane is no stranger to the supernatural given her ability to use her art to see spirits. Alongside hunky telepath Giovanni and tarot reader Ingrid, Jane attempts to deal with the strange entity that Elias is desperate to be rid of. Her relationship with Elias continues to develop, and she soon realizes his entanglement with the malicious being is more complicated than he first let on. More truths are revealed even as time is running out, and as the stakes get more serious, Jane becomes willing to do anything to save Elias. Though the premise promises something new, the execution doesn't deliver. The story starts slowly and never takes off, always seemingly at the precipice of action that just fizzles into the next plot point. The pop-culture one-liners seem intended to inject a humorous undertone, but they don't ring true. Readers will long for deeper development of the relationships to make the closeness by the end feel earned. Characters are cued White.

A disappointing attempt to breathe new life into a classic. (Paranormal. 14-18)
UNDERGROUND
Fight Club
De Bard, JR
Rockport Publishers (208 pp.)
$13.99 paper | May 16, 2023
9780760382363
Series: Underground, 1

Testosterone soaks the pages of this ultraviolent urban martial arts comic.

In pursuit of the sneering giant who challenged him outside the gym one day and smashed his Olympic dreams along with his ribs, kickboxer Karim Yun dives into the corrupt and sordid world of no-rules cage fighting to pulp and be pulped by invariably larger opponents—notably proud boxer Leon Espinosa, who becomes an ally and second protagonist partway through after deciding that he doesn't like being ordered to deliberately throw fights. Spatters of blood, sound effects (“WHAM,” “BOOM,” “URGH!”), and blurred figures capture the impact of heavy blows to heads and bodies during bouts; meanwhile the mix of vocal and inner dialogue delivers technical commentary on strikes and strategy (“A 540 hook kick knockout?!” “A one-shot kill liver blow!”) that is supplemented by detailed views, sometimes even X-rays, of cracked bones and mangled joints and organs. Aside from Maya Kang, a nurse who attaches herself to Karim to doctor him between fights and be rescued from assaults by leering louts, the only women here are lingerie-clad and shown fawning over fight promoters, but De Bard provides views aplenty of strutting, tattooed, massively chiseled males to gawk at. Names cue some ethnic diversity in the cast, as do differences in skin tone and hair texture in the monochrome art.

Gore-splattered lessons in anatomy as well as bringing the pain. (Graphic fiction. 16-adult)

KISMAT CONNECTION
Devarajan, Ananya
Inkyard Press (304 pp.)
$18.99 | June 13, 2023
9781335453686

A story centering intense and heartfelt family dynamics.

Arjun Mehta has been in love with best friend Madhuri Iyer since they were 13. As senior year begins, the duo sit down for their annual astrological reading by Madhuri’s mom. Apparently, Arjun is going to have a year filled with successes in “education, athletics, and love.” Madhuri, however, struggles against the prediction that this year she’ll “crash and burn.” She also resents the prophecy that says the women in her family will marry the first person they fall in love with; to her, it feels like a curse stopping her from having casual fun with dating. Madhuri hatches an experiment about kismat, or fate: She and Arjun will date until June, proving Madhuri is in charge of her own destiny. Only, their feelings deepen even as Arjun deals with his frequently absent divorced mother, who now makes occasional forays into establishing a relationship, and Madhuri struggles to embrace Indian culture in the face of internalized shame resulting from bullying by former friends. Strongly portrayed family dynamics add depth and tension to Arjun and Madhuri’s romance, although the pace of this debut is at times too slow and characters’ feelings are often spelled out for readers with a heavy hand. However, the cast members are a joy to spend time with, and the familial and romantic subplots intertwine beautifully.

A romantic read celebrating love, self-acceptance, and familial ties. (Romance. 13-18)

CLOAK OF SCARLET
Dickerson, Melanie
Thomas Nelson (336 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780840708199
Series: A Dericott Tale

A plot to expose a greedy nobleman in 1386 England leads two justice seekers to fall in love.

When Violet, named for her unusually colored eyes, learns that her grandmother has become a victim of Baron Dunham’s unlawful so-called protection tax, she is determined to alert King Richard to the injustice but is intercepted by the baron’s men. After she is taken before the baron, Violet, who was adopted as a young child, learns a tragic and shocking secret about her own history. The baron, meanwhile, is scheming to increase his own power and has plans that threaten Violet. But Violet keeps crossing paths with Sir Merek of Dericott, a knight who has recently joined the baron’s household at the king’s request. Sir Merek proves trustworthy, and he and Violet join forces to try to find the secret account book that will prove to the king what the baron has been doing to exploit his subjects. Over time, Violet and Sir Merek fall in love. Though Violet is high-spirited, and she and Sir Merek are well developed, most of the cast is one-dimensional, and the medieval setting feels spare and underdeveloped. There are some references to previous novels in the series, but this entry, in which Christianity is woven throughout, succeeds as a stand-alone. All characters are cued White.

A period Christian romance that is lean on historical atmosphere. (Historical romance. 12-18)
Eighteen-year-old Sloan narrowly escapes a massacre at a summer camp but is left missing her memory.

Sloan expected to spend the summer before heading off to college having fun working as a counselor at Camp Money Springs, but her plans are cut brutally short when a band of men wearing carved wooden animal masks show up and slaughter everyone in the night with machetes. Only Sloan and her now-girlfriend, Cherry, survive, but Sloan can't remember anything about how they escaped, relying only on Cherry's version of events to fill in the gaps. As Sloan desperately tries to regain her own memories about that night and answer the myriad questions she has, her trust in Cherry begins to unravel. Sloan begins to wonder if anything she's been told is true, if Cherry may have somehow been involved in the massacre, and if the mystery of Sloan's own adoption 14 years earlier could be the answer to everything. Sloan's confusion and growing uncertainty build palpable tension as events hurtle forward in a haunting and compelling manner. Sloan and Cherry's codependent relationship rings true and feels suffocating and difficult to escape from, never quite allowing readers to develop trust in any one character. Occasionally, Sloan's unreliability as a narrator can feel repetitive, but overall, this element adds to the frantic march toward a shocking and satisfying conclusion. Main characters read White; there is some racial diversity in secondary characters.

A queer psychological thriller with teeth. (Thriller. 14-18)
To create his extraordinary debut novel, *Pedro & Daniel* (Levine Querido, June 6), Federico Erebia revisited his years growing up with younger brother Daniel in their big and complicated Mexican American family. By knitting together vivid scenes from their lives in small-town Ohio, Erebia explores the contours of homosexuality, religion, racism, colorism, domestic violence, abuse, neurodivergence, HIV/AIDS, and the infinite intersections these threads knot themselves into. The result is a rich and captivating story, with illustrations by Julie Kwon, that Kirkus, in a starred review, calls “stunning.” We recently met with Erebia at a coffee shop in Boston; our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Pedro & Daniel** is a work of fiction. But it is rooted in your own lived experience from 1968 to 1992—the character Pedro is, in essence, you. What made you decide to write fiction and not a straightforward memoir?

I think it’s important to understand that this is a four-arc book. It has a full arc of Pedro’s life from age 5 until age 30 (covering the years 1968 to 1992). A full arc is Daniel’s life during the same period. There’s an arc in Part 1 told from a variety of third-person perspectives, and a later arc, told in the alternating first-person perspectives of Pedro and Daniel, as Daniel faces HIV infection and AIDS. To write this, I had to put myself in Daniel's position and in his head. Memoir wouldn't have allowed for that.

Creating a fictionalized world from real-life memory is a complicated dance. You’re aiming for truth, but to get there you have to grant yourself some license with fact. I built all of these scenes partly from memory but also from scratch. I had to borrow from different memories and visions from 50 years ago, with enough specifics to really put readers in those moments as much as possible. The important thing for readers is to understand what’s going on in the boys’ minds.

**Pedro & Daniel** are incredibly close. And they are both gay. But Pedro doesn’t discuss his sexuality with Daniel until he’s in his 20s. Why?

Keeping it to myself was a survival tactic. If it came out in any way that I was a maricon, nothing would prevent my mother from killing me because that would be the greatest shame. It wasn’t any kind of internalized homophobia or dishonesty or not loving who I was. But you never knew. I learned to dissociate in order to mask everything. If I confirmed the facts, there would be no taking it back. As bad as it was, it would have been worse.

Throughout the book, you use dichos, or proverbs, to open windows into the boys’ minds. Daniel especially loves them. One—“Recordar es volver a vivir” (“To remember is to live again”)—also shows up on the
It feels incomplete to write about the gay experience without humor. It’s so central to who we are.
Even in the face of so many adversities that these boys face, they found joy through laughter. I wanted the reader to experience that just as the boys did. But also, I understood that I was putting the reader in very difficult positions and situations, and I didn’t want to keep them there. I wanted to give them something to laugh about—a break. You need to have the full spectrum of emotions, because they’re human. As gay people, our humor is real, and I wouldn’t even say that it’s learned, necessarily. It’s just there, and we nurture it, develop it, use it. It saves us.

There are moments of searing violence in the book, but you sometimes temper them with diversions into, for example, science and psychology and the way our minds and bodies work. In one instance, during an intense, abusive attack, you explain in a relatively dispassionate voice exactly why nerve endings in the scalp are so sensitive and why broken vessels in the scalp produce so much blood. These detours offer a generous breather and a semblance of safe remove.
I want to help the reader as they’re reading those scenes, because I know it’s a tough read. For me, I can’t even watch a movie when there’s violence. I turn it off. I don’t want readers to experience that. I hope that I’m being careful as I’m taking the reader along, helping the reader, nurturing the reader, so that they can move forward and experience the lives of these two boys.

Pedro is the older brother, but for much of the book Daniel is the one offering support and guidance. But Daniel hardly has everything figured out. Far from it. Especially in the spiritual realm.
I spent a lot of time with Pedro looking to Daniel for all the answers, but I also want to show Daniel as not really in control of all of his urges, including with his sexuality. He was human. He had his own demons. I really wanted to show his struggle with the Catholic Church, with his own spiritual-
THE HILLS OF ESTRELLA ROJA
Franklin, Ashley Robin
Colors by Nakata Whittle
Clarion/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
9780358567035
9780358567028 paper

A slowly building graphic novel full of creepy monsters and tense family dynamics.

Eighteen-year-old Marisol Castilllo’s spring break involves traveling to the small Texas town of Estrella Roja to attend the funeral of the abuela she hasn’t seen since childhood due to a family estrangement. Nineteen-year-old Kat Fields, who co-hosts the podcast Paranormal Texas, heads there too after receiving an email tip about strange “devil lights” and learning of the town’s history of unusual events. Eager to pursue these leads for her podcast, Kat changes her spring break plans with friends and takes off alone to explore the mystery. Despite repeated warnings, Kat ventures into the hills but finds locals unwilling to talk about the town’s past. Then she meets Mari. Mari finds her extended family’s detachment and hostility palpable, and she senses they are keeping something from her. Increasingly suspicious about their secrets and eager to spend time with Kat, she joins her quest. As they make terrifying discoveries in the hills and face the townsfolk’s hostility, Mari and Kat realize they can trust no one else, and their fast friendship blooms with an awkward first-crush cuteness that gently slows the plot’s momentum. Franklin’s energetic, full-color artwork pulses with emotion and movement. Kat reads White; in addition to Latine Mari, characters reflect the diversity of the Texas population.

A queer graphic horror with an upbeat vibe. (concept art) (Graphic horror. 13-18)

THE REUNION
Frick, Kit
McElderry (320 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781665921466

What are the Mayweathers hiding, and what are they willing to do to keep their secrets hidden while holidaying in paradise?

The Mayweather family teenagers are bonded by the Incident, which happened three years ago. Sixteen-year-old Addison Acker-Mayweather is “the family diplomat,” determined to keep the peace at all costs. Her twin brother, Mason, has a secret of his own that he’s kept from the rest of the family. Their cousin Natalia Mayweather, also 16, is preoccupied with her online boyfriend, Seth. The cousins are reunited the day after Christmas for a weeklong extended family vacation in Cancún to celebrate Addison and Mason’s mom’s engagement to Austin Hunt, who’s accompanied by his 17-year-old son, Theo. As the Mayweather family gathers once again, mysteries begin to unravel. Interspersed between chapters are emails and newspaper stories from January, revealing that one of the teenagers has gone missing. Told in alternating viewpoints from Addison’s, Mason’s, Natalia’s, and Theo’s perspectives, this slow-burn thriller gradually reveals the Mayweather family’s secrets, building up to a cliffhanger ending. The suspense is palpable, and while the pace drags at times, the Mayweather teens have enough interpersonal drama to keep readers hooked. Queer representation is a strong point: Theo is bisexual, and Natalia has two mothers. The Mayweather family is largely cued White; Natalia is White and Puerto Rican.

A suspenseful and atmospheric story of a family with a messy history. (family tree) (Thriller. 14-18)

MY FATHER, THE PANDA KILLER
Hoang, Jamie Jo
Crown (384 pp.)
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Aug. 29, 2023
9780593642962
9780593642979 PLB

A Vietnamese father and daughter wrestle with intergenerational trauma in San Jose.

It’s the summer of 1999, and 17-year-old Jane Vũ is resentful: Her mom left three years ago, and Jane wakes up before dawn to open her family’s convenience store, where she has worked the register since age 11. Jane and Paul, the 7-year-old brother she’s taken care of since he was a baby, are routinely beaten by their abusive father, Phúc. Despite all this, she got into UCLA, her ticket to a better life. But now Jane is struggling to tell Paul she’ll be leaving. Before she goes, she has a story to tell him, one that follows a 13-year-old Phúc in 1975 as he attempts to escape Vietnam during the war. Leaving his hometown of Đà Nẵng, Phúc encounters pirates, sharks, and other horrors on his way to the United States. The two narratives alternate, offering parallels between the harsh realities faced by a war refugee and his daughter. A sharp, introspective lead, Jane works to reconcile her father’s love with his cruelty and is biting candid on the subjects of Vietnamese stereotypes, culture, and people—including her parents. The painfully raw depictions of Phúc’s brutality are arduous to read, but even so, Hoang successfully makes the case for offering empathy over judgment.

A gripping and difficult story of a family surviving abuse. (glossary of characters) (Fiction. 15-adult)
“Richly layered.”

*THE DARK PLACE*

Jayne, Hannah
Sourcebooks Fire (352 pp.)
$11.99 paper | Aug. 29, 2023
9781728262918

A teenage girl whose mother struggles with mental illness navigates a new school, new friendships, and a crime she may have committed.

Seventeen-year-old Lennox Oliver, the new girl in her San Jose, California, high school, is finally fitting in and finding friends after having lived in many different places with her traveling ER nurse father. It’s been the two of them since she was 9, ever since her mother was admitted to a mental hospital for treatment for her schizophrenia. One night, while Lennox is driving with friends, she hits someone—she clearly sees the frightened girl in her headlights before feeling a thump. But while there’s a dent in the car, there’s no body.

In the days following, Lennox feels like she’s unraveling, and she worries that she’s succumbing to schizophrenia too. Jayne paints a picture of a teen whose life feels almost perfect—with nice friends, a boyfriend, a great school—except for the possibility that she’s a murderer looming over her. This story, told with plenty of flashbacks, visions, red herrings, and snappy dialogue, draws readers into a twisted tale exploring questions of conscience and belonging. Anxiety inducing and full of twists and turns yet realistic and relatable, it will keep readers on the edges of their seats.

A fast-paced thriller that will have readers questioning what’s real. (*Thriller. 14-18*)

Kay, Lauren
HarperTeen (320 pp.)
$18.99 | June 20, 2023
9780063230996

A complicated story of family dysfunction blended with a frothy romance.

