Featuring Deena Mohamed, Darrin Bell, Dan Santat, and SJ Miller

PLUS: Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis at 20
FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK | Tom Beer

FALLING FOR COMICS

As a kid, I didn’t read comic books. No Archie. No Superman or Batman. Not even Classics Illustrated (even though I adored books like The Three Musketeers). I was definitely a nerd, but somehow that particular flavor of nerdiness eluded me.

Once I hit adulthood, things changed fast. I don’t recall my gateway drug—Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez’s Love and Rockets? Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s V for Vendetta? Art Spiegelman’s Maus? Whatever it was, I was addicted to graphic novels from then on. This was the 1980s, and although Maus received widespread acclaim, eventually winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, most graphic novels were eyed with suspicion by the literary establishment. College kids like me didn’t care; these books spoke to us.

In time, graphic memoirs like Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home (2006), Roz Chast’s Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant? (2014), and Jerry Craft’s New Kid (2019) would transform attitudes toward the genre as critics and awards committees realized what readers had long known: Comics were a valid and artful way of telling a story, as profound—or silly or strange—as their creators made them. Graphic literature even proved worthy of serious study as an art form, as evidenced by Hillary Chute’s Why Comics: From Underground to Everywhere (2017), which Kirkus, in a starred review, called a “comprehensive, critically incisive survey.”

So it’s about time that we at Kirkus recognized the variety and vitality of the genre in this, our inaugural Graphic Lit Issue. In these pages our editors highlight some of the best examples they have seen this year for both adults and young readers. Elsewhere, we talk with practitioners such as Deena Mohamed (Shubeik Lubeik), Darrin Bell (The Talk), Dan Santat (A First Time for Everything), and SJ Miller (Maze and the Endless Unknown). And nonfiction editor Eric Liebetrau pays tribute to the work of Chuck D, better known as a rapper with Public Enemy; this year he released not one but two works of graphic nonfiction, Stevedio and Summer of Hamm, which both received Kirkus stars. Finally, contributing editor Gregory McNamee revisits Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis, published 20 years ago and now a classic.

As for me, my late-blooming obsession with comics continues unabated. Among my favorite books of recent years in any genre are Thi Bui’s The Best We Could Do (2017), Nora Krug’s Belonging: A German Reckons With History and Home (2018), Adrian Tomine’s The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Cartoonist (2020), and Kate Beaton’s Ducks: Two Years in the Oil Sands (2022). This year I may add another graphic memoir to that list: Julia Wertz’s Impossible People: A Completely Average Recovery Story (Black Dog & Leventhal, May 9), a painfully honest but warmhearted account of the artist’s struggles with alcohol. In a starred review a critic wrote, “Her story may be ‘completely average,’ but the way she tells and draws it is extraordinary.”

If you’re not already a devoted reader of graphic literature, we hope the issue will introduce you to some books worth checking out. Like me, you just might find yourself addicted.
The Kirkus Star is awarded to books of remarkable merit, as determined by the impartial editors of Kirkus.

Caldecott winner Brendan Wenzel’s latest picture book is a beautifully surreal ode both to the natural world and the power of imagination. Read the review on p. 115.
WHERE THERE WAS FIRE
Arias, John Manuel
Flatiron Books (288 pp.)
$28.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781250817389

A Costa Rican family is torn apart by multiple tragedies over several generations.
One fateful night in 1968, Lyra and Carmen’s family is changed forever: Their maternal grandmother dies, and their father, José María, sets fire to the American Fruit Company, the banana plantation where he works, and then disappears. Afterward, Teresa, their distraught mother, flees to Washington, D.C., for six years with no contact, leaving the sisters in the care of their godmothers. This is the second time Teresa has faced loss related to the plantation: Her father worked there as a corporate lawyer until he too disappeared one day. Jumping forward to 1995, Lyra is estranged from her mother as she raises Carmen’s son, 10-year-old Gabriel, as her own following Carmen’s death by suicide when he was a newborn. Now working as an infertility counselor in San José, Lyra meets a patient who used to work at the American Fruit Company and who has a box of documents he was supposed to destroy. As Lyra begins to research the bad deeds of the company that fractured her family, she wrestles with whether to reconcile with her mother, newly diagnosed with cancer, and be truthful with Gabriel about his family. Arias’ debut novel seeps with spirits and omens as the devastating impact of imperialism is examined. The story is told through a kaleidoscope of moments in multiple time periods, leaving the reader to piece together knowledge alongside Lyra even as the truth will come far too late to heal the devastating wounds left behind: “Ashes cannot testify on the witness stand.” Arias ably balances the weight of a family drama with a broader depiction of Costa Rican history, though the characters could be more fully depicted and, just as for Lyra and Gabriel, not all the pieces come together for the reader.

A striking debut rich in secrets and sadness.
LOVED AND MISSED

Boyt, Susie
New York Review Books
(224 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
9781681377810

A single mother navigates custody of her granddaughter—and tries to correct mistakes she made the first time around—in this gentle but heart-wrenching story.

When London schoolteacher Ruth learns that her daughter, Eleanor, is pregnant, the two are sharing a meager Christmas dinner on a park bench. Eleanor is years into debilitating addiction, living on and off the streets with her baby’s father, Ben, but Ruth pushes past Eleanor’s resistance to offer help when Lily is born—holding vigil as the newborn goes through withdrawal in the hospital, taking control of the baptism as Eleanor and Ben keep wandering off, regularly stopping by their apartment to make sure they’re eating. When Ruth finds an unresponsive person in Eleanor’s apartment—ostensibly an overdose—she flees with Lily, anticipating a fight for custody that never comes. The years pass swiftly, almost perfunctorily, as Lily grows into a kind, strong-willed, and precocious child, “someone who knows life is a serious business, perhaps a few years before she might,” as Ruth’s friend describes her. The pacing matches Ruth’s own matter-of-factness: Her outsize shame leaves little berth for wallowing, and her self-deprecating wit resists maudlin sentimentality. (The greatest source of comic relief comes from Jean Reynolds, Ruth’s co-worker, whose brashness and loyalty make her impossible not to love.)

Through intimate first-person narration, Ruth balances the pain of losing a daughter against the hope of a second chance. Her relationship with Lily brings a cautious joy. Ruth can’t look at the girl without seeing the trail of maternal pain that originated with her own mother, who drank disinfectant after Ruth’s father left, and led to Lily’s miraculous birth. Love can go awry—see the double meaning of the title, which Lily discovers on a tombstone: “It kind of sounds like the person tried to be loving but…the aim was wrong”—but can that misdirection be righted? Though Lily isn’t immune from trauma—this is clear when her perspective abruptly takes over in the final third of the book—she is propped up by the strength of Ruth’s devotion. 

Readers who are averse to crying in public be warned: You’ll want to sit with this astounding story at home.

VAMPIRES OF EL NORTE

Cañas, Isabel
Berkley (384 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 29, 2023
9780593436721

Childhood sweethearts reunite in the shadow of the Mexican War and the threat of vampires.

Néstor and Nena were inseparable as children on the Rancho Los Ojuelos, though not everyone thought it was appropriate, Nena being the daughter of the owner and Néstor the son of a vaquero. After a treasure hunt goes wrong when they’re 13, Néstor thinks Nena is dead and he leaves the rancho, planning never to return. Nine years later, threats of Yanquis moving south finally bring him back to help with the fight only to discover that Nena survived that night and is none too happy at having been abandoned. As the two head into the fray, they must find a way to work together again while avoiding Yanquis, Rinches, and creatures reminiscent of the one that attacked Nena all those years ago. Cañas draws upon a wealth of research in re-creating the Rio Grande Valley in the 1840s, richly weaving in the Mexican War while also delving into horror. The vampires of this tale are incredibly original, a whole new brand of folklore that slowly unspools as the story progresses. There are three different narratives here: a love story, a war story, and a horror story. Each is compelling in its own right. Unfortunately, the book’s weakness is that it can handle only two of them at a time. It isn’t until the last stand that everything comes together, but it’s powerful when it does. Nena and Néstor, who are both point-of-view characters, are equally charming and infuriating in some of their choices. The side characters are not very well fleshed out, though they add to the sense of place.

While perhaps not greater than the sum of its parts, the parts themselves are quite good.

THE LAND OF LOST THINGS

Connolly, John
Emily Bestler/Atria (368 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781668022283

This dark fairy tale, sequel to The Book of Lost Things (2006), speaks volumes about a mother’s devotion. 

Ceres, a single mother, keeps vigil over her 8-year-old daughter, Phoebe, after the child sustains a near-fatal head injury and enters a coma from which she may never recover. This world offers little hope, but there are “worlds upon worlds upon worlds.” So Ceres is driven by an aggressive ivy, “a creature of verdure and hate,” into a place of fairies and strange beasts. There, she is transformed physically into a 16-year-old girl, though she retains her 32-year-old mind. Threats abound from richly conceived creatures like the Crooked Man, whose
Whether you’re an established fan of graphic novels or a reader looking for a new experience, this year has seen a wide variety of books to try, from historical novels to horror to fantasy to fictionalized biography. Here are a few suggestions.

**Sugar & Other Stories** by Joy San (Silver Sprocket, Feb. 22): You might want to start out with a collection of graphic stories, such as San’s debut, which are “loosely connected by their sense of the uncanny and macabre, full of monsters both literal and psychosocial,” according to our review. “San’s art is clean and confident and deftly captures a story’s essential beats, whether that’s a character’s growing anxiety or the return of a meaty hell spawn whose face is a ring of needlelike teeth.”

**Last on His Feet: Jack Johnson and the Battle of the Century** by Adrián Matejka; illustrated by Youssef Daoudi (Liveright, Feb. 21): Johnson became the first Black heavyweight boxing champion in 1910; Daoudi and Matejka have used that title bout to frame what our starred review called their “evocative and entrancing” graphic novel, which covers Johnson’s “rise in sport and culture and his undoing by the virulence of American racism....With red ink luridly accentuating the brutal black-and-white tale, Daoudi’s exceptional sense of anatomy, expressions, and choreography combine with the snap of Matejka’s text to vividly depict this defiant and flawed man’s struggle against a culture built to dehumanize him and equipped with laws to break him....A knockout.”

**The Man in the McIntosh Suit** by Rina Ayuyang (Drawn & Quarterly, May 2): Bobot was a lawyer back in the Philippines, but now he’s a migrant farmworker in Depression-era California. He hasn’t heard from his wife in months and heads to San Francisco to seek her out. “This graphic narrative is several things at once,” according to our review. “A noirish mystery, a vibrant work of historical fiction, and a tale of immigrant dreams and adversity...The expressionistic artwork is washed in blue, green, red, or amber hues signaling a scene’s setting and mood.”

**The Gull Yettin** by Joe Kessler (New York Review Comics, May 2): This graphic novel has no words, depending entirely on Kessler’s art—“a striking mix of heavy, kinetic lines; simple but expressive faces and bodies; and a riot of mostly primary colors,” according to our starred review—to tell the “mesmerizing” story of a young boy who’s both tormented and comforted by a supernatural creature.

**Boys Weekend** by Mattie Lubchansky (Pantheon, June 6): Sammie Kavalski is not excited to spend the weekend at their best friend Adam’s bachelor party now that it’s clear they’re not one of the guys. But they certainly weren’t expecting the straight-up horror that awaits them at El Campo, a resort built on a garbage island. Lubchansky “uses science fiction, horror, and the comic book form to explore the terrors of coming out as transfemme in a world dominated by dudes,” and while the combination doesn’t always work, our review called it an “undeniably original adventure.”

**Parallel** by Matthias Lehmann; translated by Ivanka Hahnenberger (Oni Press, June 13): Lehmann’s graphic novel, translated from German, follows Karl Kling from World War II to the 1980s as he refuses to sacrifice his desire for men in order to lead a more comfortable life in his repressive time and place. “Karl’s story is handled with delicacy and restraint,” according to our review. “Lehmann’s gorgeous black-and-white artwork establishes the melancholy tone with its depiction of bombed-out cities and gray East German streetscapes.”

**Graphic Novels for All Readers**

*Laurie Muchnick is the fiction editor.*
“evil was without bounds” and who has a finger consisting of a “tangle of centipedes.” And there are the Fae, who abduct and feed on children. A few others are Pale Lady Death, the Spirit of the Water, and Calio, a perfectly camouflaged dryad who refers to themselves in the plural, as in “We are Calio.” And sprinkled among the pages are allusions to fairy tales, such as “Rapunzel” and “Red Riding Hood.” Ceres meets a circle of wicked witches confessing non-sins such as “It’s been five years since my last wickedness,” which sounds like an AA (WWA?) meeting. Ceres finds a strong and wise ally in the Woodsman, although she is hardly a damsel in distress. She is a strong mother who wants her daughter back. “Whatever it takes,” Ceres declares, “I want her returned to me.” But the Woodsman replies that “This world, like any other, doesn’t care what you want.” Curiously, Ceres refers to the previous book: “That novel, The Book of Lost Things, has become the basis for a fantasy world in which I now find myself stranded.” Readers may well wonder what some of the action has to do with reuniting the mother and child, but mom doesn’t lose sight of her goal.

**A feat of imagination that will please Connolly’s fans.**

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**OUR STRANGERS**

*Davis, Lydia*

Bookshop Editions (304 pp.)

$26.00 | Oct. 3, 2023

978-0877717103

Davis, whose prodigious output includes translations, essays, and stories, is back with an overflowing treasure chest of jewel-like stories.

Davis’ stories, some no longer than a sentence, others arranged on the page like poems, eschew the conventions of fiction and instead focus on small, significant moments. “I saw something white moving through the air by the side of the house,” the narrator in “A Matter of Perspective” observes. “I thought it was a large white butterfly fluttering by— / a rare white butterfly! / But it was only a special delivery letter, / Coming past the window in the postman’s hand.” This attention to perspective, to the significance of details as well as the possibility of misperception and miscommunication, animates Davis’ work. In some cases, it’s linguistic, as in “Caramel Drizzle,” a playful piece about the difference between adding “caramel syrup” or “caramel drizzle” to a coffee drink, or “Letter to the Father,” in which a poet whose father is dead wonders, “Do I have a father, or did I have a father?” How much can depend on our perceptions? these stories relentlessly ask. In “Incident on the Train,” a woman asks a young couple to watch her belongings only to begin to worry that they aren’t responsible because “the guy’s eyes are bloodshot, and the girl has a lot of tattoos.” As in many of Davis’ stories, the narrator’s second-guessing leads not to clarity but only more confusion and chaos. Though these stories pose serious questions, their tone is always playful, tender, and irreverent. A series of pieces titled “Claim to Fame” poke gentle fun at the practice of claiming fame by association: “In Detroit, standing in a line, I met a woman who turned out to be the daughter of Samuel Beckett’s publisher Barney Rossett.” And in “Pardon the Intrusion,” Davis creates a community board of things that people are giving away or seeking. Some of the requests are ordinary (“Would anyone like this toddler bed?”) and others slightly wacky (“Pardon the intrusion, but I and the Professor have a surplus of borage. Any suggestions?”), but together they tell a story about how our idiosyncrasies bring us together.

*The collection that you’ll want to keep on your bedside table by one of America’s most original short story writers.*
LIES AND OTHER LOVE LANGUAGES
Dev, Sonali
Lake Union Publishing (335 pp.)
$28.99  |  Sept. 26, 2023
9781662513978

A mother’s carefully stacked house of cards collapses when a daughter goes sleuthing.

Vandy Guru is a successful advice columnist who has all the answers. That is, until her husband, Vir, passes away, leaving her with grief and an inability to address her acolytes’ problems. Then her daughter, Mallika, a talented choreographer who’s recently auditioned for a Netflix film, goes missing. Mallika fails to meet her mother, who’s returning from a speaking tour, at the airport and then doesn’t show up at her cousin’s wedding dance practice. Vandy calls her own mother, who offers up cryptic clues about where Mallika went but provides no real help, sending Vandy into a tailspin. While Vandy is at a loss, the reader is able to piece together the mystery as Dev alternates among chapters told from the perspectives of Vandy, Mallika, and Rani Parekh, a mysterious character whose story is slowly revealed. As Mallika deals with career setbacks and feelings of self-doubt, she begins to uncover a series of lies that profoundly alters her understanding of her family and her place in the world. Mallika’s journey of discovery sets off Vandy’s own journey, forcing Vandy to confront truths she has worked hard to keep hidden. Dev does not do enough to round out Mallika’s character, but the scenes between Vandy and her childhood friend Rani are funny, genuine, and, at times, heartbreaking. While the story does hinge on some less-than-believable events, Dev’s characteristic strength at writing relationships between loved ones grounds this larger-than-life plot in a poignant reality: “There was a whole chunk of her life that her daughter knew nothing about. What was the point of sharing something that caused so much pain? Vandy had found a solution, and she’d borne the consequences.”

Deception and tenderness mingle in this touching story.
In French colonial Senegal, a young, soon-to-be-eminent French botanist becomes obsessed with a mysterious woman sold into slavery who escaped to freedom.

Michel Adanson journeyed to Senegal to catalog new fauna and flora for "Universal Orb," his magnum opus. A half-century later, following his death in 1806, his daughter, Aglaé, discovers his hidden notebooks, which document his intense experiences on and around the island of Gorée. Life will never be the same for him after he learns of Maram Seck, known as "the revenant," who is said to have miraculously "returned alive from beyond the seas, from that land where, for slaves, there is no return" and disappeared on Senegal's Cap-Vert. Consumed by Maram's story, Adanson and his guide endure harsh conditions to find her, and when they do, they learn that her painful tale is very different from the face-saving version told by her uncle Baba Seck, a village chief. When she was 16, he sold her to a white man for a musket after she bashed him unconscious during an attempted rape. Overwhelmed by her natural beauty, spiritual strength, and beguiling use of the nontonal Wolof language, Adanson falls helplessly in love with her. But fearful that he will never be worthy of her love, he ultimately exposes the traits that make that so.

Less brutal than Diop's International Booker Prize–winning At Night All Blood is Black (2020) but no less powerful, the new book takes its title from the familiar name for the place on "the island of slaves" where millions of Africans were shipped to the Americas. With its sumptuous physical descriptions, shades of language, and smooth overlap of truth and invention, this is masterful storytelling. The ease with which the narratives (including Aglaé's) unfold belies the emotional force they gather.

A mesmerizing tale.
THE WREN, THE WREN

Enright, Anne
Norton (288 pp.)
$27.95  |  Sept. 19, 2023
9781324005681

The exceptional, multigarlanded Irish writer returns with a three-generation, woman-centered family portrait marked by “inheritance, of both trauma and of wonder,” and melodic, poetic echoes.

After a nonfiction book (Making Babies, 2012) and a novel (Actress, 2020) exploring parenting, Enright continues to mine this fertile territory, here considering the bonds between daughter Nell and mother Carmel, each influenced by Carmel’s father, Phil McDaragh, “the finest love poet of his generation,” also remembered for “the shouting and the hitting.” His titular poem, dedicated to Carmel, is a romantic vision of the bird, “so fierce and light / I did not feel / the push / of her ascent / away from me / in a blur of love....” But it’s Phil who, bit by bit, leaves for pastures and wives new, gifting responsibility and debt to his two daughters alongside the care of their mother, who’s dying of cancer. Carmel, in turn, “would not have a man in her life,” and Nell, raised cherished but fatherless, seems ill-equipped in her dealings with the opposite sex, notably when falling for Felim, a coercive, increasingly unkind figure. She’s also searching for her own niche as a writer, leaving Ireland to wander around Europe, then the world, in pursuit of a future. The narrative switches point of view among Nell, Carmel, and Phil, and Enright adapts her gifts of musical, seamless prose, wit, capacious insight, and textured personality to each in turn. Lyrical poems of birds punctuate the text, as do snatches of cruelty and violence between men and women, sisters, men and animals, even parents and children. But the familial connections are indelible and enduring. Carmel, watching a long-ago filmed interview with Phil, remembers how devastatingly easy it was to love him. Modern young woman Nell, reaching a place of “happy separateness,” watches it too: “The connection between us is more than a strand of DNA, it is a rope thrown from the past, a fat twisted rope, full of blood.”

Tender and truthful as ever, Enright offers a beguiling journey to selfhood.

CODE RED

Flynn, Vince & Kyle Mills
Emily Bestler/Atria (384 pp.)
$29.99  |  Sept. 12, 2023
9781982164997

Guns blaze in Syria as Mitch Rapp once again takes it to the bad guys.

A few things you need to know about the series hero: He is a highly proficient killer, he’s absolutely loyal to the U.S., and he has a strong sense of honor. So when Damian Losa, a billionaire Mexican and “the most powerful criminal in the world,” calls him for a favor, Rapp can’t refuse. “I helped him when he desperately needed it,” Losa says, “and he’s the kind of man who’ll feel obligated to honor that debt.” “Until I’ve repaid my debt to him,” Rapp says, “he’s the boss.” Losa wants to know about the growing Captagon business in Western Europe, where the illicit drug causes irreversible brain damage and permanent psychosis in its users. Losa asks Rapp to find out how the Syrians are making huge quantities of the drug economically. Jihadis want to undermine the West “where they were weak” by effectively rotting people’s brains, because they can never win on a battlefield. Rapp goes to Syria disguised as a wealthy Canadian attorney and learns that the Russians are in charge of exporting the drug to the West. (Turns out the Russkies hate us, too. Who knew?) Of course, Rapp gets into some bloody gunfights because that’s what he does. But at least once the violence is disgusting; when a young man is impaled on an angle iron and is obviously going to die, Rapp bashes him in the forehead. “You see?” he tells the boy’s father. “It’s okay. He’s with God now.” Shame on Rapp. Although most of the action takes place in Syria, the interesting put-downs are about the
Russians. A Russian general muses, “Russia had been revealed for what it was: a starving old woman lashed by the Siberian wind.” And Rapp observes, “The Russians aren’t people who play to win. They play to make everyone else lose.”