Seventeen-year-old Olivia Schwartz’s drive masks the intense anxiety she’s carried since finding her beloved older brother dead six years ago. Her parents never mention Logan; her 5-year-old twin brothers don’t even know he existed. But on a family cruise, carefree Jules—an old summer camp friend who happens to be there too—tempts Olivia to put aside the science fair research that could get her a prestigious internship with a surgeon, drink alcohol to ease her social awkwardness (consider it “a trial run” for college parties, Jules says), and go after sexy fellow passenger Sebastian. Olivia’s deep repression starts to ease as she tries a more relaxed teen life for the first time, but when she opens up about Logan, Sebastian and Jules keep saying things about him that bother her, leading to an explosive revelation that shakes up Olivia’s understanding of her family.

A fast-paced thriller that will have readers questioning what’s real. (*Thriller. 14-18*)

Britney S. Lewis
Disney-Hyperion (368 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781368077736

A high school senior vows to solve her older brother’s cold case while warding off the growing darkness of an unseen world.

Seventeen-year-old Hylee Williams never wanted to leave Kansas. But after she literally vanished and reappeared in front of her parents and best friend during a cookout, Hylee was sent to live with her paternal grandmother in the cookie-cutter suburbs of Missouri. Hylee’s new life is less than desirable. She’s the new kid at school, her parents barely keep in touch—and she’s being pulled into another dimension, always arriving at a sinister version of her childhood home, where she’s forced to relive the night when her then-15-year-old brother, Bubba, went missing. Bubba’s body was never found, but nine years later, Hylee believes he is still alive. When Hylee meets a charmingly awkward boy called Eilam Roads at a house party, the attraction is undeniable; both feel as though they’ve met—and loved—each other before. As the frequency and duration of Hylee’s time-traveling episodes increase, she leans on Eilam to help control her ability, which may be linked to Bubba’s disappearance. Lewis’ genre-bending second novel offers equal parts star-crossed romance and spine-tingling science fiction horror. The method for time traveling is too easily explained, but the narrative is richly layered, and Hylee and Eilam’s relationship is depicted with tenderness.

An ultimately hopeful story that shows love—in all its powerful forms—can conquer the demons of the past. (*Horror. 13-18*)
BELLEGARDE
Lilac, Jamie
HarperTeen (320 pp.)
$15.99 paper | July 11, 2023
978006238598

Evie Clément unexpectedly finds herself up for the coveted title of Bellegarde Bloom while questioning her growing feelings for the boy who got her there as part of a wager.

Each year in Paris, the Court of Flowers selects the Bellegarde Bloom, the most desirable of the marriageable girls at the ball. Seventeen-year-old Evie, the daughter of a baker, is an unlikely candidate. But Beau Bellegarde has accepted a bet from Julien, his half brother, in exchange for Julien's inheritance, which forms the bulk of their family's estate. The challenge: that Beau can make any girl into the Bloom—and thanks to Beau's secret interventions, Evie secures a nomination. What wasn't in the plans? Their growing feelings for one another and the added complications of Beau's dishonesty and a duke's competing interest in Evie. The chapters switch between Evie's and Beau's first-person perspectives, helping readers become aware of feelings and plot points that other characters are not privy to. The pre-revolutionary, early modern setting is cued through mentions of Versailles, carriages, and fashions such as powdered hair. This fun and fluffy story wraps up with a satisfying ending. Most characters present White; Evie's best friend, Josephine, and some other background characters are Black.

A familiar plotline delivers exactly what readers want: sweet, romantic fun. (Romance. 13-17)

NO LIMIT ON LOVE
Lister, Alison
James Lorimer (184 pp.)
$27.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781459417243
Series: Lorimer Real Love

Eleventh grader Dan preps for a music solo and falls in love in this queer story for reluctant readers.

In the wake of a massive storm and dayslong power outages in Ottawa, Dan is the only one to show up for the cleanup effort of the school grounds that Levi organizes. Romantic sparks fly, and Dan finds himself falling for Levi as they spend more time together. All the while, Dan is considering their gender identity and, plagued by anxiety, worrying about the state of the world. Dan also struggles with the lingering psychological impact of the storm along with prepping for their solo for vocal music class. On top of all that, Mindy, Levi's ex, is trying to cause trouble for Dan at school. Dan's own disavowal of gender roles comes across as somewhat performative, as they judge their own mother for sometimes not wearing a bra and look down on Mindy for her more traditionally feminine presentation. While Dan's music class performance is the closest thing to an overarching thread, it doesn't receive much focus outside a few scenes, so the payoff doesn't feel particularly climactic. Even Mindy, the closest thing to an overall antagonist, only sticks around for two chapters before she is dealt with. Major characters are White.

Disappointing. (Romance. 14-18)

SAVAGE BRED
McCombs, Victoria
Enclave Escape (272 pp.)
$24.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
979886050622
Series: The Royal Rose Chronicles, 3

The crew of the Royal Rose return for their third and final voyage across the seas.

Friends-turned-lovers Emme and Arn have been forcibly separated, and as the story opens, a newly healthy Emme believes Arn has willingly left her, while Arn is meanwhile desperately trying to find Emme. As Emme has embraced a life sailing the seas together with Emric, her brother, and Ontario, their mutual friend, and has plans to entrap her mother, the once-infamous pirate Arabella the Ruthless, Arn finds himself in the service of a merciless king, becoming the terror of the seas he never wanted to be. Life at sea really is not easy, and Emme's and Arn's ways back to each other are full of danger, death, and deception. While this closing chapter in the Royal Rose Chronicles trilogy still features in spades the adventure, back-stabbing, and twists that readers have come to expect, the story falls short of the promising earlier volumes in presenting a tale full of parallel stories that don't quite merge into a cohesive whole and character arcs that sadly do not feel fully fleshed out. A late introduction of technology feels out of place in the otherwise whimsical, magical worldbuilding, and while this is the official end to the trilogy, some threads are left wide open for future swashbuckling exploits.

A disappointing ending. (Fantasy. 14-18)

I’LL TELL YOU NO LIES
McCrina, Amanda
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (224 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9780374390990

An American teenager becomes entangled in a web of lies with a Soviet defector during the Cold War.

The year is 1955, and Shelby Blaine is grieving the death of her mother three weeks prior when her life is turned upside down again. Col. Blaine, Shelby’s father, is in Air Force intelligence, and he’s been given a special assignment that takes
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them from their military base in Germany to upstate New York, where his expertise is required to debrief a Soviet defector. Eighteen-year-old Shelby makes the acquaintance of the defector, a young Ukrainian pilot named Maksym Kostyshyn, at a welcoming party, but the next day she learns that he has escaped without a trace after the military found a hole in his story. When Maksym makes contact with her, Shelby has to decide whether to turn him in under suspicion that he is in fact a KGB operative or to believe him when he insists that he is telling the truth. What follows is a fast-paced, twisty story that keeps readers on their toes. Along with Shelby, they will be unsure who to believe and who can be trusted. This spy thriller is peppered with rich period details. Shelby's character feels like an authentic portrayal of an intelligent, college-bound teenager of the time, lending the book the realistic air of the past come vivid life.

A fascinating dive into a segment of history that reverberates today. (author's note) (Historical thriller. 13-18)

SOMETHING CLOSE TO MAGIC
Mills, Emma
Atheneum (384 pp.)
$19.99 | June 13, 2023
9781665926911

A gently magical tale about the powers of friendship and embracing one’s identity.

Forced to leave school and her magical education three years prior, 17-year-old Aurelie has forsaken her magic and works as an unpaid baker’s apprentice. Her seeking abilities are of little value in a world where people believe magic comes at a steep cost. But when finder Iliana enters the bakery with a set of seeking stones and a tempting financial offer to split a bounty, Aurelie cannot refuse. Thus begins a quest to find a set of seeking stones and a tempting financial offer to split at a steep cost. But when finder Iliana enters the bakery with a set of seeking stones and a tempting financial offer to split a bounty, Aurelie cannot refuse. Thus begins a quest to find a set of seeking stones and a tempting financial offer to split a bounty. Aurelie cannot refuse. Thus begins a quest to find a set of seeking stones and a tempting financial offer to split a bounty.

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This appealingly breezy novel will whet readers’ appetites for magic and adventure. (Fantasy. 12-17)

A TALL DARK TROUBLE
Montalban, Vanessa
Zando Young Readers (984 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781678205683

Plagued by a family curse to only know doomed love, 18-year-old Cuban American twin sisters descend into a struggle involving magic, traditions, and murder.

Despite Mami’s efforts to eradicate magic from their lives, Lela and Delfi seek to develop their bruja gifts after they are haunted by strange visions of a woman’s death. Aided by Ethan (their best friend and Lela’s crush) and Andres (Delfi’s jilted ex and an aspiring sleuth), the girls uncover a sinister plot involving some powerful brujos who may have a connection to Mami’s family history. What did she run away from back in Cuba? In a separate storyline set in 1980, nearly 40 years before the twins’ adventure, 18-year-old Anita grapples with her predestined path among la Orden de las Palomas. Led by Mamá Orti, Anita’s mother, las Palomas is a malicious group of formidable magic practitioners who pledge their collective might to serve Castro and secure their place among the Cuban elite. Ordained to ascend as Mamá Orti’s successor, Anita gradually repudiates las Palomas and el Comandante’s sphere of brutality in pursuit of seemingly unattainable freedom alongside her brother and friends. Featuring nuanced depictions of Afro-Cuban religious practices, Montalban’s assured debut goes in heavy with an exploration of multigenerational trauma and its accompanying psychic pain. Richly rendered main characters and a knotty central mystery captivate. Even though secondary characters at times fall flat and some obvious plot twists distract, this is overall a strong page-turner.

Utterly bewitching. (author’s note) (Paranormal. 14-18)

EXPLORING CAREERS IN THE CREATIVE ARTS
Nardo, Don
ReferencePoint Press (64 pp.)
$32.95 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781678205683

Wondering whether your creative bent can become a full-time job? Read on.

In an introduction, Nardo acknowledges the challenges of making a living solely from creative work but also the drive that induces creative to make art. Casting a very wide net, the author considers six broad categories of creative workers: art directors, craft artists, fine artists, performing artists, designers, and media and communications artists. Following the series format, for each category Nardo first explains the nature of the specific position; e.g., art directors unify the work of a team in pursuit of a specific look or style. Essential background preparation (a degree,
“Thoughtful and compelling.”

EXPLORING NORSE MYTHOLOGY
Nardo, Don
ReferencePoint Press (64 pp.)
$32.95 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781678205720

Five brief chapters cover many highlights of the substantial body of Norse myths.

Beginning with Yggdrasil, the World Tree; the race of gods called the Aesir; and the worldview, cosmology, and values inherent in the myths, Nardo then retells and comments on key stories. (Many others, however, like Baldr’s death, Sigyn’s catching the poison dripping on Loki, or the forging of Thor’s hammer, are omitted.)

Citing historians and scholars, Nardo discusses the possible impetus behind the motifs and preoccupations found in these tales. One chapter traces the gods’ (especially Odin’s) various quests. Another examines Norse attitudes to fighting and death and their conception of the afterlife. A chapter is devoted to dwarves, elves, and other supernatural beings, and the final chapter traces the ultimate destruction of the Aesir and their world. Sidebars define words and explain such topics as the Poetic Edda, an early written source of the myths; Norse worship practices; and the battle of Ragnarok. Many colorful illustrations and a couple of photographs add a romantic flavor, balancing the solid, practical data clearly presented here is valuable for creative youths and those who guide them.

Introduces essential information for anyone considering a future in the arts. (source notes, jobs list, index, picture credits) (Nonfiction. 13-18)

A teenage girl searches for her missing sister with the help of the last person to see her alive in this debut mystery.

It has been almost one year since Teddy’s twin sister, Izzy, disappeared during a midnight swim across Bottomrock Lake. The police believe Izzy drowned, but Teddy feels there is more to the story. Bisexual Izzy was training to try out to swim in the Olympics, so the mile swim should have been nothing for her. Adding to Teddy’s suspicions are the mysterious text Izzy sent her just before she went missing and the fact that Izzy’s passport has also vanished. After spending the last year searching for leads, Teddy is close to giving up as she returns to her old summer job as a lifeguard at the lake. But when Toby Smith, Izzy’s friend from swim team who was with her that fateful night, shows up to work as a lifeguard too, she feels that this must be a sign to keep looking. Believing that Toby is hiding something and desperate for answers about the sister she thought she knew so well, Teddy decides to form a relationship with him that soon becomes its own mystery. The plot unfolds at a deliberate pace as themes of grief, family, identity, and guilt are explored; it’s less a whodunit than a character-driven account of Teddy’s journey and relationship with her sister. Main characters are coded White.

Thoughtful and compelling. (Mystery. 13-18)

SKY OF SEVEN COLORS
Nelson, Rachelle
Enclave Escape (368 pp.)
$24.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9798886050585

Seventeen-year-old Meg has already lost her mother, and now she is about to lose her best friend, Andrew, to college. But Meg never imagined that she might lose her whole world. When a terrible accident leaves Andrew clinging to life by a thread, Meg is blindsided by grief and guilt. Hiking back to the site of the accident—where Andrew at last confessed his love for her—she is suddenly transported to a space between worlds, unable to return to her own. Trapped in a strange, colorless land among giants who believe she is the key to the salvation of their kind, Meg must fight to save those she loves, possibly even at the expense of her own life. Ironically, the bookends of the narrative set in the human world feel less vivid than the gray world of the giants. There’s something ineffably beautiful about the whimsical and wild fantasy world and culture Nelson has created. Meg is an interesting narrator, defined more by her circumstances and choices (or lack thereof) than her personality,

apprenticeship, employment experience, etc.) for each type of work is then described along with pay levels, important skills, working conditions, a typical workday, and, finally, annotated websites providing further information for each category. Quotations from practicing professionals in each field, brief sidebar excerpts from interviews with artists, and one extended interview with a potter deepen the human dimension. Small sidebars highlight statistics, often from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. A handful of stock color photos show racially diverse young artists at work. Despite an unavoidable amount of generalizing, the solid, practical data clearly presented here is valuable for creative youths and those who guide them.

Introduces essential information for anyone considering a future in the arts. (source notes, jobs list, index, picture credits) (Nonfiction. 13-18)
“Fun, sweet, and exciting and set in a rich fantasy world.”

THE PIRATE AND THE PORCELAIN GIRL

A wonderfully strange debut. (map) (Fantasy. 13-18)

CREEPING BEAUTY

Portes, Andrea
HarperTeen (368 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9780062422477

A princess pricks her finger on a spindle—and falls through an alternate world in this retelling of “Sleeping Beauty.”

Elizabeth “Bitsy” Roix is the plain princess of the Roix Kingdom whose fate, whether she wishes it or not, is to be married off to someone her family considers appropriate. That is, until the day she pricks her finger on a spindle, falls deeply asleep, and everything changes. As her parents desperately try to break her curse, Bitsy wakes up in a different world—one of oppression, freedom fighters, and magic—where she attempts to carve a place for herself through a journey of self-empowerment that will have repercussions across worlds. This subversive take on the fairy tale “Sleeping Beauty” starts off well with a story that aims to empower its princess into breaking her own curse. Bitsy’s first-person narration is funny and engaging, sometimes breaking the fourth wall and addressing readers directly. Excerpts from her father’s journal complement the narrative and show another side of events. But the more the novel progresses, the more haphazard it becomes. The treatment of certain worldbuilding elements, including social inequalities and prejudices and a romance that grows from a shaky foundation, is superficial and ill-defined and never forms a cohesive whole.