High-energy action makes this a mostly enjoyable thriller.

**DEVL MAKES THREE**

*Fountain, Ben*

Flatiron Books (544 pp.)

$30.99 | Sept. 26, 2023

9781250776518

Natives, expats, and interlopers navigate the aftermath of Haiti’s violent 1991 coup.

Fountain’s second novel, following the National Book Critics Circle Award–winning *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* (2012), opens shortly after the deposition of Jean-Bertrand Aristide by the Caribbean nation’s military leaders. Matt Amaker, an American running a scuba-diving business for tourists, hopes the matter will soon blow over; but Audrey O’Donnell, a CIA agent managing money funneled into Haiti by the U.S. government, has a better glimpse of how upended the country is, to the point of getting a perverse thrill from it (“here was the world in miniature, a hothouse geopolitical lab where trends, functions, and methods were stripped bare for the interested student to view”); and Misha, a native Haitian and sister of Matt’s business partner, becomes a witness to the depths of the coup’s violence when she works as a clerk in a hospital struggling to keep up with the flood of victims. Desperate to keep working, Matt pursues a treasure-hunting scheme, heading to a quiet shore to find some cannons and other potentially lucrative remnants of a Spanish galleon. In the process, he digs up further trouble—and a metaphor for the long history of colonialist abuses that, Fountain suggests, keep driving Haiti to the brink. Fountain has made dozens of trips to Haiti, which fueled half the stories in his superb 2006 debut, *Brief Encounters With Che Guevara* (and made him an exemplar of Malcolm Gladwell’s “10,000 hours” rule for mastery); his grasp of the country’s folklore and history is worked satisfyingly deep into this book’s pages. But the execution can be disappointingly flat in comparison to other white-man-in-a-foreign-land practitioners like Paul Theroux, Norman Rush, Graham Greene, and Russell Banks; not quite a thriller about treasure-seeking nor a study of spycraft nor realist historical fiction, the book displays Fountain’s smarts but also meanders and lectures.

A fine-grained, if at times overly upholstered tale of humanitarian and political tragedy.

**THE APOLOGY**

*Han, Jimin*

Little, Brown (304 pp.)

$28.00 | Aug. 1, 2023

9780316367080

A 105-year-old Korean woman embarks on a journey to America to prevent a wedding.

Hak Jeonga dies at the age of 105, killed by a bus in Chicago. Narrating from the afterlife, she fills in the events leading up to the accident. Ten days prior, she’d received a letter from Joyce, the granddaughter of her estranged sister, Seona, who’d eloped to North Korea when she was young and never saw her family again. The letter, as it turns out, is a request for money: Joyce’s son, Jordan, is terribly ill, and they need to raise $70,000 for an experimental treatment. What concerns Jeonga most in the letter, however, is the brief reference to Jordan’s fiancee, Ellery Arnaud. Ellery is also the name of Jeonga’s
illegitimate great-granddaughter. After some sleuthing confirms that Ellery Arnaud is indeed her descendant, Jeonga proceeds to plan a trip to America, ostensibly to give the money to Joyce in person, but in reality, to try to forestall Jordan’s marriage to Ellery. The narrator, in spite of her old age, speaks like a child. The sentences are short, simple, and prosaic, the sentiments immature. The novel relies too much on the uniqueness of the narrator’s identity as an elderly Korean woman without doing the work to make her convincing. One wishes that the plot could be the novel’s saving grace, but this is not the case. The stakes feel low, and as a result, the plot crawls, filled with geographical movement (from Seoul to San Francisco to Chicago to the afterlife) but lacking in emotional depth. The catharsis, when it comes, feels cheap, sagging with thinly rendered apologies.

An unwieldy novel about family reconciliation.

THE BODY BELOW
Hecht, Daniel
Blackstone (516 pp.)
$27.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781538519677

A brief, unnerving encounter in a beloved swimming spot sends a disgraced but still employed reporter on a quest to find his sister’s killer.

Years after his attempt to take down a corrupt senator who turned on him and got him fired from the Washington Post, Connor Whitman is working for the Richfield Herald, the paper in his Vermont hometown, which was willing to overlook his checkered past. During one of his daily long-distance swims in the Richfield Reservoir, he bumps into a squishy, partially submerged object he quickly loses sight of. When his memory is jogged later, he realizes that it might have been the bagged body of Gertrude “Trudy” Carlson, a single mom who’s gone missing. What he can’t have imagined is that Trudy was born Laurel Whitman, the sister from whom he’s long been estranged. Even that’s not the only tie the missing woman has to his past, for her first husband was Mason King, Conn’s childhood friend and present-day sheriff’s deputy. Alternating perspectives between Conn and his girlfriend, Celine Gabrielli, the guidance counselor at the school Trudy’s two children attend, Hecht follows Conn’s quest to ascertain the fate of the sister he’d never really known. Two subplots that erupt along the way—one concerning David Laughlin, a serial abuser who hits on every female employee in a local shop, the other involving the affairs of Anthony Shapiro, the latest of Trudy’s many ex-boyfriends—are so explosive that they threaten to take the limelight off Trudy, except of course for Conn and Celine.

A soulful, improbable, and ultimately cathartic plunge into the depths.

THE LAST RANGER
Heller, Peter
Knopf (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 1, 2023
9780593535110

Challenging times for a ranger in Yellowstone National Park.

Heller draws on an extensive background in adventurous outdoor pursuits and a literary pedigree from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop to produce this fast-paced, elegantly written slice of the often busy, sometimes perilous life of a contemporary Yellowstone National Park ranger. As he portrays it, typical duties in the life of ranger Ren Hopper, who lives alone in a rustic cabin in the park, can include everything from arresting an intoxicated driver for striking a bison to saving a heedless family from a dangerously close encounter with a protective mother moose. But at the heart of the story is Ren’s
attempt to track down the human predator who’s been poaching the park’s wild wolf population, which had been eradicated for more than seven decades in the 20th century and restored only after deliberate effort. Ren’s pursuit takes on even greater urgency when his friend Hilly, a famed wolf biologist, nearly loses her life after she’s caught in a trap that appears to have been placed solely for the purpose of ensnaring her. The prime suspect is Les Ingraham, a local resident embittered after his shot at a professional football career is derailed by injury, but Ren can’t rule out the possibility that a secretive militia-like group that’s hostile to restrictions against hunting on federal land may be involved. Along with evocative descriptions of Yellowstone’s stunning beauty, Heller efficiently creates a small cast of fully realized characters, most notably Ren, who’s still struggling with grief over the death of a mother who introduced him to the natural world before abandoning her family. But as the author displays in a thrilling climactic chase scene, he doesn’t neglect his obligation to bring what at heart is a nature adventure story to a satisfying conclusion.

Life and death in nature are close companions in a fast-moving and lyrical story.
Deena Mohamed first attracted attention for “Qahera,” her webcomic about an Egyptian Muslim superheroine, in 2013, when she was 18 years old. She went on to write an undergraduate thesis on the history of Egyptian comics and then to become a major figure in that scene. After Mohamed self-published the first volume of her graphic novel, *Shubeik Lubeik*, about the interconnected lives of a group of citizens of an alternate-world Cairo in which bottled, wish-granting genies are for sale, it won the Grand Prize and the award for best graphic novel at the 2017 Cairo Comix Festival. In the world Mohamed has invented, cheap “third-class wishes” inevitably backfire on those who make them, “first-class wishes” are outlandishly expensive luxuries, and government regulations on wishes maintain Egypt’s class divisions.

The 500-plus-page English-language edition of *Shubeik Lubeik* (Pantheon, Jan. 10)—which reads right to left, as in the Arabic version—collects all three volumes in Mohamed’s own translation. (*Shubeik Lubeik* is Arabic for, approximately, “your wish is my command,” the title under which it was published in the U.K.) A starred Kirkus review called the book “exceptionally imaginative while also being wonderfully grounded in touching human relationships, existential quandaries, and familiar geopolitical and socioeconomic dynamics.”

Mohamed talked to Kirkus about *Shubeik Lubeik* over Zoom from her home in Cairo. This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

You’re a scholar of the history of Egyptian comics, and your work also draws on Franco-Belgian and Japanese and Anglophone comics. What’s particularly distinctive about the Egyptian comics tradition?

In the 20th century, the biggest comics in Egypt were children’s comics, but the artists who were working on them were usually also working as satirical political cartoonists and designers and illustrators. So even their work for children had a sharp sense of humor. A lot of contemporary Egyptian cartoonists were influenced by those comics growing up—their work has characters with exaggerated features and a preference for social critique. You don’t get a lot of long graphic novels or fantasy strips that don’t address a specific real-life thing.

*Shubeik Lubeik*, as playful as its concept is, is very much about the political and historical reality of Cairo. I wanted it to be on Egyptian shelves. For people who haven’t read a comic since they were kids, you have to trick them into believing that this is a story that they can believe emotionally [laughs].

Your work has appeared in both English and Arabic, and you’ve talked about how you reworked *Shubeik Lubeik’s* narration for the English version—the narrator explains both the magical aspects of the world you’ve invented and aspects of Egyptian culture that might be unclear to English-language readers. What else were
you thinking about in the translation process? When I was writing *Shubeik Lubeik*, sometimes I would be working on something in Arabic and think, *this is going to be so annoying to translate…* and then I would think, *well, that’s a problem for my future self!* I wanted English-language readers to feel that they’re reading a translation, something like fansubbed [fan-subtitled] manga, where the translator has a bit of a personality, too. I also thought it might add on to the tactile experience of reading, because the book is already so chunky and so big, and you get the experience of opening it right to left. Even though the concept is very “Oriental”—wishes and all that—the treatment isn’t. So it sets up an expectation of magic and fantasy, and then you read it and realize it’s not really that magical.

The world where genies grant wishes is still very recognizable as the world as we know it! If you have enough money you can get almost anything, to an almost fantastical extent. It really helps to conceptualize wishes as prayers sometimes—it anchors what people want and how they would treat it. In the stories I grew up reading, there are good genies and bad genies and lesser djinn and greater djinn. Except in those stories, genies tend to be the central characters, like *Kazaam*, that movie with Shaquille O’Neal where he was a genie trapped in a boombox. Here, the wish itself is the focus.