A fairy-tale retelling that aims high—and falls flat. (Fantasy. 13-18)

THE PIRATE AND THE PORCELAIN GIRL

Riesbeck, Emily
Simon & Schuster (304 pp.)
$22.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781534487765

What would you risk for acceptance? Ferra bemoans the loss of Ephemeral, the girl she loves, and wishes to be so "beautiful" and “unique” that she will return her affection. Ferra’s prayer is answered by a magical being who turns her into a living porcelain figure. Now extremely fragile, Ferra damages her face, leaving an empty hole where her left eye was. Wanting to cross the sea to be with her lost love, she overhears young pirate captain Brigantine bragging about her ship’s prowess. With a crew desperate for cash, Brig takes the job. They set sail, hot-tempered Brig clashing with know-it-all Ferra nearly the entire way. Ferra will do anything to be worthy of Ephemeral’s attention, while Brig has something to prove to the floating city of pirates who banished her. What follows is an extended tale exploring the importance of accepting oneself, including one’s so-called imperfections. The story is fun, sweet, and exciting and is set in a rich fantasy world where magic is rare but very real. Offering moments of genuine depth, it challenges the toxic idea that people should change just to please another. Barna’s illustrations add oodles of energy as well as visual expansions of the worldbuilding. Before her transformation to white porcelain, Ferra had light-tan skin and brown hair; green-skinned Brig resembles an ogre-type, and the population of this world reflects various real-world and fantastical races.

Part fantasy, part fairy tale, part action-adventure—and all heart. (Graphic fantasy. 12-18)

FORTY WORDS FOR LOVE

Saeed, Aisha
Kokila (304 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9780593326466

Love blooms between two best friends in a magical town grieving a tragic loss.

Raf and Yas have been best friends since the former’s home was destroyed and his people fled to Moonlight Bay via the enchanted Golub tree in the Willow Forest. Despite warnings from his community elders, Raf decides to confess his romantic feelings to Yas—but he finds her with Moses, the Holler Candy empire heir. The golden leaf-shaped birthmark burns against Raf’s wrist, and he runs to the shoreline, where he discovers 5-year-old Sammy Holler dead. Now, a year later, Moonlight Bay is struggling—the Hollers have moved away, the once pink-and-lavender waters have turned dark gray, several local businesses have shut down, and tensions between the locals and the Golubs are rising. Yas, whose parents are struggling to make ends meet, faces the prospect of leaving her hometown. Raf, once excited about college, becomes resigned to staying home to support his family. When the wealthy Naismiths move into the Holler Mansion, the townspeople are desperate to make them stay, but Yas and Raf question what their true intentions are in Moonlight Bay. Saeed takes readers on a gentle exploration of losing faith, finding yourself, and grief’s impact on a community. Unfortunately, the slow-burn romance is sluggish, and the secondary characters feel underdeveloped. Readers who don’t mind light worldbuilding that allows them to imagine details for themselves may enjoy this lightly magical story. Characters are racially ambiguous.

Intriguing but lacking in impact. (Fabulism. 12-17)
With the upcoming school dance, Sydney is trying to ensure Finn doesn’t feel left out. Things take a turn for the worse when Jeremy tells Sydney that he wants to leave Minnesota and play college football for UCLA. Sydney, who is unsure of her plans after high school, doesn’t want to waste time in a relationship that could end upon graduation. Her reaction also highlights her fear of men leaving her as her father did. Sydney’s feelings are realistically portrayed: She worries so much about a potential future that she cannot enjoy the present. At the same time, she’s still dealing with bully Amelia. With Amelia and her friends’ constant harassment, Sydney has struggled to make more social ties at school, adding to her isolation. Sydney’s mom, Dakotah, and Finn’s dad, Ben, model two very different approaches to their children’s being bullied: Ben, following Finn’s wishes, doesn’t want to get involved and risk making things worse, while Dakotah feels compelled to act. Each series entry further develops Sydney’s character; readers will enjoy following her as she deals with different challenges in her life.

A well-grounded reluctant reader title exploring the power of relationships. (Fiction. 12-18)

The author of the acclaimed *The 57 Bus* (2017) delves into another complex story involving teens, personal choices, and societal forces. Liberal Albany, California—where over half the residents are White and most are college educated—was the site in 2017 of a shocking discovery. A Korean American high school junior had created a private Instagram account and for several months shared racist, sexist memes with his 13 followers, all White and Asian boys. The targets were predominantly Black and Black biracial girls (a Black coach and Sri Lankan American boy were also victims). The violent, degrading images were even more horrific since the perpetrator, account followers, and victims knew one another, and some were close friends. Slater’s thorough research includes candid interviews with those on both sides. She accessibly explores edgy meme culture, online hate speech, the students’ social dynamics, a disastrous mediation session, the school district’s actions, subsequent lawsuits, and how individuals were affected post-graduation. Short, punchy chapters offer interestingly varied formats and perspectives. The book will spark deep reflection on degrees of complicity, whether and when to forgive, what contributes to genuine remorse and change, and what parents and educators could have done differently. There’s a missed opportunity to unpack questions about identity versus behavior when several young people describe fears of being labeled “racist.” The book also would have benefitted from more explicitly addressing Black girlhood and misogyny.

Thorough, thought-provoking, and all too relevant. (author’s note, content warning, resources, additional data, note on sourcing, endnotes) (Nonfiction. 13-adult)
**FIREBIRD**

*Sunmi*

Harper Alley (320 pp.)

$18.99 paper | July 25, 2023

9780062981516

A Korean American teen’s stifled life changes when she makes an unexpected friend.

When sophomore Caroline Kim agrees to peer tutor another student, she doesn’t expect it to be the outgoing, charismatic, and beautiful Korean and Filipina American senior Kimberly Park-Ocampo. The friendship that grows between them mirrors their slow-burn attraction, depicted through teasing dialogue, blushes, and emotive moments. As Caroline and Kim grow closer, the depictions of Caroline's ongoing struggles with low self-esteem, anxiety, and self-consciousness about her body are masterfully woven into their romance. Similarly, Caroline’s complicated family dynamics with her mother, overseas father, and older sister are realistically shown, particularly her mother’s controlling and emotionally distant parenting style. By contrast, Kim works as a team with her mother to run the household, watch her younger siblings, and work side jobs while still being available for her friends. The stark contrast between the two teens, their families, goals, and experiences as Asian Americans creates intriguing thematic parallels. As Caroline discovers positive aspects of herself through her relationship with Kim, the firebird as a symbol of transformation is somewhat successfully depicted through red feather motifs that stand out from the largely black-and-white art. However, the story’s impact is diluted by haphazard flashback scenes. Despite an otherwise engaging emotional journey, the finale peters out.

Gripping and thoughtful, but the clunky ending disappoints. (Graphic fiction. 13-16)

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**OUTLAW MAGE**

*Villoso, K.S.*

*Illus. by Trish Isiderio*

Snowy Wings Publishing (380 pp.)

$34.99 | $22.99 paper | Aug. 1, 2023

9781958051214 paper

9781958051207

Series: The Dageian Puppetmaster, 1

A sprawling fantasy notable for its complex worldbuilding and exploration of social issues. (Character sketches, map) (Fantasy. 13-adult)

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**THE SIREN, THE SONG, AND THE SPY**

*Tokuoda-Hall, Maggie*

Candlewick (320 pp.)

$19.99 | Sep. 26, 2023

9781536218053

A tragedy upends the worldview of a handmaid to an Imperial spy in this follow-up to 2020’s *The Mermaid, the Witch, and the Sea*.

The Red Shore is home to the Wariuta, whose warriors fight alongside hyena familiars and whose alchemists hold the secret to kau, an explosive coveted by the Colonizers. When a girl dressed in Nipran clothing washes ashore and reveals her ability to speak the Wariuta’s Sky language, Wariuta leader Ica spares the girl’s life in exchange for her services as an interpreter. Koa, Ica’s gentle, pacifist son, is relieved by this decision. But Kaia, his sister, makes clear her distrust of the girl, Genevieve, whom she views as simply another murderous Colonizer. A Nipran commander proposes a trade agreement with the Wariuta, which Ica accepts to prevent further bloodshed, but a betrayal leads to a massacre that leaves nearly all the Wariuta dead except Kaia, who is captured, and Koa, who takes a conscience-stricken Genevieve and a few survivors to a hidden oasis where there resides a siren whose blood holds the secret to the Nipran Empire’s defeat. No one escapes the Sea’s reckoning in this searing sequel. The cast is diverse in gender identity, sexual orientation, skin color, and socioeconomic status. Together, they tell a story in which justice isn’t attained through a cycle of vengeance but with the truth laid bare, paving the way toward reconciliation.

Powerful and emotionally gratifying. (map) (Fantasy. 13-18)
“Cheerful and empowering.”

STARS IN THEIR EYES
Waltz, Jessica
Illus. by Aśka
Graphix/Scholastic (224 pp.)
$24.99 | $15.99 paper | Aug. 1, 2023
9781338818802
9781338818796 paper

Fourteen-year-old Australian Maisie and her mum, Jo, are enthusiastic lovers of all things nerdy.

After scrimping and saving, they’re finally on their way to Maisie’s first fancon. Above all, Maisie is excited to meet her idol, Kara Bufano, an actress who plays her favorite superhero and is an amputee like her. The convention has more surprises in store, including a new crush in 15-year-old artist and fellow fan Ollie, who is nonbinary and working the con with their dad. Maisie’s leg amputation was due to cancer, which is in remission but has left her with chronic pain and fatigue. Her ongoing treatments and mobility aids are portrayed as a natural part of ordinary life, as is her bisexuality. While the characters often discuss anti-ableist messages in ways that could be more organic, the lessons carry import. The story is strongest when letting Maisie, Ollie, and Jo express their personalities. It captures an intense one-day romance bonded by fan art and instant understanding. Ultimately, just as important is the love between Maisie and Jo, a quirky and tightly bonded duo who are there for each other through thick and thin. Candy-colored art makes the busy convention a delightful world of visual excitement and discovery for Maisie. Aśka’s strong character illustrations let every emotion be clearly understood. Maisie and Jo have light-brown skin; Ollie and their dad read White.

Cheerful and empowering. (author’s note) (Graphic fiction. 12-17)

SWIMMING IN A SEA OF STARS
Wright, Julie
Shadow Mountain (256 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781639931019

Five students from the same Massachusetts high school struggle with difficult life experiences as one of them prepares to return to school following a suicide attempt.

In a diary her therapist suggested she keep, 17-year-old Addison begins the rotation of the narrative in first-person epistolary format, striking a weary tone laced with sarcastic humor. Also lending their voices in the third person are Booker, Damion, Avery, and Celia, students who all know—or at least know of—Addison. Booker is close to Addison, a friend or maybe more, but she’s been avoiding him. This, plus his cousin’s serious illness, weighs heavily on him. Meanwhile, Damion’s image as a minor social media star obscures a tragic family secret, and while everyone knows that Avery’s brother was recently arrested for drug dealing, most don’t suspect that quiet, reserved Celia is dealing with abuse at home. Many realistic issues are explored, and while readers will feel empathy for each of these characters, the overarching themes of interconnectedness and how people can affect others in ways of which they are not always aware are a bit heavy-handed in their portrayals. Addison, Damion, Avery, and Celia are White; Booker is Black, and there is racial diversity among secondary characters.

A story at times poignant but at others too conscious of its own hopeful messaging. (Fiction. 13-18)

THE BODYGUARD UNIT
Edith Garrud, Women’s Suffrage, and Jujitsu
Xavier, Clement
Trans. by Edward Gauvin
Illus. by Lisa Lugrin
Colors by Albertine Ralenti
Graphix Universe (116 pp.)
$17.99 paper | $30.65 PLB | Aug. 1, 2023
9788756007743
9781728445956 PLB

A graphic nonfiction account of how early 20th-century British suffragettes used jujitsu to literally fight for the vote.

Focusing on Edith Garrud, who co-owned a dojo in London with her husband, William, the book tells the little-known story of how a subset of activist women agitating for women’s suffrage were trained in jujitsu. They used martial arts to cope with the violence and police brutality they encountered while peacefully marching and assembling. Garrud taught self-defense to the Bodyguard unit, a group affiliated with Emmeline Pankhurst’s Women’s Social and Political Union. The colorful panels illustrating the action are dynamic and engaging, expressing energy, speed, and noise. Compelling historical illustrations and photographs are interspersed. The dialogue, which imparts back-ground context, is mostly snappy but occasionally too obviously didactic. The book chronicles the several years leading up to the dramatic 1914 Battle of Glasgow, when suffragettes fought Scottish police who were trying to arrest Pankhurst. The narrative also offers important detours into the prevalence and general societal acceptance of domestic violence as well as schisms within the suffragette movement regarding the most effective and politically palatable tactics. Scenes between Garrud and her husband provide insights into their marital and work lives. One line confusingly implies that Japan was colonized, and the book disappointingly includes no sources. However, a foreword by scholar Elsa Dorlin and helpful backmatter, including a timeline and historical notes, add useful information.

Engaging feminist history attractively presented. (Illustration and photo credits) (Graphic nonfiction. 12-18)
THE INFINITY PARTICLE
Xu, Wendy
Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins (272 pp.)
$26.99 | $18.99 paper | Aug. 29, 2023
9780062955777
9780062955760 paper

AI and human meet—and love blossoms.

Clementine Chang has been working with her SENA, or Sentient Emphatic Neurobonded Animatronic, a small robot companion, since she was a child. Now, she has finally landed a job with the famed Dr. Lin and moved to Mars. It’s a dream come true for Clementine, especially when she meets Kye, Dr. Lin’s assistant, who was custom built in the shape of an attractive young human man. Clementine relishes the opportunity to work with this sort of technology and use it to help others. While Dr. Lin might not live up to all of Clementine’s expectations, she can’t help but be drawn to Kye, sensing a similarity between them. When Kye reveals that he needs her help, Clementine and SENA readily agree. A hopeful future incorporating both technology and heart is depicted through clean, simple panels in blue and pink that expressively impart not only Clementine’s thoughts and emotions, but also a sense of warmth and undeniable cuteness inherent in Clementine’s world. Some darker themes are threaded throughout the story, but ultimately, it seems, good will prevail. Clementine’s surname implies Chinese descent, and Kye’s dashing appearance is reminiscent of Chinese dramas. They live in a vibrant, clearly East Asian–influenced world.

A delightful tale that brings optimism back to science fiction. (Graphic science fiction. 14-18)

I’M NOT HERE TO MAKE FRIENDS
Tang, Andrew
Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins (352 pp.)
$19.99 | July 18, 2023
9780063223271

Six Asian American teens live together for a month as part of a reality show. Chinese American Sabine Zhang is thrilled to get out of Moline, Illinois, and appear on Hotel California, a small reality series that centers on six Asian high schoolers living together for four weeks. When she arrives at the show’s Palm Springs house, Sabine realizes the other contestants—including artsy Mari, who’s implied Japanese; bookish Nigerian and Taiwanese Grant; aspiring actor Chris, whose ethnicity is not specified; and cool, sporty Danny, who’s cued South Asian—are not regular teens like in previous seasons. They all look like models and hail from bigger cities. The new season, it’s announced, is going to air on a huge streaming platform, so the casting focused on looks and the likelihood of romantic and interpersonal tensions. Sabine is most unsettled by gorgeous and outspoken Manhattanite Yoona Bae, the narrative’s second protagonist. An only child, Yoona is just happy to be away from her controlling mother and their gossipy Korean community. Yoona doesn’t want to come off as the beautiful mean girl, and Sabine doesn’t want to seem like an insecure Midwesterner, but in the producer’s hands, the two are established as antagonists. This winning story thoughtfully explores Asian representation, the differences between growing up a person of color on the coasts versus middle America, and how girls are expected to be rivals rather than friends.

A charming, crowd-pleasing debut. (Fiction. 13-18)
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Let’s talk about some books
you REALLY
should’ve read by now
pt. 2!