The middle section of the book focuses on Nour, a depressed character who’s trying to figure out what exactly to wish for. Even in your fictional world, depression isn’t something you can just wish away. I mean, you could if you knew specifically what the problem was! That’s the issue. I think once you make the decision to help yourself, it is quite possible in our world as well. I also didn’t want the conclusion to be too depressing to the reader, because in our world there aren’t first-class wishes, and if you’re reading about a character who solves it like this, you might think, *well, I’ve gained nothing here* [laughs].

Nour’s story also incorporates diagrams as a way the character tracks their mood. Those were really fun for me. Part of representing depression was that I didn’t want it to be too depressing. I see a lot of comics and infographics about mental health that use diagrams of some kind, so it wasn’t too much of a stretch to put it that way. Nour’s in a very numb depressive state—there’s not a lot of crying or spiraling—and the graphs are a way to keep it sort of clinical, since Nour’s an analytical character. We did have a design issue with graphs reading right to left; that was a thing I had to spend some time on. But I think it works out.

You pay a lot of attention to the setting of *Shubeik Lubeik*. Which are the parts where you feel like you really nailed a visual sense of place? Honestly, I think I captured the kiosks and buildings and the general feeling of Cairo pretty well. I think that’s what a lot of Egyptian readers are attracted by—the novelty of seeing their city in illustrations. We had a lot of media growing up, but when you’re constantly receiving media that doesn’t reflect you, there’s a sense of novelty to realizing, oh, *I can draw that!* When I went to New York, I thought, *there is so much art about this place!* I’ve seen this drawn a million different ways!

You spent about five years working on *Shubeik Lubeik*. What changed in that time? The biggest difference, I think, is that by the third book there were people waiting for it. For the first part, obviously, nobody knew it was happening. For the second part, nobody expected it, because in Egypt, comics projects usually lose steam—we talk a big game and then everyone runs out of money or time. By the third part, there were quite a few people who knew the characters and were excited to read it, and to me, that was really exciting. It’s the same with the English version—I had been telling people for years that there would be a translation, and I think people thought I was lying, so when it came out I was like, *yes! I told you!*

*Douglas Wolk is the author of* All of the Marvels: A Journey to the Ends of the Biggest Story Ever Told. *Shubeik Lubeik received a starred review in the Nov. 15, 2022, issue.*
precarious financial situation means that she can't afford to get canned. Ambitious flack Malcolm Kyle, the second chair, has resigned himself to the fact that his advancement is on hold as long as he’s serving the Crown this way. Then several things jolt everyone to attention. Someone tries to kidnap and kill Max Janacek, a retired academic who has a history with MI5. Someone plants a folder filled with highly classified information on Kyle. And when the worthies of Monochrome decide to pursue the information in that folder—information that never should have come their way—they turn up a witness with jaw-dropping news to impart about an operation that Station House ran in Berlin years ago. Readers who’ve joined Herron in following the Slow Horses in a series of rollicking, scary novels won’t be surprised to learn that everyone here looks down their noses at everyone else, that everyone has a price, and that conflicts within MI5 are much more likely to turn lethal than conflicts outside, against England’s nominal enemies.

As usual, there’s a lot here to swallow. Fans will rejoice to see MI5 survive despite its members’ best efforts.

A bittersweet novel of love gained, lost, and regained over the course of decades.

WELLNESS
Hill, Nathan
Knopf (624 pp.)
$30.00 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780593536117

A bittersweet novel of love gained, lost, and regained over the course of decades.

“They stare across the alley, into dark apartments, and they don’t know it, but they’re staring at each other.” It’s not an outtake from Hitchcock’s Rear Window but instead the wistful longings of two lonely people. Jack Baker, newly arrived in Chicago from Kansas in the 1990s, is a talented photographer who bristles when practical-minded people ask him what his work is about—to say nothing of why he works with Polaroids, which, a hipster friend reminds him, “are mass-produced, instant, cheap, impermanent.” Yes, and that’s the point, for though Jack comes from the windblown prairie, he’s pretty avant-garde. Elizabeth Augustine is a quadruple major at DePaul, “five majors if you count theater, which I have no talent for but enjoy nonetheless,” and exactly the woman Jack hoped he would meet. Life proceeds: That artsy hipster becomes a real estate mogul who plants them in a development very much outside their price range until Elizabeth pulls down the big bucks from the psychological research firm that gives Hill’s latest its simple title. “Basically they were a watchdog group, a subcontractor for the FDA and FTC, sniffing out bullshit,” Hill writes, but Elizabeth, scraping by while Jack pulls down pennies as an adjunct professor, discovers that there’s hay to be made creating bullshit rather than exposing it—making airplane seats narrower, for instance, and then selling once normal-sized seats at a premium. Hill romps through our soufflélike culture with a nice sendup of academic literature and broad jabs at memes ranging from organic food (“one-hundred-percent bioavailable”) to progressive parenting, open marriage, and cult behavior (“Elizabeth knew...that the thing that most effectively strengthened and deepened delusions was being surrounded by people who shared the same delusions”) while delivering a story that suggests that while love may not conquer all, it makes a good start.

A warmhearted satire that chronicles our “perfectly, stupidly, dreadfully elegant” accommodations to life.

BRUCE J. BERGER
TO SEE GOD
“...highly recommended for spiritual readers...thought-provoking, essential reading.”
—Midwest Book Review

“...a remarkable achievement, the capstone to an even more remarkable trilogy...Read it—it’s really that good.”
—James H. McGee, Author of Letter of Reprisal

ISBN: 978-1-68513-357-9

“The novel’s overarching theme of how trauma is passed down from parents to children is particularly well handled...”

“A thoughtful and satisfying concluding volume of a trilogy.”
—Kirkus Reviews

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SKIP TO THE END
James, Molly
Forever (384 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Aug. 15, 2023
9781538739273

A 30-something London woman kisses three men at a wedding but can’t remember which one is destined to be the love of her life.

Amy Daniels has an unusual gift: When she first kisses a person, she gets
a vision of the end of their relationship. After 20 years of kissing men only to have premonitions of bad endings, she decides things need to change. She doesn’t want to wind up like her beloved mother—now in a nursing home in the early stages of dementia—who married a man though she knew he’d leave her heartbroken. Her close-knit group of friends have been with her every step, or rather kiss, along the way: beautiful, organized Charlotte, who’s marrying banker Marcus; flamboyant twins May and Jay; and steady, outdoorsy, plant-focused Gareth.

At Charlotte’s over-the-top wedding, where the booze is flowing, May dares Amy to kiss three men to see what happens. And she does. But when she wakes up the next morning, it turns out she was so drunk she can’t remember whom she kissed—just that along with two bad premonitions came one that showed her happily-ever-after. She spends the next few weeks trying to figure out, with the help of her friends, whom she kissed and whether he is her destiny. Was it rich, modelworthy Tristan, whose family owns a vineyard? Kind Ben, a waiter and pet-sitter who’s working on a screenplay? Creepy Elliot, who’s been chasing her forever? Or a mystery man?

James has written a charming story that fizzes and bubbles like champagne—easy, fun, and enjoyable to read. Pure escapism.

A light, frothy look at finding romantic love and the solid base of love offered by friends.
bedroom at night for reasons unclear but likely untoward. Confronted by preteen hoodlums who demand to know which gang he swears allegiance to—“You run with Gulag? Uncle Death? One Shot? Diablos? Why’re you wearing shorts?”—Slide decides to find his own place in a better part of Polis, about which his roomie warns him, “Polis is a friend to no one. It will only take what you give and spit back the bones, even your past, which it holds in reserve to taunt you.” That’s just so, and as Slide goes out into the city, moving from one pitiless zone to the next, he meets some extremely odd characters, such as a hot dog vendor who demands that he eat a suspicious-looking tube steak before proceeding (“Can’t help the streets if you ain’t buying the meats!”) and a tent-city denizen decked out in two tracksuits even in the “June heat that wrapped our throats like pythons.” Finally Slide reaches a part of town “where the light shines brighter,” where the coffee shops have dozens of varieties of beans and “everyone’s clothes were of a higher thread count”—a paradise that’s inaccessible to him. Like Dante, Slide wanders in circles, soaking in weirdness, tragedies, and occasional flashes of beauty. And like Joyce, Johnson builds a world that, for all its improbabilities, is recognizable, with characters who dispense rough and memorable wisdom to help survive an ominous future; as one Uglygod instructs: “You don’t step into a snake’s mouth because it says it’s got its teeth pulled.”

An inventive, beautifully written debut that will leave readers wanting more.

**THE PEACH SEED**

*Jones, Anita Gail*

Henry Holt (448 pp.)

$28.99 | Aug. 1, 2023

9781250872050

The sweeping story of a Black family in the South focuses on resilience and love.

At almost 70, Fletcher Dukes still lives on the seven-acre farm outside Albany, Georgia, where he grew up. The farm has belonged to his people for generations, a point of pride for a Black family in the Deep South. He’s content for the most part, although he misses his glory days as a young man active in the Civil Rights Movement—the same days in which he was in love with a girl named Altovise Benson. She left Albany long ago and became famous as a jazz singer; Fletcher stayed, made a happy marriage, and raised three daughters. He’s been a widower for several years when he and his sister, Olga—who’s still a busy political activist—go to the Piggly Wiggly for groceries one day. Fletcher recognizes her perfume before she even comes into sight: Altovise is back. The novel follows the story of Fletcher and Altovise forward and delves into their past while painting a warm portrait of his family and community. Some chapters leave Albany for Saginaw, Michigan, where a man named Siman Miller lives; others take the reader to the life of Malik Welé, a teenager living near the Senegal River in West Africa a couple of centuries ago. Their connections to Fletcher eventually become clear, as does the significance of the peach seed of the book’s title, a pit carved into the shape of a tiny monkey and handed down among the male members of the Dukes family. Dialogue varies from realistic and funny to some improbably lengthy monologues, but Jones is always insightful about family dynamics. And it’s a pleasure to see older people as main characters in a novel, depicted fully and without condescension.

Engaging characters keep a complex multigenerational plot moving to embody decades of Black history.
“An expertly structured, morally complicated, and surprisingly timely blend of fact and fiction.”

**CONFESSION**

Kohan, Martín

Trans. by Daniel Hahn

Charco Press (150 pp.)

$16.95 paper | Sept. 5, 2023

9781913867652

An intimate, sidelong look at Argentina’s bloodiest dictatorship.