KIRKUS REVIEWS
Male characters struggle with identities, loyalties, relationships, and precarious situations in this story collection. Prolific author Adams plumbs the needs, desires, joys, and troubles of male protagonists within these nine tales, beginning with a teenage grocery store clerk reluctantly monitoring a possible shoplifter in “Thief Catcher.” The challenge is heavy for a young person—to balance job retention while expressing compassion for the economically disadvantaged shoppers in his store. The tale expertly mines themes of humanitarianism, morals, and grace. While “The Last Tequila Run” may sound like it’s set at a frat party, it’s anything but. Two drunken friends with “tequila-bloated brains” illicitly venture into Mexico, get stopped by aggressive U.S. border patrol agents, and divulge secrets that blow apart their long-standing friendship. Some stories address the toll of creating art; in “The Music Messiah,” a journalist is obsessed with interviewing a tenor saxophone jazz legend who just returned from a Zen monastery where he’d hoped to exorcise his demons. In “Winter Break,” an English teacher struggles to keep distracted, entitled students interested in discussing James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914). There are other scars to witness and life lessons to be learned throughout Adams’ memorable collection, like the drastic consequences of keeping family secrets in “Ever After,” in which a husband hears a lifetime of crushing confessions divulged by his wife on her deathbed and then finds sympathy and grief impossible to fathom. The titular tale is perhaps the most affecting. It recounts the history of two brothers—one mourning the death of the other—in a spare story suffused with melancholy and anchored by the indelible love of family. There’s lots to savor and ponder here. While Adams’ seasoned storytelling entertains, it also explores fraternity, family, and the challenge of navigating life’s pains and pleasures.

Brimming with resounding themes and notable characters.
Akchurin documents the waning days of the Soviet Union in this travelogue. In 1990, Moscow-based journalist and poet Akchurin decided to take a road trip. The Soviet Union was in the process of unraveling due to localized democratic revolts and ethnic conflicts, and Akchurin wanted to witness these events firsthand (and maybe write a book about them). An ethnic Tartar, Akchurin was particularly interested in the non-European, resource-rich republics of Central Asia: “More than fifty million people live in the Moslem republics in the southern backbone of the Soviet Disunion, well-known for its vast number of natural treasures, which include everything from huge undeveloped oilfields and major gas pipelines to gold and uranium mines.” The journey ended up being a 10,000-mile overland odyssey through the Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirghizia, Turkmenia, and Azerbaijan. Along the way, Akchurin encountered militiamen, nomads, ex-prisoners, squatters, one irate hotel maid, and even a Tajik rock musician, all of whom offered opinions on the ways the recent upheavals had changed their lives (often for the worse). Though he did not realize it at the time, Akchurin was in the process of creating what he refers to as a “death mask of what was formerly the Soviet Union,” one dusty mile at a time. The book offers a rare window into the myriad overlapping peoples of Central Asia and their varying relationships with Russia and Communist rule. The author never exoticizes, though he is happy to give his political opinions freely (both to the reader and to the people he meets on his journey). The book was originally published in 1992, shortly after Akchurin made his journey; it is now a work of history. In addition to capturing a remarkable moment in world affairs, Akchurin reminds us that nations and empires are not permanent entities but dynamic organisms made up of millions of individual lives.

A fascinating time capsule that blends memoir, politics, and reportage.
The expression of LGBTQ+ identity can shift—through coming out, building community, and partnering or in response to changing political or cultural landscapes. In these three novels, LGBTQ+ characters explore, in the words of one reviewer, “the raptures and dangers” of being queer at home and abroad.

Sean Eads’ novel *Confessions*, which considers character, love, and family, takes place in a small Appalachian town. *Confessions* follows several residents, including several gay characters (one closeted), as they try to manage their complicated lives and connections where everyone knows too much about everyone else’s business. The nonlinear tale, which unfolds in the form of a memoir-turned-letter, is “an adept and heart-wrenching rural drama with devastating LGBTQ+ themes,” according to our review.

*Desire Lines*, Cary Alan Johnson’s Kirkus-starred novel set in New York City during the AIDS crisis, stars a Black gay man who “explores the raptures and dangers of his complicated identity” and ventures into forbidden places. Our reviewer says, “The precision and honesty of Johnson’s writing bring an immediacy and universality to a narrative that is firmly anchored in its historical time and its particular set of marginalized identities.”

A bisexual Armenian American writer visits her homeland in Nancy Agabian’s *The Fear of Large and Small Nations*. Via “fragmented narratives, journal entries, blog posts, and meta passages,” the novel illustrates the ways travel and the return home can spur self-transformation. Says our reviewer: “This is a courageously fragmented approach to storytelling that depicts a valiant search for self-understanding while challenging traditional gender roles, discrimination, and homophobia. Beautifully textured writing in a compelling tale that ponders identity and belonging.”

Maddock aren’t just innocently camping nearby; they’ve been paid to commit a serious crime. The next day, Kate and Veronica meet a man named Nash while hiking; he’s mysterious, and Veronica doesn’t trust him. While savoring Yosemite’s sights, Kate and Veronica talk a lot about weighty matters, including Veronica’s divorce, which stems from her husband’s leaving her for a younger woman. Veronica is bitter about that event as well as the glass ceiling she keeps hitting in her technology career. As the two women hike, they encounter Nash again. They also keep running into Darren and Maddock. The suspicious pair are clearly trying to kidnap Kate and Veronica, but Nash foils the plot. Nash, a retired soldier, was involved in an incident that made the news a year ago, one that Kate remembers. Once she works out who he really is, they start to bond and Nash reveals that he’s on the run from the law. Everyone hiking in Yosemite seems to have secrets. And Veronica’s secret is perhaps the greatest one of all and the most unexpected. Catron’s gripping story delivers a lot of intriguing twists and turns, and the big reveal is a shocking one. But the novel takes a while to get there. The tale reads a bit like a travelogue, and Kate sometimes speaks as if she’s a park official citing facts from a website—“Four million people visit Yosemite each year. The park has twelve hundred square miles, but the vast majority never venture beyond the valley’s seven square miles.” While hikers will appreciate these informative details, they bog down the first third of the book. Still, patient readers will enjoy the thrilling action that follows.

*A riveting tale about friendship and betrayal set in Yosemite.*

**A STROKE OF MAGIC**

*The Dinosaur Woman*

Costagliola, Brunella

Illus. by Valerio Mazzoli
gbs (81 pp.)


Three children take a magical journey to the past, marveling at forgotten discoveries and appreciating new cultures along the way in Costagliola’s chapter book.

The author sets her story in Vero Beach, Florida, rendered in picturesque detail. Seven-year-old twins Alex and Ella spend their days at a colorful and quaint retirement home called Discovery Casa, where their mother works as a nurse. One day, the twins meet Layla, an inquisitive 6-year-old visiting her Abuelita. As children do, they become fast friends, excitedly bonding over their dreams of adventure and discovery. As the children and Abuelita discuss culture and heritage (“This is the dress I made for the Pollera Conga, a Panamanian festival that celebrates our African heritage”)—consistent themes throughout the book—Abuelita mentions a mysterious new resident named Art, and the intrigued children set out to find him. They stumble across an open door to a space covered with paintings, the most interesting of
which depicts a woman on a beach surrounded by dinosaurs. Just as they begin to ponder why a woman would be among the prehistoric beasts, the painting begins to swirl, creating a vortex that transports the kids right out of Discovery Casa and onto that very beach in 1830. Here, they are guided by Emet, a comical talking paintbrush, who introduces them to their very first piece of forgotten history: Mary Anning, a pioneering paleontologist and the woman in the painting with the dinosaurs. The kids spend the rest of this quick, delightful read digging for fossils, learning cool history, and making a new friend. With evenly paced, polished prose, Costaglio la crafts the perfect start to a series of books for young readers. The characters are charming and center the whimsical world of time travel, talking paintbrushes, and magical art in relatable reality. Most importantly, the powerful themes of culture, history, and justice ensure that this book will stick with both kids and adults.

A whimsical children's book full of fascinating forgotten history.

DEsert DEADLINE
A Dante & Jazz Mystery
Craft, Michael
Questover Press
9798218138813 paper
9798218137953

A desert-based duo works the case of a murdered author in Craft's mystery novel. Dante O'Donnell is the VIP concierge at Sunny Junket Vacation Rentals, helping his famous and wealthy guests get the most out of their stays in Palm Springs. When private eye Jazz Friendly—who previously helped Dante get out of a very tight spot—asks him to hook up a friend of a friend with a place to stay, Dante is happy to oblige. The client in question is a famed, reclusive romance novelist Maude Movay, who needs a quiet hideaway where she can finish the final book in a bestselling series. Jazz loves Maude's work, and Dante is able to set the author up with a lavish guesthouse in a gated community, with everything she needs to bang out the manuscript in a month's time. Unfortunately, Maude—who turns out to look nothing like her author photo—ends up dead, with a cryptic final message in her typewriter: "To Jazz Friendly, my dearest chum and most devoted reader. Yours forever, Maude Movay." Jazz and Dante spring into action to solve the murder, which involves a massive, multimillion-dollar streaming video deal implicating a number of interested parties. When someone close to Jazz gets caught up in the crime, the case goes from high-profile whodunit to personal tragedy. The author's prose is arch and energetic: Dante regards the dead author's lawyer, observing, "it wasn't just the fatigue that had taken a toll—the puffy red eyes behind her huge red glasses suggested a recent crying jag, and her twisted features made me wonder if she was on the verge of another." It's fun to see Craft, the author of 19 novels, plot the demise of a writer's block-plagued author, which he does with typical ingenuity and precision. The setting and characters are well drawn, and the reader ends the novel anticipating future Dante and Jazz cases.

A satisfying entry in the expanding Palm Springs–based detective series.

GRONE
Cumby, Patrick
Broken Monolith (662 pp.)

Enhanced virtual reality technology threatens to destroy the real world in Cumby's series-launching SF debut. Fifteen-year-old Fiona Martinez, who uses a wheelchair, and her twin brother, Francis, are consummate and avid video gamers. But they're ill-prepared for a bizarre mission they receive while immersed in the popular online role-playing game Longstar. Someone from the company that created Longstar calls and begs the pair to save the enigmatic Analise, who's "something new": neither an avatar (like the twins' in-game characters) nor an AI–controlled bot. In a concurrent plot, in the simulated universe of havencosm, 19-year-old Kwon Se-Jong is smitten with Nkiru Anaya and happily joins her on a church-sanctioned pilgrimage from Earth to other planets, including Grone. Powering both this VR world and Longstar are the QARMA engines—the same supercomputers that the U.S. military employs for "ultrarealistic wargame simulations." A threat looms, as the intermingling of these worlds, coupled with a virus infecting the game servers, may somehow be responsible for a recent uptick of sunspots and earthquakes in the real world. Cumby's spirited, impressive worldbuilding packs this first installment with incident, action, and incident they receive while immersed in the popular online role-playing game Longstar. Someone from the company that created Longstar calls and begs the pair to save the enigmatic Analise, who's "something new": neither an avatar (like the twins' in-game characters) nor an AI–controlled bot. In a concurrent plot, in the simulated universe of havencosm, 19-year-old Kwon Se-Jong is smitten with Nkiru Anaya and happily joins her on a church-sanctioned pilgrimage from Earth to other planets, including Grone. Powering both this VR world and Longstar are the QARMA engines—the same supercomputers that the U.S. military employs for "ultrarealistic wargame simulations." A threat looms, as the intermingling of these worlds, coupled with a virus infecting the game servers, may somehow be responsible for a recent uptick of sunspots and earthquakes in the real world. Cumby's spirited, impressive worldbuilding packs this first installment with incident, action, and incident they receive while immersed in the popular online role-playing game Longstar. Someone from the company that created Longstar calls and begs the pair to save the enigmatic Analise, who's "something new": neither an avatar (like the twins' in-game characters) nor an AI–controlled bot. In a concurrent plot, in the simulated universe of havencosm, 19-year-old Kwon Se-Jong is smitten with Nkiru Anaya and happily joins her on a church-sanctioned pilgrimage from Earth to other planets, including Grone. Powering both this VR world and Longstar are the QARMA engines—the same supercomputers that the U.S. military employs for "ultrarealistic wargame simulations." A threat looms, as the intermingling of these worlds, coupled with a virus infecting the game servers, may somehow be responsible for a recent uptick of sunspots and earthquakes in the real world. Cumby's spirited, impressive worldbuilding packs this first installment with incident, action, and incident they receive while immersed in the popular online role-playing game Longstar. Someone from the company that created Longstar calls and begs the pair to save the enigmatic Analise, who's "something new": neither an avatar (like the twins' in-game characters) nor an AI–controlled bot. In a concurrent plot, in the simulated universe of havencosm, 19-year-old Kwon Se-Jong is smitten with Nkiru Anaya and happily joins her on a church-sanctioned pilgrimage from Earth to other planets, including Grone. Powering both this VR world and Longstar are the QARMA engines—the same supercomputers that the U.S. military employs for "ultrarealistic wargame simulations." A threat looms, as the intermingling of these worlds, coupled with a virus infecting the game servers, may somehow be responsible for a recent uptick of sunspots and earthquakes in the real world. Cumby's spirited, impressive worldbuilding packs this first installment with incident, action, and
In Derr’s illustrated middle-grade novella, a boy must learn how to become a leader.

Eleven-year-old Luis is close friends with the kids on his coed baseball team, the McIntyre Manatees—but that hasn’t always been the case. In this book, he and his friends relive what happened when they first met a year ago, when Luis moved to Ohio from Texas. His parents encouraged him to join the local baseball team to ground him in familiar habits after the upheaval of a big move. He was new to the well-established Manatees and was shocked when the new coach picked him to be captain over kids who’d been on the team longer, and his teammates were similarly surprised. Only soft-spoken catcher Gary seemed to be on his side when he took up his position, and the hardest player to get along with was first baseman Jimmie, the biggest, strongest, and meanest kid on the team. As Luis and his teammates played through the season, they realized that winning games isn’t just about skill—it’s also about being able to work together. Readers follow Luis as he learns leadership skills in a smooth, well-paced narrative that models good communication and perseverance. They’ll find themselves rooting for the Manatees as the story builds and playoffs approach. A major letdown, though, is that Derr has players recounting playoff highlights after the fact rather than allowing readers to experience the game as it occurs. He also frames the novel as the story of Luis and Jimmie’s learning to become friends, which feels discordant at the end, when greater emphasis is on Luis’ growth as team captain. However, these aspects don’t spoil the joy of the story or the portrayal of the characters’ clear love for sports, which are evident in the text and grayscale line drawings by LaCoste, which are cartoonlike and expressive; characters are depicted with an array of skin tones.

A wonderful narrative for readers who love baseball that also offers valuable lessons to those who don’t.
It isn't long until she concocts a plan to take her trusty camera den in a bird's nest, for example, or in the clutches of a shiny red fetch with Dog. Van Fossan's cartoon art style echoes that of a family for several generations. Without it, she doesn't feel that a bad situation and that her artistic powers are not diminished over yet. She effectively learns that a lot of good can come from expanding consciousness.

**GLORIA BEE’S BIG PICTURE DAY**
Hawthorne, Lin
Illus. by Leigh Ann Van Fossan
Three Plus One Publishing (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 6, 2023
9781960492029

A young girl is poised to paint, but she can't find her heirloom paintbrush in Hawthorne's illustrated children's book.

There are many words to describe Gloria B. Wilson: enthusiastic, adventurous, dedicated, and, most of all, artistic. She loves to paint scenes from her everyday life with her favorite brush, which has been passed down by female painters in her family for several generations. Without it, she doesn't feel that she can make art at all. One day, Gloria is ready to complete her at-home art gallery when she realizes she's lost the heirloom art tool: “How in the WORLD am I going to create my art and finish my gallery if I don't have my favorite paintbrush?” she frets. It isn't long until she concocts a plan to take her trusty camera and her pet dog (named Dog) around town, retracing her steps as she searches for the lost item. She investigates a bird's nest, and her pet dog (named Dog) around town, retracing her steps as she searches for the lost item.