In this fictionalized retelling of the regime that terrorized Argentina from 1976-‘83, composed as a triptych, Kohan depicts its mental and emotional impacts on the everyday people of his home country. The opening section, “Mercedes,” recounts the sexual awakening of 12-year-old Mirta López in 1941 and her repeated attempts to absolve her “wicked thoughts” within the dark confessional booth of uncomfortably curious Father Suñé (“And what exactly did you feel while you were doing it?”). The catalyst for Mirta’s newfound urges is none other than future brutal dictator Jorge Rafael Videla, referred to only as “the Videlas’ eldest son,” who passes Mirta’s house on a predictable route, affording her a view from a conveniently situated armchair. Eventually, Mirta ventures outside and attempts to cross paths—but never interact—with the boy, until one day at Mass he unexpectedly sits next to her and Mirta’s lust reaches a surreptitious culmination right there in the pew. Hinting descriptions of Argentina’s “old water cartography, canals and bends, unspoken tunnels” punctuate the first section and link it to the second, “Airport,” which details an attempt by Marxist guerrillas to assassinate Videla nearly 40 years later as his airplane takes off. The pseudonymous operatives access the underground waterways of Buenos Aires to plant dynamite beneath a runway, but one crucial explosive fails to detonate. The final section, “Plaza Mayor,” recounts a game of cards between the elderly Mirta López and her grandson as a foggy, circuitous conversation about the past unfolds. Propulsive and unsparing, Kohan’s prose mimics the uncertainties of history and suggests that truth resides somewhere between official record and popular memory and that reality is thorny, ambiguous, and fully human in its messiness.

An expertly structured, morally complicated, and surprisingly timely blend of fact and fiction.

**LANDSCAPES**

Lai, Christine

Two Dollar Radio (230 pp.)

$18.95 paper | Sept. 12, 2023

9781953387387

While living in a world on the brink of environmental collapse, a young woman prepares for the return of a violent figure from her past.

In a near-future England devastated by climate change, Penelope and her partner, Aidan, have converted a massive, crumbling country house into a residence for climate migrants. Penelope was once an aspiring art historian, but living through the rise of homelessness, hunger, and political instability has made her academic ambitions appear untenable: “Ideas and theories could no longer hold together the disparate parts of the world.” Now, she spends her days preparing meals for residents and venturing into the derelict city center for supplies. But as repairs pile up and resources grow scarce, Penelope and Aidan are forced to sell the estate and its remaining valuable objects. As part of the sale, the couple decides to invite Aidan’s fierce, detached brother, Julian, to see the house he grew up in one final time. As Julian’s arrival grows near, Penelope is roiled by harrowing memories of their brief romance—and one unforgettable, terrible night. She can’t sleep, kept awake by nightmares in which ravenous termites destroy her home. By day, Penelope throws herself into her archival work, preparing the house for sale by cataloging its contents—pictures, postcards, novels, albums of stamps and flowers—descriptions of which are interwoven throughout the text. Shifting between Penelope’s diary entries and an omniscient description of Julian’s passage to England by train, the novel...
builds an electric undercurrent of doom. Despite an unflappable, subdued narrative tone, there’s legitimate suspense as Julian nears Penelope’s home.

In cool, sinewy prose, this astute and timely novel explores the roles of beauty, art, and passion in a time of survival.

**THINGS GET UGLY**
The Best Crime Stories of Joe R. Lansdale
Lansdale, Joe R.
Tachyon (352 pp.)
$19.95 paper | Aug. 15, 2023
9781616963965


“Of all my writing, the short story is my favorite form of expression,” says Lansdale, and his joy shows in the exuberant invention of these noirish tales. A few of them, like “The Steel Valentine” and “Six-Finger Jack,” are unpredictable but routine, and a few others, like the spooky “The Shadows, Kith and Kin” and the supernatural 1958 private eye story “Dead Sister,” play more to Lansdale’s wide-ranging interests than to his storytelling strengths. But even entries that don’t entirely come off, from “Mr. Bear” (a man develops a surprising friendship with the psycho bear who sits next to him on a plane) to “Boys Will Be Boys” (a pair of kids who “feed off each other” descend into a pit of sex, drugs, and depravity), are fueled by some wildly deranged premises, and the best of them, like the supershort “The Job” (an Elvis impersonator is hired as a hit man) and “The Ears” (a third date is spun into a nightmare by a casual discovery), strike a note of giddy brutality.

In particularly compelling, funny, and entertaining scenes, bedevils into poetry and contains both violent and magical elements. In particularly compelling, funny, and entertaining scenes, bedevils into poetry and contains both violent and magical elements. In particularly compelling, funny, and entertaining scenes, bedevils into poetry and contains both violent and magical elements. In particularly compelling, funny, and entertaining scenes, bedevils into poetry and contains both violent and magical elements. In particularly compelling, funny, and entertaining scenes, bedevils into poetry and contains both violent and magical elements.

**THE FUTURE**
Leroux, Catherine
Trans. by Susan Ouriou
Biblioasis (288 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9781771965606

In this lyrical novel of suspense, a grandmother searches for her missing granddaughters in an alternate, dystopian version of Detroit.

In Fort Détroit, a city that was never ceded by the French and whose urban center is roiling with toxic spills and lawlessness, grieving grandmother Gloria has moved into her daughter’s city-center house under the most dire of circumstances: Judith, the daughter, was found murdered, drowned in her own bathtub, and Judith’s daughters, 15-year-old Cassandra and Mathilda, 12, have disappeared from their troubled home. Gloria gradually gets to know her neighbors, including Solomon, a gentle, soft-hearted gardener, and straight-talking Eunice, who’s recently lost her father. Gloria pursues fruitless inquiries with the local police, and then, frustrated, she finally decides to explore the local park, Parc Rouge, basically a dense and quasi-impenetrable forest that’s rumored to be inhabited by ragtag bunches of feral children. In this case, the rumors are true: These kids look out for each other, but they’ve also created a rigid set of rules and hierarchies. And watching over them all, kids and adults alike, is a large pit bull named Priscilla. The story, told from the points of view of various characters, including Priscilla, encompasses speculative alternative history as well as a dystopian future—albeit with utopian aspects—and is recounted in sometimes-feverish prose that pushes its boundaries into poetry and contains both violent and magical elements.

In particularly compelling, funny, and entertaining scenes, bedevils into poetry and contains both violent and magical elements. In particularly compelling, funny, and entertaining scenes, bedevils into poetry and contains both violent and magical elements. In particularly compelling, funny, and entertaining scenes, bedevils into poetry and contains both violent and magical elements. In particularly compelling, funny, and entertaining scenes, bedevils into poetry and contains both violent and magical elements. In particularly compelling, funny, and entertaining scenes, bedevils into poetry and contains both violent and magical elements.

**WALK THE DARKNESS DOWN**
Magariel, Daniel
Bloomsbury (224 pp.)
$27.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781635578140

A troubled couple journeys through despair and compulsion as they struggle with loss.

After the accidental death of their young daughter two years ago, Les and Marlene’s marriage has foundered. Les seeks respite from his grief in drug use and long stints as a commercial fisherman in an unnamed region of the Northeastern U.S., while Marlene befriends sex workers in the hope of creating a therapeutic maternal role for herself. The two have effectively abandoned one another without formally separating, and the story charts their eventual confrontation with the trauma they have been unable to accept. A notable strength of the work is the engaging backdrop it provides of maritime culture in a declining town. There are consistently sharp and memorable descriptions of land and sea and of the ecological disruptions which form a counterpart to the human world (communities of horseshoe crabs, red-winged blackbirds, and
Young adult American bullfrogs endure their own systemic challenges here). The author clearly knows this world well; the daily lives of those in the fishing trade, at work and at home, are rendered with a strong sense of authenticity. Several sections that document the routine dangers, professional tensions, and economic realities faced on a scallop boat are particularly gripping. Less successful are the rather stale scenes and occasionally implausible dialogue charting the psychological mechanics of Les and Marlene’s failing relationship or Marlene’s interactions with Josie, her ersatz daughter, and the pimp who eventually reclaims the girl. The novel is written in a style that oscillates, a little awkwardly, between brisk realism and a sometimes-strained poetics: “He stares straight ahead, eyes glittering and indignant.... Music floats pendulously through the apartment and the tired night sighs with a dry wheeze.” Nevertheless, beyond these distractions, the vision of a coastal region and its cultural milieu offered here is often poignant.

A bracing story of grieving, coping, and reaching for the terms of recovery.

**ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS CALL**

*Maher, Kerri*

Berkeley (368 pp.)

$28.00 | Sept. 19, 2023

9780593102213


In the spring of 1969, on the cusp of divorce from her husband, Gabe, Siobhan Johnson is blindfolded and taken to an undisclosed location to have a back-alley abortion, supported by her friend Veronica Stillwell. Two years later, Siobhan and Veronica have founded Jane, a thriving underground network offering safe, sanitary, and very much illegal abortions. Amid a delightful cast of supporting characters, Maher centers the story around three women: Veronica is a wife and mother who works tirelessly to balance her double life and whose previous miscarriage amps up her anxiety about her current pregnancy; Patty Buford is a friend of Veronica’s who works tirelessly to balance her double life and whose previous miscarriage amps up her anxiety about her current pregnancy; Patty Buford is a friend of Veronica’s who works tirelessly to balance her double life and whose previous miscarriage amps up her anxiety about her current pregnancy; and Margaret Jones is an English professor and new volunteer who becomes increasingly aware that her boyfriend, Gabe—yes, that Gabe—isn’t the dreamboat she’d hoped he’d be. Rather than delivering an action-packed tale of heroics in the fight for justice, Maher makes a feast of ordinary morsels. After all, real advocacy, as Siobhan says, mostly “involves hundreds of mundane tasks. But it all adds up to a remarkable, liberating act.” As tensions creep in—from Veronica’s risky pregnancy to the near-constant police presence outside Jane’s various locations and the reappearance of Patty’s wayward sister, Eliza—interpersonal conflicts are refreshingly resolved with healthy adult communication. Race and class struggles are given ample focus—Black patients, who make up the majority, are at greater risk of arrest than white patients, something Black volunteer Phyllis Williams is all too happy to point out to her privileged white peers. When the women of Jane are faced with arrest, the looming passage of *Roe v. Wade* is their salvation and a heartbreaking reminder of what women have since lost.

A character-rich story of risky, remarkable activism that resonates more strongly than ever.

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**“A character-rich story of risky, remarkable activism that resonates more strongly than ever.”**

ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS CALL

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**“...the unique twist of incorporating a music playlist into the story... adds an extra layer of depth to the characters and their emotions, making the story even more engaging and relatable.”**

— *New York Weekly*

ISBN: 979-8987097632

“All you have to do is call”

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**“...the breathless intensity of the protagonist’s fixation makes the book a compelling read...”**

— *Kirkus Reviews*

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“Like the house at its center, a book that is multitudinous and magical.”