She finds a cricket's nest, a hill, and a marina; as she explores, young readers will enjoy spotting the paintbrush in illustrator Van Fossan's painterly backgrounds, always just beyond Gloria’s notice. It may be hidden in a bird's nest, for example, or in the clutches of a shiny red crab. The protagonist's quest ends unexpectedly with a touch of tongue-in-cheek humor that hints that her adventures aren't over yet. She effectively learns that a lot of good can come from a bad situation and that her artistic powers are not diminished by the lack of her usual tool. This is a story that relies heavily on the illustrations, which feature plot points that the text doesn't, such as Gloria's losing the paintbrush because she was playing fetch with Dog. Van Fossan's cartoon art style echoes that of a child's with some refinements, much like Gloria's own art. Gloria is depicted with brown skin; the few other human characters, in a photo or in person, have a range of skin tones.

**SORA SEARCHES FOR A SONG**
Little Cricket’s Imagination Journey
Herbert, Christine
Illus. by Scott Partridge
Photoby Dan Lao Photography
9781955555509
9781955555593 paper

A cricket wants to find her own song and uses the power of imagination in this latest book in the Once Upon a Dance children's book series.

This ambitious book, geared toward very young readers, once again combines a children's story and dance guidebook, with lush, detailed, and slightly abstract illustrations taking center stage. The book tells the story of Sora, a cricket who's alone among others of their kind chirping away—a “cricket orchestra”—as they can't find their own song to sing. They embark on a fanciful quest to find the imagination that others say they lack. Every time Sora says they can't imagine something, the character transforms into that thing, whether it's a songbird chirping and singing or a fish making noise with underwater bubbles. Finally, when a threatening creature tells Sora that trees taste terrible, the cricket says, “I can't imagine it's as bad as all that” and turns into a tree. Sora realizes that in order to make the transformations stop, they just need to open their eyes. Sora is then a cricket once again but with a vivid imagination and, finally, a song to sing. It's a lovely story, with a helpful addition: Ballerina Konora is pictured, in photographs by Dan Lao Photography, doing basic dance moves that help illustrate the action and invite readers to participate. For instance, she lifts her hands to mimic diving in water or stretches her arms and legs to “be” a tree. The movements and noises the ballerina suggests will entice many youngsters to attempt them. The story itself is appealing, although author Herbert’s text probably has come up with some dance moves of their own.

**PROFIT FIRST FOR THERAPISTS**
A Simple Framework for Financial Freedom
Herres, Julie
Greenoak Press (318 pp.)
$23.58 paper | $9.99 e-book | May 2, 2023
9798987216309

Herres offers a business management strategy guide that’s designed specifically for mental health therapists.

In this work, the author takes the established Profit First system for managing business accounts, created by author and
I AM AYAH
The Way Home

Donna Hill
Sideways Books (368 pp.)
May 23, 2023
9781649371454
9781649371461 paper

A Black couple’s romance ties together the past and the present in Hill’s novel.

Hirajeta’s debut YA mystery finds a teenager determined to unmask an apparent killer who’s anonymously threatening her.

WHAT THE RIVER Buries

Hirajeta, Rocky
Level Elevate (308 pp.)
$16.46 paper | $7.99 e-book
March 21, 2023
9781685123079

Hirajeta’s debut YA mystery finds a teenager determined to unmask an apparent killer who’s anonymously threatening her.

For 17-year-old Natalie Bishop, sketching in the Acres—a secluded, wooded spot in her small American city of Marton—provides solace. The high school senior has a lot on her mind, from a failed photography class project to the four-year anniversary of her father’s death. But these pale in comparison to what she sees in the woods one night: a masked man disposing of a body. She flees, shaken, and soon wonders if maybe she was mistaken about what she saw. Then someone drops something at her front door: the sketchbook she left in the woods. A scribbled note inside it assures her that she’ll be left alone—if she stays quiet about what she witnessed. Going to the cops might not be the best idea, as the author of the note also boasts of “friends in high places.” This drives Natalie to track down the writer herself, drawing on two important clues: a tattoo she
Please tell us a little bit about yourself and your work.
I grew up in Manhattan and on the North Shore of Long Island. I was dispatched to boarding school at age 11. Shortly thereafter, my grandiose childhood dream of being a senator was dashed when I realized that I was gay. My sophomore year at Harvard was interrupted when I was hospitalized with severe depression. Upon returning to school I read *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath in one sitting, immediately after which I was inspired to write several passable poems. It suddenly became clear that my vocation was to be a poet. I have begun to write prose only recently.

How did you choose your book’s genre?
*Portraits From Life* is something of a generic hybrid. It is part memoir and part critical study of a number of artists I came to know personally and whose lives and works I find both exemplary and admirable. Its first section consists of portraits of the eminent poet and translator Robert Fitzgerald, with whom I studied at Harvard; the editor and novelist William Maxwell; the choreographer Erick Hawkins; and the poet Marie Ponsot, whose poetry workshop I found revelatory and that I attended twice in my 50s. I delve into my identification as a gay man in discussing Maxwell’s *The Folded Leaf*, a superb gay coming-of-age novel that I have always found deeply moving. And I explore my sense of kinship with Hawkins, who was bisexual, and whose dances, which I likewise found moving. I attended on yearly pilgrimages to the Joyce Theater in New York.

The second section of *Portraits* deals with my changing attitude over time to the work of Robert Lowell. As a young man and aspiring poet, I felt antipathy toward his work. I had little sympathy with the confessional mode and was put off by what seemed to me a strain of reptilian cruelty in a number of his poems about his family. The last chapter of *Portraits*, informed by my own ongoing struggles with mental illness, attempts a more mature reappraisal of Lowell’s work and reflects an appreciation of the stamina and courage that must have been required to produce it.

Was your work influenced by any other queer texts?
Among the queer writers I admire the most are the usual suspects—Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, H.D., Djuna Barnes, James Baldwin, Elizabeth Bishop, and John Ashbery. Slightly less well known is the astonishingly brilliant work of the novelist and social chronicler James McCourt.

Who is your primary audience?
As a poet, I don't identify with any particular school or espouse any prescriptive poetics. Nor do I have a target audience in mind. More recently, as a writer of prose, I simply feel an obligation to write as lucidly and gracefully as possible. I recently heard from a friend that his 97-year-old mother had just read and enjoyed *Portraits*. I would like to nominate her as my ideal reader!

What are you working on now?
I am putting the finishing touches on *Lamentations*, my book of poems that is scheduled to be published by Ristretto Books in about a year. Its centerpiece is a 40-page poem in the voice of Orpheus, whom I envisage—picking up on Ovid’s version of his myth—as being gay.

*Portraits From Life* is sponsored by George Franklin.
glimpsed on the masked man's neck and a wallet she found at the scene. But she'll definitely need help, especially once the apparent killer's threats escalate. Hirajeta's tale thrives on the believability of the amateur investigation; Natalie makes several mistakes and even commits a crime or two, including driving someone else's car sans permission. Although some of her decisions seem based on wild guesses and flimsy evidence, she also readily acknowledges her naïveté. The teen sleuth is surrounded by an outstanding cast of characters, namely her empathetic mother and her bigharted and more pragmatic best friend, Marisa. Animated descriptions enliven the pages, too, as when Natalie's anxiety makes her heart a "tape on fast-forward" and her close proximity to a potential murderer makes her feel as if she's in a "walk-in freezer." Although Natalie's suspect list is relatively short, her prey remains evasive, which generates a hefty amount of suspense. The final act wraps up things perhaps a bit too easily, but it's a gratifying ending nonetheless.

A taut and entertaining whodunit with an appealing amateur detective.

**MASTERPIECE**

Hoffman, Alexandra  
Illus. by Beatriz Mello  
Wishing Star Publishing (32 pp.)  
9781778071041

Hoffman's picture book features a young boy on the autism spectrum.  
Samuel is a school-age boy with fair skin, light brown hair, and blue eyes who loves the color blue. When his teacher, Ms. Anderson, asks the class to draw pictures of their families, Samuel puts on his headphones and doesn't hesitate to use his favorite color. While his classmates present pictures employing a veritable rainbow of hues, Samuel creates his own masterpiece exclusively in shades of blue. This prompts the wise teacher to explain, "Some of us use all the colours, and some of us use shades of only one. Even though our art may be different, each is just as special." Samuel's use of headphones in the classroom as well as nonverbal cues (like flapping his arms to indicate he's ready to present his picture) allude to Samuel's being on the autism spectrum—which elevates a great children's book to the level of a culturally significant one. Mello's illustrations splash across the pages with bright, bold colors and lines that draw the eye, perfectly complementing the text. The result is a touching story that all readers can enjoy. Those on the autism spectrum and their loved ones will find much-needed representation in this whimsical story that quietly speaks volumes.

Samuel's story comes to life through compassionately drawn characters, warm dialogue, and joyful illustrations.

**THE STORIES WE KEEP**

A Novel of Motherhood, Mental Health & Hope  
Holly, Shanna  
Three Sparrows Publishing (288 pp.)  
9798987966204

A depressed mother of three flees her family and draws insight and strength from other women in Holly's debut novel. On a rainy day in Texas, Jenna Cartwright meets Maggie, whom she describes as "the closest thing I have to a real friend outside of those I left behind in Alabama so many years ago," for coffee. However, Jenna confesses, she can't imagine that Maggie "ever struggles with her kids, or her life," as Jenna does. Only her visits with Bonnie, an elderly local acquaintance who reminds Jenna of her grandmother GiGi, offer some respite. As weeks go by, Jenna grows brusque with her children and increasingly stays in bed much of the time. One day, sitting in the refuge of her parked car in her driveway, Jenna spots her husband, Andrew, returning home from work. She starts the car and drives past him, briefly stopping at Bonnie's house "to say goodbye." Back on the road, Jenna fights an impulse to smash into a pole before driving on to Alabama and the home of her best friend, Michelle. Over the following days, Jenna talks to her mother, Michelle, GiGi, and members of GiGi's walking group about the struggles the women have faced, Jenna returns home with renewed spirit and an enriching new focus in her life. The author effectively captures the complexity of Jenna's depression through her first-person narration. Jenna seems self-involved and even unlikable at times yet also strikingly articulate about her mental state: "I am numb to the sight before me. Numb to the sounds. Numb to the feelings of anger, frustration, and guilt that I know are there, somewhere beneath the surface." While the men and children in the narrative remain somewhat shadowy, the range of women's stories presented here dramatically showcases how despair and loneliness can be relieved through connection with others.

A touching, evocative depiction of the therapeutic imperative to share and support.

**A WALK BETWEEN RAINDROPS**

Jahn, Amalie  
BermLord (326 pp.)  
$4.99 e-book | June 27, 2023

A teenage girl tries to repair her shattered relationship with her younger sister during a road trip to amusement parks across the United States in Jahn's YA novel. Pennsylvania sisters Elise, who narrates, and Wylla go on a marathon scavenger-hunt contest that takes them through major American
amusement parks over the course of two weeks. Along the way, they gather hidden tokens based on clues provided by the sponsor. But it’s not all fun and games; the past autumn, a long-standing relationship between 17-year-old Elise, younger sister Wylla, and their childhood pal Logan came to a dramatic end due to Elise’s fateful decisive action—scandalous details of which are revealed piecemeal. Furthermore, a violent car crash the previous March left Elise with lingering anxiety. Nonetheless, as they travel with a curious crew of other contestants, the sisters tentatively try to mend their relationship—or at least Elise attempts to do so amid agonized self-searching and PTSD symptoms: “It’s hard to believe in yourself when no one else does either. Not Mom. Not Wylla...Which is probably why I always assumed that the reason I never had a boyfriend was because unlike Wylla, I was simply unlovable.” The Logan incident and the sisters’ sibling rivalry and dysfunctional upbringing are hashed out, but Elise feels Wylla is holding back something vitally important. Although the plot involves a lot of theme-park attractions, this is a probing and self-reflective psychological tale and not a narrative roller coaster. Still, there are plenty of real coasters among the speed tours of Dollywood, Cedar Point, Kings Island, Busch Gardens, and so on. To Jahn’s credit, none of this feels like travelogue, though a sidebar on Tennessee’s engaging, interactive Titanic museum certainly sells the place. Near the end, the author presents a whip-snap plot twist, cannily forcing the reader to rethink and reinterpret all that has gone before. As a result, quite a few readers won’t mind getting on the ride a second time.

A superior, sisterly road drama with a last-act surprise.

A couple tries out a new romantic paradigm in Karl’s gay romance novel, the third in a series.

Joey and Henry have been together since 1976, when Joey, a White guy from suburban Pennsylvania, inherited an empty factory in Philadelphia’s “Gayborhood.” With the help of Henry, a Black Philadelphia native, Joey managed to turn it into Club Wylla, a pillar of the local gay scene. By 1992, the two have been married for over a decade, and though they don’t mind bringing others into the bedroom, they have agreed to only do so when they are both present. Joey recently violated this rule, and, even worse, he didn’t use protection—a major risk as AIDS ravages the gay community. The only way Henry will stay in the relationship is if Joey agrees to fully commit to their previously lax dom-sub relationship: “I want you to decide, dog,” Henry tells Joey. “Do you want to be chocked with my discipline, or let go? You can have freedom or you can give in to me totally. It’s one way or the other. What’s it gonna be?” It’s the start of a new era, with new rules and new obstacles. Joey appreciates the structure, but what will happen if that structure is suddenly—violently—ripped away? The book shifts the point-of-view character every chapter, with Joey and Henry alternating narrative duties with club regulars like Mr. GQ, the gossip columnist for the Philadelphia Gay News. From sex scenes to comic dialogues, the author’s prose is reliably sharp and insightful, as when Henry explains the fine art of tying knots: “We’re practicing how to make bondage knots properly. There’s an art to it, you know. The wrong kind of knot could end up hurting a sub, I mean, not in a good way.” This is the concluding book in a trilogy, and Karl takes admirably big swings to wrap up the story. Though romance forms the heart of the novel, the book has the weight and scope of socially minded literary fiction.

An ambitious, satisfying conclusion to a trilogy of novels set in Philadelphia’s gay club scene.

HANDLE WITH CARE
A Doctor’s Search for Faith, Fact, and Feeling
Klein, Milton S.
Redwood Publishing (234 pp.)
$24.95 | Nov. 1, 2022
9781956470628

Klein, a retired physician, reflects on the way the medical profession has changed over the last half-century.

The experience the author both enjoyed and suffered through as a medical student—he joined the freshman class at the University of California San Diego School of Medicine in 1968—is, in his view, largely a thing of the past; in that era, medical students were both terrified and edified by “Giants,” department chairs who “walked the earth distributing intellectual magic beans” and sadistically humiliating students for sport. Medical school today is a more hospitable, sensitive environment, the author observes, and the efficiency afforded by ever more sophisticated technology is a clear benefit, but Klein frets that something deeply important has been lost in this evolution. He acknowledges that advances like telemedicine and robotic surgery are a great boon to distant, disadvantaged populations, but it represents a trend toward the impersonal, precluding not only a more personal touch, but also more sensitive diagnoses, a predicament astutely rendered by the author. The author asserts that doctors detached from their patients begin to adopt a “shift work mindset” that potentially undermines the noble calling of medicine. Klein unpacks this issue—the trade-off between personal care and technological efficiency—from several angles with impressive thoughtfulness. Moreover, he avoids even a hint of intellectual extremism and prudently navigates the space between the “techno-nihilists” who reject any innovation that comes between doctors and patients and “tech-driven practitioners” who blindly cheerlead the “value of advanced informatics.” “Millennials in the medical field have been raised in an environment of instant access,” he
observes, cautioning the reader, “for the patient, efficiency may be misinterpreted as detachment; for the practitioner, accessibility becomes an intrusion on lifestyle.” The author is guilty of some congested prose in phrases like “unfiltered imbroglio of medical information.” Nevertheless, this is an eye-opening reflection on the state of health care today and forecast of its future from the personal perspective of an experienced insider.

A fascinating appraisal of the contemporary medical profession.

THE FIRST ASSIGNMENT
Kramer, Billy
Self (328 pp.)
9798218079185

Kramer makes an impressive debut with a twisted tale of a teenager who wakes up to find himself in an elite academy of grim reapers. Seventeen-year-old Shawn Turner doesn’t remember dying. But when he suddenly finds himself at Wayward Academy for training on how to become a reaper of souls, he’s forced to admit that he is, in fact, deceased: “This time Shawn didn’t need the grip of the gate to stop the blood flow in his body; because not only did Shawn not know where he was; he had no heartbeat.” As he struggles to adjust to his new role and surroundings, he makes fast friends with Quintin “Q” Prodit, Maple Collins, and Jay Musters. Wayward Academy teachers instruct the group on how to properly collect souls. Once given a name and approximate time of death, they must retrieve the glowing orb above the dead body to make sure the deceased moves on to the “next phase”—otherwise, they will turn into a ghost. But when Shawn is confronted with collecting a living person (called a “grounder”) named Cirie (“the last rays of sun made the red-tiled roof of Avalon’s land mark casino glow like coals”), giving readers a window into what it’s descriptions of ghostly horses (“In contrast to the horse’s dark coat were bones visible on the side of its face and yellowing with decay. Where the right eye should have been was an empty socket that had skin flaking off like a bad case of dandruff”) or depictions of suicide, heavy themes often mix with lighter moments. All of that makes for an action-packed yet thoughtful novel that both young adults and adults can enjoy. A cliffhanger ending brings hope for a sequel.

Deft pacing and engaging characters make this an intriguing exploration of life, death, and all the choices in between.

A VIEW TO DIE FOR
Maddux, Carolyn
Self (338 pp.)
$17.95 paper | $9.95 e-book | Oct. 18, 2022
9781734771923

A young detective faces a daunting challenge when a murder victim has too many enemies in Maddux’s picturesque mystery.

Developer Warner Hayden wants to build an over-the-top luxury hotel. It goes against everything the conservation-minded Catalina Island town of Avalon stands for, but Hayden has dug up the dirty secrets of community leaders whose approval he requires. He’s well on his way to his goal—until he’s found dead at the foot of the slope below his projected building site. The alcohol and cocaine in Hayden’s system make his death appear accidental at first. But the medical examiner finds blunt force trauma that makes him declare it a murder. The case initially falls in the lap of Rhys MacFarlane, the youngest detective in the Los Angeles sheriff’s office; Lexi Yoshimoto, his friend and secret crush, called him after discovering Hayden’s body. The homicide chief sends heavy-drinking DI Jimmy Canham to help investigate, but he just wants to charge the first likely suspect. There’s no shortage of suspects among the locals and artists visiting for the Plein-Air Festival, and Rhys and Jimmy clash frequently as Rhys tries to protect his friends and neighbors while seeking the true killer. In her debut novel, Maddux appealingly begins with a victim who people are glad is dead and presents readers with a suspect pool that’s full of sympathetic characters. She smoothly details the indiscretions that put each character under Hayden’s control, bringing their inner conflicts into clear focus. Stuck in the middle is the good-hearted Rhys, who must find the killer of a man no one will miss. The narrative has a pleasingly quick pace and offers a sparkling picture of Avalon (“the last rays of sun made the red-tiled roof of Avalon’s landmark casino glow like coals”), giving readers a window into what draws famous painters to the festival. Maddux has established a ready backdrop for a potential new series.

Colorful characters inhabit a stunning setting in this engaging whodunit.

OUR DARKEST HOUR
Mari, Gabriella E.
Self (508 pp.)
$15.99 paper | $3.99 e-book
9798986829814

After a fatal car accident, a young man becomes a psychic in this gay paranormal romance.

Mari’s novel has a killer opening line: “The world around Adrian Sinclair was dead.” It’s the middle of winter, and Adrian is still reeling from the loss of his best friend, killed when
their car was hit by a drunk driver two years before. Around the time of the crash, Adrian developed psychic powers, allowing him to see and communicate with ghosts, demons, and other paranormal entities. Enter the Crossroads Paranormal Research Society, a team of young men who investigate hauntings for a popular YouTube channel with a huge fan base. They take Adrian on as their new trainee, hoping to hire a psychic to join them full time. While Adrian spends much of the first third of the novel attempting to keep the fact that he’s gay a secret, romantic tension builds as he develops feelings for Yukio “Yu” Gaetz, a stoic-seeming demonologist and CPRS team co-founder. Bad news for Adrian: Fans of the show have shipped Yu with the other co-founder, Lukas Kessler, under the shipname “Yukas”—and rabidly defend their favorite pairing. Even worse news: There’s a supernatural entity out there that seems to be targeting psychics, so joining CPRS could put Adrian in its deadly line of fire. Mari skillfully handles a sometimes-tense, other times swoonworthy romance that escalates as Adrian becomes more involved in the team, learning more about his incredible powers and developing deeper relationships—all while otherworldly danger looms. The burgeoning relationship at the novel’s center keeps the drama fresh and lively, aided by dynamic character development. One of the best elements of the book, however, is the inclusion of text from an online fan forum, which makes CPRS feel like a real, popular team of supernatural investigators. Likewise, the large fandom—with thousands of interactions on the forum and conventions with packed audiences—allows Mari to investigate themes involving toxic parasocial relationships, such as the negative impact of shipping on real people.

A thrilling supernatural novel that also engagingly investigates the nature of fandom.

This Marin spends most of her time smoking cigarettes in the park with her boy-crazy best friend, Whitney, and working at a grocery store with Sam Hanson. Sam clearly likes Marin, though he’s also the No. 1 desire of her ex-friend, golden girl Hannah. Is it possible that the two different versions of Marin’s life could end up in the same place? The two timelines are demarcated through the use of different fonts, and the author does an impressive job crafting two distinct Marins—one bolder, one more timid—who nevertheless feel like the same person. The prose is always alive, as when Marin (who loves to dance in the park with her boy-crazy best friend, Whitney, and working at a grocery store with Sam Hanson) says “I sank into the motions immediately. Lifting up, folding over, then up again. Swinging an arm out to the side, and most of my body with it, then the other. Spin, collapse, rolling up off my toes, reaching and reaching and folding and hurting—the song was about being trapped, trying to get out, get free...” The story compellingly demonstrates how human relationships are always multifaceted, no matter how history shakes out. A well-crafted YA novel about the various ways one makes it to adulthood.

IN ONE LIFE AND OUT ANOTHER
Mercer, J.
Bare Ink (280 pp.)
$25.99 | $5.99 e-book | May 16, 2023
9781663233349

In Mercer’s YA novel, a teenage girl’s life unfolds in parallel timelines.

Do you ever wonder how your life could have gone if just one thing had been different? In one version of Marin Greene’s life, her parents are divorced. She’s just received a car for her 17th birthday (from her dad, of course), and she’s planning to use it to spend as much time away from her overbearing mother as possible. Her best friend has been Hannah since the two of them stopped hanging out with their third musketeer, Whitney as soon as the three got to high school. Marin’s biggest problem—other than deciding where to go to college—is that she and Hannah both have crushes on the same guy: a truck-driving, soccer-playing fellow named Sam Hanson. In another version of Marin’s life, her parents never divorced, though she still battles with her overbearing mother on a near daily basis.

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE
Every Word Doth Almost Tell My Name
Ed. by Morgan, Cynthia
iUniverse (466 pp.)
9781663233349

A collection of academic essays proposes that key Shakespearean works were written by Christopher Marlowe.

Twenty-seven essays and summaries are presented here, 20 of which were written by Morgan herself, the remainder by Marlowe scholars. In her introduction, the editor comments on how academia is mainly composed of “traditionalists resistant to the idea someone other than the Stratford Shakespeare wrote the works.” Morgan suggests that the pieces presented here offer “a broader look at Marlowe than is currently taught in the universities.” The opening essay by Morgan, “The Sonnets of Exile,” provides a close reading of specific Shakespearean sonnets to argue for Marlowe’s penmanship. Elsewhere, the respected author A.D. Wright’s essay, published posthumously, challenges the authorship of Shakespeare’s King Henry VI. Other essays include Alex Jack’s proposal that messengers that fell arrest without all bail shall carry me away, and reveals how he’s died’ (The coward conquest of a wretch’s knife).” The academic style used throughout is suitably formal but rarely technically confounding, its natural clarity rendering it accessible to a wide audience. Even those unfamiliar with the
Amazingly, she can psychically interact with the ghosts—and, the author cunningly unravels “the riddle of SLY” associated with the inebriated tinker Christopher Sly in *The Taming of the Shrew*—with Sly’s adventures purportedly mirroring the fate of Marlowe himself: “Sly is not dead, the corpse described by these lines must be somebody else’s.” Readers may be disappointed that this collection does not include a broader range of critics, as Morgan delivers most of the commentary. Still, the essays here are sufficiently convincing and well researched to perpetuate and bolster the Marlowe scholars’ response to the Shakespeare authorship question.

A delightfully provocative set of essays about Christopher Marlowe.

**HOUSE OF MIRRORS**

*Nash, Nola*

Ramirez & Clark Publishers (282 pp.)

$15.99 paper | $4.99 e-book | Sept. 6, 2022

9781955171182

In Nash’s paranormal novel, a tour guide discovers an extrasensory ability that can help her free trapped spirits. Anyone visiting the “sleepy little sub urb” of Franklin, Tennessee, can catch the “ghost tour” with guide Ruby Baxter. However, town newcomers Jake and Mallory Winter need Ruby’s rich historical knowledge for more than tourist entertainment after Mallory sees a ghost in their home—specifically, the shade of a Civil War–era soldier, shot and killed at the foot of the couple’s bed. Ruby surmises that the man fought at the extraordinarily bloody Battle of Franklin and later identifies him by name. After Jake sees ghosts as well, Ruby determines that the spirits are trapped in mirrors in the Winters’ house. Amazingly, she can psychically interact with the ghosts—and, to her surprise, transport back to their 19th-century pasts. She and the Winters make it their mission to help these spirits, most of whom simply want to go “home.” But returning the purchased mirrors to their rightful homes proves difficult, and not every Franklin local is cooperative. Nash’s measured ghost story is more poignant than spooky. Ruby, as a medium, connects with the spirits on a personal level, even witnessing firsthand their unavoidable deaths, and sending ghosts to the other side leaves her with a sad feeling of “emptiness.” She’s a well-developed protagonist with an intriguing backstory: She grew up with wonderful, doting grandparents, her late grandfather restored buildings (including the Winters’ home), and her late grandmother also had “spiritual sensitivities.” However, some of this emotional resonance fades as Ruby handles two feuding, rather annoying ghosts. At one point, she fears a “witch hunt” after a local man dismisses her ability, though that’s more of a potential conflict than an actual one. As the story progresses, Nash intercuts Ruby’s benevolent deeds with brief but vibrant scenes of the real-life Battle of Franklin: Tennessee’s “Five Bloodiest Hours.”

This quiet, engaging tale ably blends the supernatural with real-world history.

**ALL THAT IS SACRED**

*Norman-Carbone, Donna*

Red Adept Publishing (324 pp.)

$17.99 paper | $2.99 e-book | June 6, 2023

9781958231067

The spirit of a woman killed in a car crash guides her friends and family toward healing in Norman-Carbone’s novel.

When Lynn, a woman in her 30s, and her husband, Scott, set out for a weekend getaway to work on their marriage, a car crash on an icy road ends her life. Lynn’s spirit is stuck in limbo, watching her friends and family struggle in her absence. Scott builds a shrine to her in his room, and her young daughters, Emma and Olivia, begin to forget things about her. Her friends—Jules, Helene, Annie, and Riley—once an inseparable group since high school, drift apart due to secrets and resentments. Able to influence her loved ones as a spirit, Lynn encourages her friends to meet up at her family’s beach cottage on the one-year anniversary of her death to repair their bond and enable them to help Scott and the girls heal. As her friends argue and reminisce, Lynn learns things she never knew and starts to come to terms with her own life and death as her friends find closure. The story is more concerned with the relationships between Lynn and her loved ones than creative depictions of the afterlife (Lynn exists mostly in a shadowy replica of her home on Earth and can communicate with her loved ones more easily than she could in life). The emotional payoff of the story far outweighs the narrative conveniences used to make it happen. The linchpin of the novel is the women’s friend group—including the secrets that pulled them apart and the loyalty to Lynn that brings them back together (“This is what it feels like to be us, girls with a shared past. No matter the circumstances, we always make each other feel warm and cozy—just like home”). The dynamics among the women, both as a group and in separate pairs, are very well developed. The text captures the ways women feel the need to model perfection for each other and illustrates how covering up weaknesses allows them to fester. There is catharsis in the way each of the women, particularly Lynn, allows herself to be imperfect and in the healing that comes from that vulnerability.

A heartfelt, life-affirming novel tailor-made for readers who love stories of female friendship.
“Brilliantly observant poetry that captures a dark moment in our recent history.”

A PLAGUE OF MERCIES

THE STOLEN THRONE

Owen, Abigail
Entangled Teen (460 pp.)
$17.99 | $7.99 e-book | May 2, 2023
9781049372819

In this second installment of Owen’s YA fantasy series, a young woman impersonates her twin sister, a queen, while fighting for her own life.

After the events of The Liars Crown (2022), Meren has successfully impersonated her twin sister, Tabra, as the queen of Aryd; her sibling is currently hiding in the desert. But her sister’s evil husband, King Eidolon, knows the truth and has magically bound Meren to him with a sand nymph’s curse. The secret of his apparent immortality is still a mystery, but he somehow sheds “shadows” (“fractured, evil pieces of the king’s soul”) to create younger versions of himself—and his queens are always sacrificed to make it possible. However, one of these shadows, Reven, has managed to fight off the evil that permeates his nature. He and Meren have fallen in love, although he’s forced to constantly fight the shadows still contained within himself: “Their screams are like ragged blades shredding my insides as they try to claw their way out,” he narrates at one point. “If I look down, I know I’ll see their faces bulging out of my skin, even under my clothing.”

Reven mounts a daring mission to rescue Meren alongside Cain, a member of a nomadic tribe known as the Wanderers, who also vies for her heart. The most engaging adventures begin as the main characters attempt to defeat Eidolon’s shadows once and for all; Meren has power over sand and Reven has power over shadows, but those abilities become unreliable, which effectively puts them all in danger. Fans of Sarah J. Maas’ A Court of Thorns and Roses series will find much to enjoy in Owen’s work, which features plenty of fast-paced action and sexy-but-forbidden romance. Meren’s tendency to deliver sassy quips also provides a feeling of lightness to the author’s well-drawn characters.

A nonstop adventure with plenty of magic and romance to draw in avid YA fantasy fans.

A PLAGUE OF MERCIES

Pelzman, Adam
Jackson Heights Press (348 pp.)
$15.95 paper | $8.99 e-book | June 7, 2023
9781733258562

A New Yorker watches from his apartment window as a plague ravages the city in this prose poem by Pelzman.