NORTH WOODS

Mason, Daniel
Random House (384 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780593597033

The story of a house, the humans who inhabit it, the ghosts who haunt it, and the New England forest encompassing them all.

In the opening chapter of the fourth novel by Mason—a Pulitzer Prize finalist for A Registry of My Passage Upon the Earth (2020)—a pair of rebellious young lovers flee their Puritan Massachusetts village to seek refuge in the “north woods”: “They were Nature’s wards now, he told her, they had crossed into a Realm.” Readers, too, will find themselves in an entrancing fictional realm where the human, natural, and supernatural mingle, all captured in the author’s effortlessly virtuosic prose. Across the centuries, the cabin built by those lovers will transform and house a host of future inhabitants. Elsewhere we find “Case Notes on Robert S.,” in which a psychiatrist pays a house call to a resident suffering from possible schizophrenia and given to auditory hallucinations while wandering the forest; and “Murder Most Cold,” a murder mystery in which a young woman is murdered and her family hires a private investigator. The house is multitudinous and magical.

Like the house at its center, a book that is multitudinous and magical.

THE BIG GAME IS EVERY NIGHT

Maynor, Robert
Hub City Press (264 pp.)
$16.95 | Aug. 22, 2023
979888574159

A high school football player struggles in the aftermath of an injury.

“I never had a favorite team because I didn’t watch football for pleasure. I watched it like work.” That’s Grady Hayes, the 15-year-old narrator, on the subject of the sport he plays. For Grady and his high school teammates, football represents a way out of their South Carolina community, and his fellow players often discuss scholarships and prospects with sensibilities that waver between hope and pragmatism. “The stakes for that game against Gadsden were no higher than any other,” Grady muses. “That’s not to say they were low, only that the stakes were always high.” It’s in this game that Grady injures his leg—and, making matters worse, the doctors then take a week to determine the source of his pain. Eventually, one of them offers him an ominous diagnosis of his rare broken bone: “It’s almost like a miracle. Or whatever the opposite of that is.” From there, Grady becomes increasingly alienated from his family (especially his mother and cousin) and friends, all the while developing a penchant for pills and spending time with an unpredictable classmate who encourages his more self-destructive tendencies—including reckless off-road driving. Maynor’s novel is at its best when documenting Grady’s depression and alienation; throughout, it’s clear that Grady is aware that he should be doing something else, but he simply doesn’t care. His father’s arrival on the scene late in the novel adds a more chaotic element to the book and offers a new context for some of Grady’s actions. At times, Grady can feel more reactive than proactive as a character, but the lived-in details of this novel help to balance that.

A heartfelt story of ambition, family, and frustration.

DISRUPTIONS

Millhauser, Steven
Knopf (288 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 1, 2023
9780593535417

More turmoil and magic in suburbia from one of America’s most accomplished short story writers.

The latest collection from Millhauser revisits some of his favorite subjects. There are pivot points in adolescence: “One Summer Night” turns on a young man’s seduction by his girlfriend’s mother; “The Fight” sketches a conflict among boys; and “The Change” follows the anxious thoughts of a 15-year-old girl walking home at night. There are satires: “Thank You for Your Patience” darkly spoofs phone-hold platitudes, while “He Takes, She Takes” does the same for breakup patter. But most of the stories, and by far the strongest ones, explore community norms, stretching and mocking them to better expose their limits. “After the Beheading,” with echoes of Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” is set in a town that’s implemented a guillotine with some troubling aftereffects. “The Little People” imagines humans cohabiting with Lilliputian neighbors, while in “The Summer of Ladders,” a community’s efforts at roof repair begin stretching toward the clouds. In “Green,” a neighborhood goes all-in on xeriscaping, eradicating its trees and plants; in “Theater of Shadows,” a town strives to become as black as possible. (“Babies wore soft black diapers. People blew their noses into black tissues.”) Each
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of these stories is open to interpretation as a study of prejudice, suburban narrowness, and groupthink. But Millhauser has always been too slippery a writer to pursue such obvious meaning-making; more often, the effect is that of Borges-ian strangeness and delight. That's especially on display in one of the longest stories, “Kafka in High School, 1959,” which poignantly imagines the bleak-hearted author in spit-shined Eisenhower America, and “Late,” a comic riff on a late-arriving dinner date.

Millhauser remains gifted at stretching time, space, and expectations.

ONE BLOOD
Millner, Denene
Forge (432 pp.)
$29.00 | Sept. 5, 2023
978152076193

What does it take to save your own life?

Millner presents a searing chronicle of generations of Black women in the U.S. as they deal with forces, large and small, depriving them of freedom, dignity, and a sense of self-worth. Spanning the tumultuous years from 1965 to 2004, the stories of Grace, LoLo, and Rae—and their forebears and contemporary relatives—illustrate the battles fought for survival on the domestic front as other struggles played out on the streets and in the workplace. When Grace is cruelly stripped of the protection and guidance of her beloved grandmother, Maw Maw Rubelle, and sent to live with an unsympathetic aunt in Brooklyn, her country ways and spiritual beliefs cannot protect her from the social and class prejudices she encounters there. (The heartbreaking result of Grace’s brief experience of happiness provides the thread binding the three women together.) LoLo, a victim of neglect and sexual domestic strife and intriguing tragedies, Rae’s circumstances drop away; Millner explores the ways Black women searched out paths to survival for themselves and their families (often at tremendous personal cost). Echoes of determined earlier choices echo in the lives of subsequent generations in Millner’s gripping saga.

Strength and love flow through Millner’s story.

STILL BORN
Nettel, Guadalupe
Trans. by Rosalind Harvey
Bloomsbury (224 pp.)
$26.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781639730032

Widely translated Mexican author Nettel considers the thorniness of motherhood in this novel shortlisted for the International Booker Prize.

Is motherhood worth it? For Laura, the answer’s always been a resounding no: “For years I tried to convince my girlfriends that procreating was a hopeless mistake.” Children “would always represent a limit on their freedom.” Since their 20s, her friend Alina has agreed. Independent, busy traveling, the two look askance at the societal expectations women face. Later, settled in Mexico City, Laura has her tubes tied. Then, shockingly, Alina announces she’s trying to get pregnant. What happens next is every prospective parent’s worst nightmare: Alina learns there’s a grave problem with her baby, who won’t live past birth. Running parallel to Alina’s story is that of Doris, Laura’s widowed neighbor, whose young son throws daily violent tantrums. As Laura tries to support Alina through an impossibly difficult situation, she’s drawn to her struggling neighbor’s troubled son as well as to a local feminist collective, finding herself reconsidering ideas of motherhood, family, even “frequently illogical, incomprehensible” love itself. A pair of pigeons nest on her balcony and raise an ungainly chick that looks nothing like them; Laura becomes convinced another bird laid the egg, practicing brood parasitism. Nettel describes the realities of her characters’ lives with a compassionate but unspiring eye. Every mother depicted is fully human, not selfless and saintly but a complex individual with mixed, even contradictory feelings. There’s joy here and camaraderie, but there are no easy solutions. “I don’t understand…” Alina tells Laura at one point. “And in her voice, [Laura] thought [she] could hear, not indignation, or even bewilderment, but simply all the despair in the world.”

A deeply felt, refreshingly honest story of two friends finding their ways down different paths.

FOREVER HOME
Norton, Graham
HarperVia (336 pp.)
$30.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780063338616

Irish comedian Norton casts a gimlet eye on relationships in this fourth novel set in the land of his birth.

Norton’s absorbing novels blend domestic strife and intriguing tragedies, and in his latest, he excavates the lengths to which people allow themselves to be manipulated in order to get along. English teacher Carol Crottie loses her husband
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KIRKUS REVIEWS
“Morbid Anatomy,” and “Out of Body, Out of Time”—this emotionally propulsive novel then veers into mystery territory as Carol, prodded by her pushy mother, discovers the truth about Declan’s missing wife and why his children treat her so cruelly. She also discovers the lengths to which her mother will go to hide a secret. With sensitivity and a knack for understanding people’s feelings and motivations, Norton also examines the discord in Killian’s marriage as he and husband Colin await the birth of their daughter through surrogacy, as well as Sally’s inability to form relationships outside the realm of social media and why her once-close relationship with Carol turned ugly. Norton’s sometimes-charming, sometimes-sinister novel, set in the fictional Irish village of Ballytoor, gently leads Carol toward a painful yet revelatory examination of her relationships with Declan, his children, and her own son, Craig. Perfect for fans of Maeve Binchy’s Ireland-set works of fiction and Alexander McCall Smith’s quirky, character-driven comic novels.

A heartfelt look at how family members make and break each other.

A DARKER SHADE OF NOIR
New Stories of Body Horror by Women Writers
Ed. by Oates, Joyce Carol
Akashic (272 pp.)
$29.95 | $17.95 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9781636141343 paper
9781636141374

In this haunting new collection, edited by Oates, 15 women writers explore the manifold horrors of living (and dying) in a patriarchal society.

Divided into three parts—“You’ve Created a Monster,” “Morbid Anatomy,” and “Out of Body, Out of Time”—this collection may initially appeal to readers eager for tales filled with vampires and werewolves, influences from beyond the grave, and gore, guts, and ooze. They will not be disappointed. However, the stories not only bleed across the categorical boundaries they have been assigned, but also expand the scope of what is terrifying about the body—living or dead, human or nonhuman—in the first place. Some stories lean into the visceral imagery typical of the body horror genre. In “Muzzle,” Cassandra Khaw explores the terrors of transforming from a human into a werewolf: feeling muscle, bone, teeth, and primal urges realigning inside oneself. Similarly, Aimee LaBrie’s “Gross Anatomy” and Valerie Martin’s “Nemesis” attend to the body’s bumps, scabs, and pus (though both stories dip into ableist territory by presenting illness as a moral punishment). Other stories, however, like Margaret Atwood’s “Metempsychosis, or The Journey of the Soul,” focus more on existential terrors. Through the point of view of a snail whose soul has been ripped from its body and transplanted into that of a human woman, Atwood taps into the fears surrounding not only mortality, but also bodily misalignment, confinement, existential dread, and not being recognized for who you really are. “To be female,” Oates writes in her introduction, “is to inhabit a body that is by nature vulnerable to forcible invasion, susceptible to impregnation.” In the pages that follow, not only men and offspring, but also the desires of the dead, the societal expectations of the living, powerful weapons, self-doubts, and new souls creep into the bodies of women characters, taking up space. Yet the women are not entirely powerless. In “Breathing Exercise,” Raven Leilani’s protagonist, Myriam, works to tease apart the criticism she faces for her performance art, the violence with which men threaten her, and her own relationship to her body and work as a Black woman artist. For Myriam, power, pain, fear, and vulnerability do not exist in static relationships to one another—nor do they in many of the stories in this collection.