Gabriel is a lonely, troubled, and divorced industrial designer who lives in an apartment building on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. Each day he observes his neighbors go about their lives in adjacent apartment blocks. Despite never having met them, he grows to know the actions of a select few intimately, including an aging Mancunian couple, a pair of gay doctors, a lonely old man, and a widowed socialite. The girl he nicknames Sophie particularly captivates Gabriel. He watches her go about her daily chores and grows jealous when any potential suitors visit. Gabriel observes sadly that “despite being separated by only a few inches of concrete, / they will never be of service to each other.” His neighbors suddenly begin to fall ill as a pandemic moves through the city. “Death is here,” declares the speaker, and the city’s forces are “depleted” for a moment. The everyday street life is captured in short, urgently descriptive lines that comment on the action as it unfolds: “There is a cyclist, / a pot-bellied man, / who spits on the ground / and clears his nostrils.” Such descriptions are often interspersed with Gabriel’s reactions (“Gabriel believes that the social contract continues to erode”), framing each scene with personal opinion. The result is an intimate portrait of a metropolis that becomes distressingly distorted and paranoiac with the onset of the “plague” (“An ambulance, / a deathmobile with pretty lights, / ambles up Amsterdam. / He glares at the ambulance / Stay away, / he warns”). Pelzman meticulously captures the shifting moods of the city during the pandemic and knits a captivatingly unconventional love story into the narrative. If future generations wish to understand what the Covid-19 lockdown felt like in America’s great cities, this book should be among the first on their reading list.

Brilliantly observant poetry that captures a dark moment in our recent history.

PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS AS SOCIAL INNOVATORS IN HEALTHCARE

The Physician Assistant History Society
Physician Assistant History Society (408 pp.)
$39.95 paper | April 28, 2022
9780578341644

This illuminating history of physician assistants in the United States shows how a novel medical profession took root and blossomed.

This book from the Physician Assistant Historical Society looks back on the 50-year rise of physician assistants and nurse practitioners as health care providers who perform many tasks that medical doctors do, including taking patient histories, making routine diagnoses, stitching wounds, prescribing drugs, assisting surgeons, and performing such complex procedures as cardiac catheterizations. The volume gathers chapters by several authors, most academic PAs. Reginald D. Carter, a historian emeritus at the society, writes on how PAs, as a concept, emerged as a way of alleviating postwar doctor shortages and on
the first university training programs in the 1960s. Professors Karen Eseta Mulitalo and Lisa Tshuma and mobile medical-care PA Leslie A. Kole explore the PAs’ original mission of providing needed medical care in rural towns and inner-city neighborhoods. Florida State University professor James R. Kilgore and Maha B. Walker recap the lobbying efforts of the academy to change University PA program directors James R. Kilgore and Maha B. Walker examine such programs, which have grown from awarding certificates to master’s degrees. Society trustees John J. Davis and Robert S. Smith, along with Kole, survey diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts by the American Academy of PAs. AAPA directors Erika E. Miller, Stephanie M. Radix, and Carson S. and inclusion efforts by the American Academy of PAs. AAPA directors Erika E. Miller, Stephanie M. Radix, and Carson S. Walker recap the lobbying efforts of the academy to change state and federal laws on, for example, what PAs are allowed to do and how they’re paid. Professor Christine M. Everett spotlights research studies that show that PAs provide care that’s equal in quality to that of doctors and cheaper to boot.

From the welter of historical and institutional detail, broader themes about the growth of the PA industry effectively emerge, including the long struggle of PAs to raise their status; the push back from the American Medical Association, which lobbied governments to maintain restrictions on PAs’ independence and responsibilities to keep them from supplanting higher-paid doctors; and the push by universities to capitalize on the spread of the PA sector by increasing the length, prestige, and expense of training programs and credentials. There’s redundancy, with later chapters sometimes rehashing content covered earlier, and the prose style is heavily academic—lucid but plodding and stuffed with acronyms: “In 2017, the AAPA HOD approved a new policy, Optimal Team Practice (OTP), which arises when PAs, physicians, and other medical professionals work together to provide quality care without burdensome administrative constraints.” There are livelier passages, as well, including stories of heroic military PAs and colorful, first-hand appreciations of the PA craft: “In between sewing lacerations, treating asthma, and casting fractures, I wrote papers on malaria, splenic injuries, and exotic zoonoses,” recalls New York University professor Charles DiMaggio of a PA stint in a New York hospital. The book isn’t for casual readers, but scholars and practitioners will find a wealth of information on the impact of physician assistants on American health care along with deeper sociological insights into the ways in which professional groups establish themselves.

A revealing, if often dry, portrait of a critical shift in modern medical practice.

**ALWAYS REMEMBER THE NAMES**

**Pote, Ryan**

Manuscript

An FBI agent is framed, disgraced, and hunted in Pote’s thriller.

A devastating explosion at a high school graduation ceremony that takes hundreds of lives has all the earmarks of a terrorist attack. Mike Hammond, the director of the Terrorist Explosive Device Analytical Center, is told, “We need our best on this.” “No fucking way in hell,” he responds. “He’s unstable, and he’s on a leave of absence.” He is also in an Alabama prison after busting up a bar. But no sooner does John Craft arrive on the horrific crime scene than he senses that something is not right. When Craft finds a connection between a rash of bombings and Mexican drug cartels, the case becomes uncomfortably personal; his daughter, who suffered from depression while Craft was stationed in Iraq, died from taking tainted fentanyl, and Craft himself became addicted to Oxycodone. The push back becomes harder and deadlier the closer Craft gets to the truth—but that only emboldens him. “It’s time to take the gloves off,” he vows. “I tried it the right way—time to do it my way. I’m a man with nothing to lose...A fugitive of the same laws I swore to uphold...These bastards want a war? They don’t know what’s coming for them.” Pote, a veteran special operations pilot, debuts a protagonist with Jack Reacher-esque bluntness—provoked in that bar, he makes quick work of his would-be assailant. When depicting violence, it is sometimes most effective to leave the worst to the reader’s imagination; the pithy statement “Tony grabbed him by the elbow. That was the last thing Tony remembered for six days” doesn’t need the subsequent play-by-play carnage the author supplies. But Pote is a potent writer, and here he pits Craft against a despised villain with a wide reach, leading to a wow of an ending that fires the imagination and leaves the reader eagerly awaiting the outcome in a sequel.

A punchy debut with an unstoppable hero and relentless action.

**C TRAIN**

**Rusu, Meredith**

*Illus. by Angela Atuesta*

The Circle Tales (32 pp.)

$18.99 | June 8, 2023

97898752627603

Rusu’s picture book tells the story of a New York City subway train that finds a new home thanks to an old friend. The city is bustling with activity, playing out on miles of sidewalks. Underneath these, C Train transports diverse people from all walks of life to work, school, or their homes. Her favorite passenger is Maya, a Latinx girl with a star barrette. Maya loves the ocean and regales C Train with stories of sea life.
The subway loves Maya’s colorful art and wonders, “Where do sea creatures sleep?” As Maya grows up and pursues her initially unspecified dream career, C Train grows older and less reliable. One day, she’s surprised to see Maya in her railyard; her friend’s return heralds a new home for C Train. This first installment in a STEAM-based series, created by Brigette Allen and written by Rusu, introduces youngsters to the concept of artificial reefs: trains that are lowered to the ocean floor to provide homes for sea life. Rusu’s engaging story thoughtfully explains C Train’s transformation and effectively utilizes repetition (“Magical, messy, and marvelous!”) to make a connection between city and ocean life. Atuesta’s bold and bright painterly illustrations capture the vitality of New York and the sea. A note at the end recounts the story’s nonfictional inspiration.

An entertaining and educational look at artificial reef creation.

**BAD REALITIES**
Schrader, Andrew
Bad People Publications (213 pp.)
$3.99 e-book | May 26, 2023

SF, horror, and dark fantasy intermingle in Schrader’s collection of short stories. The narrator of the book’s opening tale lives a life in chains. He survives by feeding on human flesh—and, in doing so, apparently saves the world. The 11 stories that follow don’t lighten the mood much. People line up for the latest fad in “Chop,” which involves a large knife, and family vacations seem like a bad idea considering what near-future airports require for travel in “I’m Ready To Affirm You Now, Gamma.” While Schrader plays around with genres, it’s all consistently disconcerting and scary stuff. Characters persistently wind up in harrowing circumstances or, as the title suggests, face some horrible, disturbing truth. The author maintains an atmosphere of dread; in a typically tense passage from “The Floating Brain,” he writes, “Bits of a broken light bulb crunched underfoot as she pushed open the exit door and stepped out onto the dirt field, passing the lone pole with a badly sun-scorched tetherball attached to a decaying rope.” The two standout stories are also the longest. “Hondo Rane and the City of Illusion,” in which a towering barbarian returns to his hometown to protect a family heirloom from falling into villainous hands, is superb, violent fun. “The Floating Brain,” which closes the book, unfurls on a dystopian Earth where a teenager plans to use a special gift to combat a giant, tentacled floating brain that devours humans who rebel against the government. Both of these offerings deftly condense vast worlds into taut narratives and could easily be spun off into additional stories or even full series. Some of the material tiptoes into familiar horror/SF terrain, as when someone is convinced that a scarecrow is stalking them (“Jack Nasty on the Wind”), but the author casts a spell with sharp, concise prose and climaxes that will rattle most readers.

Dark, indelible, and gleefully unsettling tales.

**MUMENTOUS**
Schultz, Amy J.
Atmosphere Press (178 pp.)
$37.50 | $12.99 e-book | April 25, 2023

Schultz explores the culture of Texas homecoming mums in this debut book of photography and reportage. Across the country, high school girls often wear chrysanthemum corsages to their yearly homecoming football games. In Texas, however—where everything is bigger—the homecoming mum has morphed into an elaborate affair featuring as many as 20 artificial mums personalized with ribbons, beads, feathers, trinkets, messages, and the like. Schultz, who attended high school in Florida, first encountered the phenomenon of Texas homecoming mums after moving to the Lone Star State as an adult. She was immediately fascinated: “Is a mum just a mum or is a mum a metaphor?” she wonders early in the book. “Is the thing greater than the sum of its parts, much like the person who wears it, or the state in which it thrives, or the society in which it stands?” With this book, Schultz sets out to explore—through stories and photographs—the culture of mums: how the tradition originated, how it has changed over the years, and what it means for the schools, students, parents, and communities who participate. It’s a tale rooted in a particularly Texan love of maximalism but one that also tells a larger story of the human need for ritual and pageantry. Schultz’s spirited prose vividly captures the colors and textures of the mums and their wearers, as when the author gets to try one on and strut around: “When you’re enveloped in a mum of this size, there’s no direction to go but forward. As I found my footing to steer all three of my dimensions, the mum audibly cheered me on, because woven into it was a waterfall of sleigh bells and cowbells. With my every step, twist, and gesture, the bells involuntarily created a manic and discordant melody.” The many eye-catching black-and-white photographs are as instrumental as the text in communicating the soul of mum culture. Both seasoned Texas alumni and readers completely unfamiliar with the tradition will be equally charmed by this beguiling quirk of Americana.

An entertaining, brilliantly shot look at a Texas high school tradition.
All We Could Have Been and More
Shaw, Joshua
Livingston Press (138 pp.)
$18.95 paper | $9.95 e-book | July 19, 2023
9781604893472

Shaw considers alternate modes of existence in this debut collection of literary short stories.

A woman—who may be controlled by a zombie ant fungus—invites her ex-boyfriend over for a late-night reconciliation (“Zombie Ant Fungus”). A parks and wildlife employee is forced to take a bear into her home when there’s no more room in the woods only to realize, a few weeks into the stay, that the “bear” is actually just a man in a bear suit (“Parks and Wildlife”). A zombie, reanimated for the purpose of serving as a crash test dummy, falls in love with her zombie co-pilot, Jane, over the course of several catastrophic drives together (“Crash Test Zombies”).

From Dungeons and Dragons clerics to reluctant pit fighters to body-snatching aliens pretending to be human, the characters in these 16 stories press up against the walls of their realities, probing for those places where recognizable humanity turns into something less familiar. In “Bed Just Right,” a family’s suburban home is rendered an exotic museum when their creepy neighbor sneaks in and begins examining their things: “He wonders if Stan’s and Tamar’s toothbrushes are still damp from their morning brushings. He goes downstairs, runs his thumb over bristles. One is moist. The other is dry. The dry toothbrush’s bristles are squashed, flattened, stiff with old paste. Interesting, he says. Very interesting.” In the title story, an inventor devises a way for him and his wife to be the best possible versions of themselves only to realize it will be different versions of themselves who will actually get to enjoy it. Such what-ifs, inversions, and revisions populate the author’s stories, each presenting the world anew in all its vivid, lovely, awful glory.

Shaw’s tales range from dark surrealism to offbeat comedy. The prose is uniformly tight and clever, as in “Gilman,” which opens with the Creature from the Black Lagoon receiving an invitation to visit a retired ichthyologist: “The Gill-man contemplates his lair—a dank, murky cave. He owns little: a boulder, a puddle of fish offal, some chewed-up crocodile bones. He has always wanted to visit Florida.” “Hallmark Christmas Movies (2013-2020)” is composed of a series of unhinged descriptions of potential movies poking fun at the channel’s established holiday format: “Jake refers to her, the woman with no time for love, as ‘Little Miss Mediocre.’ Not to her face, of course. Except that one time. One time too many.” The author has a gift for concision—the stories are on the shorter side, some only a page or two in length. The more playful, premise-driven pieces tend to be the strongest, though some of the more serious stories, like “Wicked Source of Light,” are quite powerful. Readers will be reminded of the work of George Saunders, though Shaw’s stories have a weirder, less reassuring tone. He veers from familiar to alien or alien to familiar in a way that keeps his audience from ever growing too comfortable, fostering a propulsive sense of unease that carries the reader on to the next strange episode.

A collection of short but memorable narratives that rupture the illusion of personhood.

The Crystal Key
Smith, Douglas
Spiral Path Books (384 pp.)
March 11, 2023
9781928048336
9781928048299 paper

Smith’s YA Dream Rider Saga continues as its eponymous superhero protagonist faces even bigger challenges in this fantasy novel.

Will Dreycott is the wealthy 17-year-old superhero/hooded vigilante called the Dream Rider, who has the ability to travel through people’s dreams. His most recent victory saw him save the world and defeat a villainous duo alongside his new girlfriend, Case, and her brother, Fader. The trio now live together in Will’s luxurious tower (a building the rich teen has outfitted for his own purposes) in Toronto, but there is trouble in paradise: Will still yearns to find his parents, who disappeared mysteriously eight years earlier while on an expedition in Peru, and to learn the truth behind his astral powers and his severe agoraphobia. Case and Fader also hope to find their mother, who likewise disappeared years before. Meanwhile, the siblings’ own strange superhuman abilities start to malfunction as Case’s inner Voice, which warns her of danger, starts to multiply, and Fader’s ability to “fade out” makes him disappear from people’s sight—and from their memories. Further complicating matters, a cult of warring sisters schemes to obtain a mysterious crystal key by any means necessary as, in the background, a sinister figure plots away. The author’s sequel to the excellent The Hollow Boys (2022) ups the ante for adventure and suspense and continues to deftly fuse superhero and fantasy tropes. The trio of protagonists have relatable inner struggles and compelling story arcs that work well both independently and when woven into the overarching storyline of Will’s parents’ fateful expedition. Smith excels at strong action sequences, worldbuilding introducing engaging new characters and the concept of the multiverse), and humorous dialogue: “Home Boy, ever notice your explanations don’t, you know, explain? Anything. At all.” There is plenty here to entice readers to return for the grand finale.

A fun and engrossing superhero sequel.
“A slim but immersive fantasy about a weather-driven intergenerational rivalry.”

WEATHERNOSE

A Cuban American girl conjures happy visions of her heritage in this illustrated, bilingual book by author Spitzer and illustrator de Carvalho.