A bold collection of horror stories that flies in the face of both gender and genre conventions.

KILL FOR LOVE
Picklesimer, Laura
Unnamed Press (285 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781911213893

A Los Angeles sorority girl finds fulfillment as a serial killer in Picklesimer’s bloody, satiric debut.

Bored with manicures and the attentions of boorish young men, and trying not to think about the pleasures of a juicy In-N-Out burger, increasingly psychopathic narrator Tiffany realizes that the only thing she really wants to do when a date takes her home is to stab him with a knife she conveniently left on a cutting board. That and consume a Pabst and a leftover chicken leg. The satisfaction this gives her leads to more slaughter, involving both guys she can rationalize deserve the punishment and those who are just in the wrong place at the wrong time. While she’s temporarily satisfied with a budding relationship with an older, richer suitor, he soon proves to be disappointingly human and less than totally addicted to her: When she looks through the windows of his house when he’s supposedly on a business trip and catches him watching TV and eating junk food, the romance takes a turn for the worse. Perhaps because Tiffany is too narcissistic to see anyone else as fully human, the other characters come across as more cartoonish than three-dimensional. These include the lawyer trying to maintain plausible deniability about Tiffany’s actions, the sweet roommate who may just be following in Tiffany’s footsteps, the sorority “goody-goody” who is always insisting that Tiffany obey the rules, and the male psychopath who might give Tiffany a run for her money. Although the novel sometimes seems more outline for a screenplay than fully articulated work of fiction, and
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while it definitely isn’t for the squeamish, it cunningly draws its premise out to its logical extreme and finds a convenient target in L.A.’s fitness and wellness culture.

Neatly flips the formula of the male serial killer on its bashed-in head.

**DRY LAND**

Pladek, B.

Univ. of Wisconsin (264 pp.)

$18.95 paper | Sept. 26, 2023

9780299343941

In 1917, as the Great War rages in Europe, an American forester discovers he has a gift that could preserve the marshlands he holds dear.

On a surveying trip in his home state of Wisconsin, Rand Brandt realizes he has a gift that could revitalize Clearwater Marsh: He can make plants grow with his hands. As a passionate preservationist influenced by John Muir, Rand recognizes that this newfound power can be used for good. He also recognizes with anger that bureaucracy may prevent him from succeeding in his dream to put preservation at the forefront of the political agenda. No stranger to discouragement, Rand considers his family’s view on his career. “Pining away in swamps was not man’s work, his father had scolded—and besides, added his mother, it would not save the places he loved.” In the weeks following the revelation of his new gift, he begins to learn its limitations and discovers it may not be all that he’d initially hoped. Unready to share the news with his superior, a ranger named Weston, he confides first in his lover, Gabriel, who is also part of his six-man survey team. Soon after, Rand is overcome by his excitement and shares the information with Weston, but he quickly regrets it as he “realize[s] he had not even considered what the Forest Service might want with his gift.” The service confirms his fear when he and his fellow foresters are told they are being sent to Europe. Rand is told he can have any post he chooses after the war, but for now, “conservation within our borders is vital, but right now, winning the war is the Forest Service’s top priority.” The conflict between wanting to do good and being unable to guides Rand’s decisions throughout the book. Compelling in its underlying conversation about environmental preservation, this book is rich with well-researched plant knowledge that conveys the delicate balance of ecosystems.

A winning combination of history, magic, and science that reiterates the importance of environmental preservation.

**EVIL EYE**

Rum, Etaf

Harper/HarperCollins (352 pp.)

$26.99 | Sept. 5, 2023

9780062987907

Typical contemporary fiction about a woman’s journey toward self-knowledge and identity is enriched by the protagonist’s particular situation as the resentfully obedient daughter of Palestinian immigrants.

On the first page, Yara, a wife and mother approaching 30, announces her intention—and by extension, author Rum’s—to “reconcile past and present.” Raised in Brooklyn within a tight Palestinian expatriate community, Yara has always been torn, wanting to honor the history and hardships of her ancestors while resisting many of her culture’s prescriptions, agreeing to an arranged marriage but refusing hijab. For 10 years she has lived in North Carolina with her husband, Fadi, and their two daughters. Along the way she has earned a master’s degree and works at a local college. But as her life begins falling apart, she can no longer avoid the unresolved conflict she has always felt—the safety of obedience versus an inner urge to break free and claim control over her life. Yara’s central conflict revolves around her mother, a deeply troubled woman who, despite all-consuming anger and frustration, never considered leaving her abusive marriage. She always considered herself cursed and told Yara she was cursed, too. At a therapist’s suggestion, Yara begins a journal to confront her past, but the repetitiveness of Yara’s memories and her use of therapeutic jargon weaken the impact. More compelling are Yara’s struggles within her own marriage. While Fadi is deeply flawed, he is neither stereotype nor villain. And Rum does not simplify the choices Yara faces as a woman whose ambition conflicts with family responsibility. The couple shares a surprising degree of intimacy—showering together most nights—and similar unhappy childhood memories. Whether Yara can break the vicious cycle in which she finds herself is the question.

Rum’s nuanced approach to difficult questions of individual and cultural identity is refreshing.

**THE CURIOUS LIVES OF NONPROFIT MARTYRS**

Singleton, George

Dzanc (247 pp.)

$17.95 paper | Aug. 15, 2023

9781950539864

Legendary South Carolina absurdist Singleton weighs in with another rollicking collection—17 quick-paced, chatty, funny stories.

Singleton’s protagonists—often over-educated, tempest-tossed white guys working bizarre jobs that are “nonprofit” in one way or several—have often been called
“A thoughtful reckoning with two men’s frustrations and contradictions.”

ISLAND MAN

Skerrett, Joanne
Red Hen Press (248 pp.)
$18.95 paper | Aug. 1, 2023
9781636281308

A man revisits his unconventional relationship with his father.

This book begins in the wake of loss as narrator Hector Peterson points out that he and his father, Winston Telemacque, are visiting the island of Dominica almost one year after the death of Hector’s mother. That’s not the only grounds for concern, however: It’s 2017, and Hector and Winston are on the island during devastating Hurricane Maria. As the storm worsens, Hector looks back on his life and wonders whether this will be the end. From there, Skerrett intersperses scenes of the men and their extended family in the hurricane’s aftermath with scenes from both Hector’s and Winston’s lives, and the reader gradually learns that Hector grew up without knowing his father, only meeting him when he was in college. Hector recounts the circumstances that caused his mother to leave Dominica for Boston—and those which led to his father making his way there as well, becoming a successful businessman. Gradually, the novel reveals the scope of Hector’s personal and professional alienation, including the disintegration of his marriage, which he accelerated with a series of affairs. By the time of the novel’s framing scenes he has become, in his own words, “a public disgrace and a private failure”—and a man unsure if he can repair the broken parts of his life. The gulf between the idealistic young Hector, who vows that “the cycle of lies and dishonesty would stop with me,” and the more jaded, alienated Hector of the present gives this novel some of its emotional weight. At times the novel’s path forward and backward in time can feel overly dense, but the attention to detail and the unconventional father-son bond at the book’s heart make for an affecting read.

A thoughtful reckoning with two men’s frustrations and contradictions.

CITY PEOPLE

Topp, Elizabeth
Little A (318 pp.)
$18.53 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781662507335

Seven young mothers attempt to navigate the cutthroat world of competitive parenting on New York’s Upper East Side.

The story opens as Susan Harris jumps to her death from the roof of her apartment building, leaving behind her successful husband and two young children. The oldest, Claude, goes to preschool at Woodmont, a feeder to the prestigious Kent School. A handful of children receive recommendations from Woodmont’s headmistress to Kent (though they won’t all get in!), and their families form something of a clique in the wake of Susan’s death. There’s Vic, a bestselling author who’s a Kent graduate herself; Penelope, a woman from a family so wealthy she can’t imagine her annual donations won’t guarantee her child admission; Chandice, Bhavna, and Amy, who each have their own reasons for believing their children will be admitted as well as crippling insecurities about what would happen if that brass ring were denied. And then there’s Kara, who’s created an entirely fake persona and suffers a gradual breakdown when Susan’s death awakens traumatic memories from her past. As the mothers lie, manipulate, and backstab, it’s clear that not all of them can hack city life. Some of the children won’t be accepted to Kent, and those families may choose to (gasp!) relocate to Westchester or Connecticut. Told in a close third person, the chapters alternate among the women, providing glimpses into each one’s deepest fears and insecurities. Topp deftly weaves a tale of interconnected characters while simultaneously revealing that they don’t really know each other at all. Painting a grim picture of what it means to be part of Manhattan’s high society, she reveals how these privileged characters manage to make themselves absolutely miserable. As Susan’s death forces the others to reexamine their priorities, the author also deftly explores issues like anxiety, financial distress, and self-doubt. Though sometimes heavy-handed,
the novel’s scathing observations about Manhattan’s wealthiest parents are wildly entertaining.

An engrossing, unflinching critique of elite parenting in Manhattan.

**THE MUSEUM OF FAILURES**

*Umrigar, Thrity*

Algonquin (356 pp.)  
$28.00 | Sept. 26, 2023  
9781643753553

An Indian man living in Ohio returns to Bombay for the first time since his beloved father’s death.

After struggling with infertility, Remy Wadia and his wife, Kathy, have a stroke of luck: a relative of one of Remy’s closest friends from childhood is pregnant and wants to give the baby up for adoption. Remy arrives in India to meet the young woman only to find she wants to keep her baby. That’s not the only disappointment waiting for him. His mother, with whom he has a thorny relationship, is in the hospital fighting for her life. These events rock Remy to his core, sending him into a tailspin of grief, bewilderment, nostalgia, displacement, and guilt. At risk of losing his mother, Remy discovers a family secret that upends everything he thought he knew about her and his father, transforming the notion of the man he thought he was and wants to be. Being both at home—meaning Bombay, the city where he was born and raised—and away from home—meaning Columbus, the smaller city where he’s made a life for himself—as an adult—is challenging, but it offers him the opportunity to unpack the revelations from the past as well as think about what he wants for his future. Umrigar knows how to tell a story. A former journalist and the author of nine previous novels, she creates interesting characters and complex relationships, builds thematic tension and narrative suspense, and delivers emotionally resonant moments at just the right pace. The book isn’t perfect. The dialogue often feels pedantic, as do some of Remy’s internal soliloquies about the differences and parallels between the U.S. and India. But these shortcomings are a small price to pay for an otherwise rich, heartfelt novel.

This is a touching story about what it really means to grow up and into an authentic life.