On the eve of her quinceañera, or 15th birthday celebration, the narrator thinks about the tree her abuela (grandmother) planted from a seed after immigrating to the United States from Cuba. That tree, now grown tall, represents hopes and dreams. Inspired by her love for her family, the narrator imagines a wishing tree that could conjure physical manifestations of their most precious memories: summer carnavales, beloved foods, Spanish movies, and the smell of the ocean. As she and her family celebrate under her abuela’s tree, the narrator realizes that all people’s lives are grounded by cultural roots and enriched by migratory seeds. The same story is told in both English and Spanish, and the layout incorporates both sets of text without cluttering or obscuring the full-color, painterly illustrations. Interestingly, de Carvalho’s art style presents children as particularly undersized; as a result, the narrator and her sister appear to be about 10 years younger than they are. Although this may be momentarily confusing, this visual encapsulation of childhood is consistent with the book’s halcyon theme. De Carvalho expresses the remembered joy of Cuban culture with vibrant and colorful images that always match the mood of the text; the most somber palette comes with mention of the narrator’s abuela’s life of hard work. The writing has a poetic tone (“The island flavors fill the air, enticing our senses as we dance and laugh together”), and though it’s quite wordy for independent readers, it’s soothing rather than overwhelming. Young children—particularly lap readers—will experience comfort and a sense of wonder.

A nostalgic and uplifting story of one family’s experience in two cultures.
“A touching story to help guide young readers through grief by emphasizing love.”

**BEA AND HONEY**

**The Secret**

Teetsel, Claudia  
Illus. by Judith Gosse  
BookBaby (34 pp.)  

In Teetsel’s picture book, two beloved pets, one alive and one deceased, share a secret. As the story opens, Bea, a black and white dog, is already an angel—the narrator describes her dream of the humans she loved so much. When the family decides they are ready to open their hearts to a new dog, they bring Honey home. Honey realizes something that the humans don’t: “The family doesn’t know that Bea is still here with them. They can’t see Bea.” But Honey can, and in the following pages the two dogs share their love for the human family as Bea guides Honey through both mischief and good behavior. Teetsel uses short, spare text and accessible vocabulary, making this useful for young independent readers who may be mourning their own loss. The brief sentences break the text down into small chunks for easy reading, and Gosse’s watercolor illustrations welcome young readers into a loving family (one especially lovely image shows how Honey sees many families followed by their angel pets, who have never left them). The backgrounds are more abstract and light on details, keeping the focus on the characters. The book was inspired by the cover image, a portrait painted by Teetsel’s son of the family dogs—one living and one an angel.

A touching story to help guide young readers through grief by emphasizing love.

**KILLING HURRY**

Thatcher, Will  
Gatekeeper Press (298 pp.)  

A recovering alcoholic with a violent past gets mixed up with the wrong people in Thatcher’s debut novel. In 2020, retired cop Troy Martin chooses to go to Nicaragua for a vacation, hoping to surf bigger waves than Florida has to offer. He’s in his mid-40s and lonely because his grown daughters are away at the nearby city of Linett, but the meeting doesn’t go well for him. His ego bruised, Tart decides he has no choice but to break into the girl’s workshop and destroy the weatherbone once and for all. As his quest leads him into ever deeper states of humiliation, Tart begins to question all of the decisions that have led him to this lonely life. As he does, he begins to realize that the young inventor who destroyed his livelihood might feel just as alone as he does.

The author’s prose is cozy and whimsical: When Tart enters Cypress’ Wonka-esque workshop, he observes, “The shed was strewn with Cypress’ many unfinished projects, things with toggles, arms and spinning domes. Some of them came alive when he passed by—there must have been motion sensors buried deep inside their machinery. Things moved and twitched here and seemed to speak and chatter to one another.” The short book reads like a children’s novel from an earlier era—the stakes are low, the fantastical elements are subtle, and the narrative voice is imbued with a knowing wryness. Young readers will be enchanted by the imagination at work even if they don’t immediately relate to the protagonist’s technology-driven unemployment. Tart is endearingly misanthropic, and his interactions with the precocious Cypress are great fun. The supporting characters—including Sol, an idiosyncratic bookshop owner and his “book-napped” granddaughter, Sari—help to fill out the world. In its stylized manner, the novel raises questions about the ways people choose to occupy themselves and how an intense fixation on one aspect of life can leave other areas neglected. The reader will finish Taibah’s tale hoping to be welcomed back to the Cerulean Isles in future books.

A slim but immersive fantasy about a weather-driven inter-generational rivalry.
Andy. Although the two grow close, Troy quickly tires of Andy's attempts to weasel money out of him and of his dubious property deals. Before long, when Andy owes too much to some very scary people, he drags Troy into his troubles. Troy's violent days in law enforcement earned him the nickname Hurt, and this tendency is something he wants to remedy as part of his recovery. He may need to rely on that ferocity, however, in order to survive.

Thatcher's breezy, character-driven tale bounces between the modern day and Troy's past. The flawed hero continually has conflicts with people in his life, whether it's his ex-girlfriend, his "crazy" (or perhaps eccentric) mom, or his estranged drug-smuggling dad. For the most part though, he's appealingly easy-going, which is reflected in his first-person narration. He's a well-developed character who judges people not by their looks or reputation but by their conduct and beliefs. The story also teems with concise surfing details: "I only got two waves and one of them nearly ended in a collision, when I got to the turn in the horseshoe and a Nica ripper was pumping down the line right at me." The tension effectively picks up after it becomes clear Andy is bad news (which the opening scene teases), and the taut final act sprints to a worthwhile payoff.

An often riveting thriller with a compelling hero.

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THE BRIDGE TO MAGIC
Thornbury, Alex
Shadow Lore Publishing (392 pp.)
$34.99 | $17.99 paper | $4.99 e-book
9780645497007 paper
9780645497007 paper

Thornbury's debut YA fantasy novel features a girl on the run fighting to suppress her forbidden magic in a dying world. The fantastical realm of Seramight is slowly succumbing to the Blight, a creeping malaise that kills anything it touches. When the city of Drasdark falls, only Terren remains, a final, multicultural refuge of haves and have-nots nestled between a long-drained sea and a bottomless chasm that separates the world of men from the magic-infused Deadlands. A single bridge—which is a living organism—spans the intervening gap. Those who tire of life may need to rely on that ferocity, however, in order to survive. Humanity's plight goes from bad to worse, ever spiraling downward. The effect is cheerless yet oddly refreshing in a genre that so often fails to make good on its threats. Troy's journey can be read as a parallel to the emotional progression of one caring for a terminally ill relative. His journey is a mental testament to humanity's enduring spirit.
“Stray Socks,” there’s a wife and mother of three who seems to struggle with distinguishing dreams from memories. Tuttle’s masterful dialogue surprises time and again, as seemingly trivial conversations deliver profundity: In the case of “Stranger,” a man’s description of another character is closer to the truth than he thinks: “Most of the time, you aren’t all here, and when you’re here, it’s as if you’re about to leave.” A notable theme of motherhood crops up throughout; “112 Months” may be the book’s most heartfelt offering, but other characters also experience intense emotions tied to pregnancy and experience self-isolation. The sole downside to this superlative book is that it’s too brief, but these stories are likely to hold up to multiple readings.

Dark, sometimes despairing tales that inspire and impress.

ADELA ZAMUDIO
Selected Poetry & Prose
Zamudio, Adela
Trans. by Lynette Yetter
Fuente Fountain Books (320 pp.)

A collection of writings from Bolivian poet, essayist, and feminist activist Zamudio (1854-1928) addresses enduring social issues.

Though the bulk of the author’s body of work, which spans poetry, prose, and nonfiction, dates back a century or more (the pieces here were originally published between 1887 and 1942), it’s only recently that political and social conditions have renewed interest in her writings and facilitated their translations for a global audience. This collection has two sections, one for poetry and one for prose, focused on themes including feminism (“Born a Man”), Indigenous identity and revolution (“End of the Century”), mental health (“To a Suicide”), and the viability of a battered society (“Masquerade”)—subjects that Zamudio grappled with as a woman far ahead of her time, culturally speaking. Yetter’s translations aptly retain the exigencies of the author’s writing, though the poems do lose their rhyme schemes in English. In the prose section, Zamudio employs an almost epistolary, introspective style to document many of Bolivia’s societal and political foibles; one story—“Yesterday’s Meeting”—uses an animal motif (much like George Orwell later used in Animal Farm (1945)) to relay bureaucratic tensions and flaws in democracy. Zamudio employs the struggles of women and Indigenous people as fodder, both for her own work and for broader revolution. Her imagery is both whimsical and grounded, optimistic and learned; as she writes in “Poet,” “it is necessary that she must dive into / Life’s most bitter dregs; / To know horrid misfortune / And rugged paths; / Hurt by life’s cliffs and thistles, / Wounded by the shocks of life. / That is inspiration!” We watch and read the news to understand what’s going on in the world, but we also seek out art to contextualize how all these events make us feel and show us how to get through them; Zamudio’s work serves these purposes brilliantly.

Confident, stirring writing by a prescient poet.
**Books of the Month**

**THE FEAR OF LARGE AND SMALL NATIONS**  
Nancy Agabian  
Beautifully textured writing in a compelling tale that ponders identity and belonging.

**THE SYNDICATE SPY**  
Brittany Butler  
A storytelling tour de force—this espionage thriller delivers the goods in a big way.

**CHESTER AND THE MAGIC 8 BALL**  
Lynn Katz  
An uplifting middle-grade story that meets sadness head-on and cuddles up to what’s important in life.

**DRAGON THIEF**  
Blake Penn & Raven Penn  
An exciting fantasy adventure and a great start to a promising new series.

**THE WORK**  
Zachary Sklar  
A beautifully written account of a principled life.

**DIVISIBLE MAN: TEN KEYS WEST**  
Howard Seaborne  
An irresistible, high-stakes, cross-country adventure about a man with amazing gifts.
BY MICHAEL SCHAUB

BOOK ABOUT BILLIE JEAN KING CHALLENGED IN FLORIDA

A children’s book about tennis legend Billie Jean King has been challenged in a Florida school district, the Tallahassee Democrat reports.

Leon County Schools, the Tallahassee school district with more than 30,000 students, is reviewing I Am Billie Jean King, written by Brad Meltzer and illustrated by Christopher Eliopoulos, following a parental complaint.

The parent objected to the book’s LGBTQ+ content. In the book, the character of King is presented discussing the end of her marriage to sports promoter Larry King and her subsequent marriage to fellow tennis player Ilana Kloss. Billie Jean King came out as lesbian in 1981, one of the first prominent professional athletes to do so.

“Eventually, Larry and I stopped being married and I fell in love with a wonderful woman named Ilana,” King’s character says in the book. “You can’t choose who you fall in love with. Your heart will tell you.”

The newspaper notes that the parent’s complaint came 10 days after King spoke out against Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and the “Don’t Say Gay” bill that he signed into law.

Meltzer posted about the complaint on Instagram, writing, “At the heart of this meritless challenge is the idea that it’s somehow inappropriate to teach that one of America’s great heroes is gay. Let me be clear: there is nothing shameful or inappropriate about being gay. I stand with @BillieJeanKing, I stand with the LGBTQ+ community, and I stand against hatred and intolerance.”

ALA: THESE WERE THE 13 MOST BANNED BOOKS OF 2022

The American Library Association released its list of the most frequently banned or challenged books of 2022, with Maia Kobabe’s Gender Queer again taking the top spot.

Unlike previous years, the new list features 13 titles instead of the usual 10. Four books tied for the No. 10 spot.

Gender Queer, Kobabe’s graphic memoir about growing up nonbinary and asexual, was the most banned book of the year; challenges focused on its LGBTQ+ and sexual content. It was also the No. 1 most challenged book of 2021.

George M. Johnson’s queer-themed “memoir-manifesto” All Boys Aren’t Blue took the No. 2 spot, up from No. 3 in 2021. Toni Morrison’s classic novel The Bluest Eye was No. 3 on the new list, followed by Mike Curato’s Flamer at No. 4.

John Green’s Looking for Alaska and Stephen Chbosky’s The Perks of Being a Wallflower tied for No. 5, while Jonathan Evison’s Lawn Boy was at No. 7. Sherman Alexie’s The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian took the No. 8 spot, followed by Ashley Hope Pérez’s Out of Darkness at No. 9.

The books tied for No. 10 were Sarah J. Maas’ A Court of Mist and Fury, Ellen Hopkins’ Crank, Jesse Andrews’ Me and Earl and the Dying Girl, and Juno Dawson’s This Book Is Gay.

In a news release, ALA President Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada praised the authors, “whose work challenges readers with stories that disrupt the status quo and offer fresh perspectives on tough issues.”

“The list also illustrates how frequently stories by or about LGBTQ+ persons, people of color, and lived experiences are being targeted by censors,” Pelayo-Lozada said. “Closing our eyes to the reality portrayed in these stories will not make life’s challenges disappear. Books give us courage and help us understand each other.”

Michael Schaub, a journalist and regular contributor to NPR, lives near Austin, Texas.
Fiction lovers tend to agree that Julia Whelan is one of the best audiobook readers working today. So it’s fitting that she narrates one of the best novels of 2023 so far. Whelan is pitch-perfect in Rebecca Makkai’s riveting *I Have Some Questions for You* (Penguin Audio, 14 hours and 4 minutes), a powerful novel about misogyny, murder, and the ramifications of the #MeToo era.

Whelan portrays Bodie Kane, a Los Angeles podcaster who returns to teach a course at Granby, her old boarding school in New Hampshire. Back in the 1990s, Bodie’s roommate was found dead in the pool, and a Black trainer was convicted of killing her. But when a student starts a podcast about how Thalia’s killer was wrongly convicted, Bodie finds herself revisiting her time at Granby, recalling aggressions and bullying, and viewing her past with fresh concern.

Whelan adds a subtle urgency to Bodie’s roiling emotions when she needs to and delivers a cool reserve whenever Bodie tries to hide behind a veneer of professionalism. Bodie has deep regrets that her careless observations and prejudices may have helped convict an innocent man, and she thinks she knows who killed Thalia. But remorse and hindsight won’t prevent her from making questionable moral choices.

This novel is a pleasure to read, too, but Whelan’s performance elevates an already excellent story. Voicing three sisters and their mother and making them sound distinct is no easy task, but author Claire Jiménez succeeds brilliantly in the reading of her terrific debut novel, *What Happened to Ruthy Ramirez*? (Hachette Audio, 5 hours and 59 minutes).

Novelists aren’t always adept at performing their own work, but Jiménez turns out to be a fine choice for this funny yet heartbreaking story about a Puerto Rican family from Staten Island. She brings depth and nuance to Jessica and Nina Ramirez, their mother, Dolores, and their lost sister, Ruthy, who disappeared from a bus stop when she was 13.

Twelve years later, Jessica spots a familiar-looking redhead called Ruby on the raunchy reality show *Catfight*. She looks and acts like Ruthy. Could this be their missing sister?

A hilarious family road trip ensues, and Jiménez proves worthy of her own material. She’s not only a solid narrator, but also a skillful storyteller who can balance comedy and tragedy.

Curtis Sittenfeld’s new novel is an engaging, comic reminder that love is not only blind, but also harder than it should be (because we can’t stop getting in our own way). In *Romantic Comedy* (Random House Audio, 9 hours and 5 minutes), protagonist Sally Milz knows her writing gig at *The Night Owls*, an SNL-style late-night comedy show, is her one true love, especially her sketches that skewer the gender wars.

But when pop star Noah Brewster arrives for a week as the show’s host and musical guest, she finds herself attracted to him even though she’s sure he’s far too famous and handsome to pay attention to a mere writer of average attractiveness.

Kristen Sieh, another prolific narrator, nails Sally’s quandary and self-doubt with wry intonations and good humor. She expertly navigates a series of emails that anchor the book’s middle section and prevents them from slowing the slow-burn love affair too much.

*Connie Ogle is a writer in Florida.*
A transgender prince and a bigender assassin must break a curse in this YA fantasy from award-winning author **Anna-Marie McLemore** and debut talent **Elliott McLemore**

★ “Fans of the [enemies-to-lovers] trope will find a lot to love.”
—Booklist, starred review

**VENOM & VOW**

KEEP YOUR ENEMIES CLOSER—5.16.23