**THIS IS SALVAGED**

*Varahini, Vauhini*

Norton (224 pp.)  
$26.95 | Sept. 26, 2023  
9780393541731

A haunting short story collection from the author of *The Immortal King Rao* (2022), a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in fiction.

In “The Irates,” a girl grieving the death of her brother tries to work at a Seattle phone sex hotline. “I, Buffalo” follows a high-achieving woman, recently fired from her law firm and struggling with substance abuse, who tries to be a good aunt. The protagonist of “This Is Salvaged” is an experimental artist who attempts to construct a replica of Noah’s Ark in Seattle with the help of a group of men from a Christian homeless shelter. In “You Are Not Alone,” a girl celebrating her eighth birthday meets her father’s new wife in the Orlando airport. The prose in this wide-ranging collection flows seamlessly, one rhythmic sentence after another. The stories range in perspective, going from an intimate first person to a distant third person that only identifies the protagonist as “the girl.” Some stories are formally inventive. “Unknown Unknowns,” the shortest inclusion, is a five-paragraph sketch of a woman’s relationship with her son and a meditation on truths and untruths. “The Hormone Hypothesis” unfolds primarily as a conversation between two women. “The Eighteen Girls” tells a tragic story of sisterhood and loss through segments ostensibly about different girls (“the first girl,” “the second girl,” etc.). Motifs reemerge across the collection’s pages: repellant parts of the body (sweat and dried up dead skin), girlhood, divorce, faith. If the collection could be said to have a theme, it would be human relationships: those between best friends, aunts and nieces, lovers, mothers and sons, sisters, daughters and fathers. Although many of the stories dwell in the realm of alienation, they generally end on a note of redemption, however small. The reader emerges from these stories contemplative but not pessimistic.

A poignant collection of stories that glimpse the salvation of human connection in the midst of modern alienation.

**LET US DESCEND**

*Ward, Jesmyn*

Scribner (320 pp.)  
$28.00 | Oct. 24, 2023  
9781982104498

This intensely wrought tone poem stalks an enslaved girl’s tortuous passage through the human-made and natural perils of the antebellum Deep South.

Ward follows her award-winning Bois Sauvage trilogy (*Where the Line Bleeds*, 2008; *Salvage the Bones*, 2011; *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 2017) by moving away from her native Mississippi and back in time
to the rice fields of pre–Civil War North Carolina, where Annis, a bright young Black woman who has learned from her mother, enslaved like her, that the white man who owns her is also her father and his daughters (on whose school lessons about Aristotle and the social habits of bees she eavesdrops) are her sisters. Annis’ mother enhances the younger woman’s education with lessons in self-defense and survival tactics she carried with her from Africa, where, as she informs her daughter, her mother was a warrior queen. Annis will need all this inherited cunning and resilience after her “sire” sells her mother. Away from her chores, Annis finds solace from her lover, Safi, the bees carrying out their own chores in the nearby forest, and words from a poem about an “ancient Italian” descending into hell as intoned by her sisters’ tutor. After Safi flees the plantation, Annis and other slave women are herded like cattle and sent off on a long, grueling march further south. Along the way, Annis has her first encounter with a dynamic woman spirit bearing the name Mama Aza, an imperious and enigmatic guardian angel guiding and protecting Annis from the more malevolent spirits that endanger the women’s lives en route to the slave markets of New Orleans, which Annis likens to the “grief-racked city” of Dante’s poem. There’s little that Ward’s narrative contributes to the literature of American slavery in its basic historic details. But what gives this volume its stature and heft among other recent novels are the power, precision, and visionary flow of Ward’s writing, the way she makes the unimaginable horror, soul-crushing drudgery, and haphazard cruelties of the distant past vivid to her readers. Every time you think this novel is taking you places you’ve been before, Ward startles you with an image, a metaphor, a rhetorical surge that makes both Annis and her readers worth your attention. And admiration.

Ward may not tell you anything new about slavery, but her language is saturated with terror and enchantment.

THE BOX
Wong, Mandy-Suzanne
Graywolf (264 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
978164452493

In a snowed-in city, a legend grows around a mysterious white box.

Wong’s experimental novel centers on a simple but enigmatic object, “a pocket-size box, dizzyingly woven all in white, tapestry-tight,” which only one person has ever been able to open. Various nameless narrators relate experiences they’ve had with the box. There are few scenes of immediate action, instead mostly complex anecdotes by people obsessed with the box’s history, as if the box is trying to “set the story free, dismembered and darkened by its own protagonists.” Wong deploys dense, theoretical wordplay instead of developing characters; much of the book is disorienting. “The counterfeit thing exists to bear the burden of this secret, the secret of its non-identity,” says one character. “A thing isn’t for any of you; a thing is for itself. A thing’s real self is its secret self,” says another. There are references to a Seeker and Keeper in what may be a timeless conflict to possess the box in “this hell of a city boxed up in snow” and suffering from possibly box-induced climate change and slow, violent societal collapse. By the final third of the book, the disparate plot threads come together just enough to show that “the box at so many crime scenes” may be an eternal force causing mass disruptions. “In a search for origins or meanings, the more you don’t find, the more certain you become of things’ strange- ness,” thinks one character near the end. While the prose can be tiring, Wong also delivers something rare, evoking a creepy sort of glamour around books and stories, as if craving a good read is itself sometimes a form of dark desire.

Casts a curious spell despite its stylistic density and lack of traditional plot.

THE LAST ELECTION
Yang, Andrew & Stephen Marche
Akashic (280 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
9781616141503

In former presidential candidate Yang’s first novel, doomsday looms for American democracy in the months leading up to the 2024 election.

No one is safe in America anymore. The latest victims of violence include a female Supreme Court justice shot to death in Washington, D.C., and a Democratic state senator gunned down in Michigan. At the Republican convention in Milwaukee, fighting between anarchists and the Proud Boys leaves three dead and 17 wounded. The only hope for turning things around is underdog third-party candidate Cooper Sherman, a charismatic, straight-talking billionaire running on the “Unfuck America” ticket. Never mind those sex clubs he once frequented. “Scandal is no longer a barrier to a candidate’s success,” according to his campaign manager, Mikey Ricci. “It’s a requirement.” And with the Joint Chiefs of Staff poised to seize power in the increasingly likely event that the election goes off the rails, there are graver concerns than a candidate’s peccadilloes. Not that evidence of the secret plot will be reported in the New York Times. “They’ll find reasons not to run it,” thinks the tip-line supervisor who discovered evidence of the plot. Though the novel has the markings of satire, details—including candidates hiring “selfie consultants” and Kim Kardashian conferring with Matthew McConaughey about his “gun-responsibility social media strategy”—are too believable to laugh at. Yang says Marche “did the heavy lifting writing this novel” and that the “stories and recollections” of Zach Graumann, Yang’s campaign manager, “form the backbone of this book.” While their collective contributions don’t cut very deep, their zinging broadsides make for lively and unsettling reading.

A corrosive work of speculative fiction that may put readers even more on edge than they already are.
DEARBORN
Zeineddine, Ghassan
Tin House (288 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9781959030294

Stories full of humor and warmth about an Arab American community.

In his debut collection, Zeineddine toes the impossibly delicate line between pathos and humor with the grace and finesse of a tightrope walker. His subject is Dearborn, Michigan, a city made up primarily of Arab Americans. In 10 stories, Zeineddine brings that community alive. His voice is irresistible—warm, funny, and unrelenting. “Money Chickens” begins: “Some folks store their money in safes; Baba devout, some secular; some run cons, some toil in honest work, Zeineddine writes as sympathetically from the points of view of a few pages is a thing of wonder.

A fantastic collection heralding the voice of a major new writer.

PROUD SORROWS
Benn, James R.
Soho Crime (360 pp.)
$27.95 | Sept. 6, 2023
9781641294157

During World War II, deadly secrets surround the wreckage of a German aircraft discovered in the North Sea.

In a short opening chapter, dated May 1942, a handful of Norfolk villagers witnesses the crash of a Heinkel He 111 bomber. Two and a half years later, a houseful of guests at nearby Seaton Manor attends Angelika Kazimierz of the Polish resistance, recently rescued from a Nazi concentration camp and about to undergo surgery to repair an injured leg. Sir Richard Seaton hosts the group, which, in addition to a handful of local characters, includes his daughter, Diana; her lover, U.S. Army captain Billy Boyle; and Piotr “Kaz” Kazimierz—Polish baron, Billy’s closest friend, and Angelika’s brother. Billy’s buoyant first-person narration peppers details of the backstories of this heroic trio throughout. A pall is cast over the celebratory air when guest Charlotte Mothersole shares the story of her brother Stephen Elliot’s mysterious disappearance two years ago and of German soldiers reportedly seen in the area. The plot thickens when the notorious bomber is washed ashore with Elliot in the pilot’s seat—a discovery that answers some questions but raises others. Seaton falls under a temporary cloud of suspicion by British military stationed in the area. David Archer, a local who witnessed the original crash, is found dead shortly after fleeing out about the bomber’s reemergence. Fortunately, Billy’s on hand to investigate. Benn skillfully advances the stories of the
While they’re staying on Gloria’s houseboat, the sisters wonder from a grumpy guy to a perky lady with sparse baking skills during her honeymoon with Lt. Nathan Bransford; they’re coming to town to give demonstrations and hunt for contestants for the American edition of their TV show. She heads to the airport with Miss Gloria, the octogenarian former roommate who went along on her honeymoon (“Long story,” Hayley tells the reader), but things don’t go as planned from the get-go. First of all the B&B where the sisters planned to stay is closed due to arson. Worse, the contestants are a sparse group, ranging from investor Jeremy Slade. The wealthy crowd is annoyed by the clumsy moves required by his protective suit, still gets away after shooting at her. Her boyfriend, detective Pete Riley, and his boss, Burt Tidwell, are upset but know from long experience that once Theodosia’s on the track of a killer, she’s not to be deterred, especially now that Holly’s business is circling the drain. There are certainly plenty of suspects, for Claxton, well known in Charleston political circles as a crook, is in the middle of a messy divorce and has made enemies throughout the artistic community. Holly begs for help, and Haley’s boyfriend is a suspect. So how can Theodosia turn down their pleas?

Historic Charleston and cream teas are a perfect backdrop for genteel murder and mayhem.

Characters he’s developed over several previous novels while strategically revealing pieces of the complex murder puzzle. This long-running series grows in breadth and depth with every installment.

A CLUE IN THE CRUMBS
Burdette, Lucy
Crooked Lane (304 pp.)
$28.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781639104307

A British baking show visits Key West with some surprising results.

Key West food critic Hayley Snow is looking forward to entertaining Violet and Bettina Booth, aka the Scottish Scone Sisters, whom she met a year ago during her honeymoon with Lt. Nathan Bransford; they’re coming to town to give demonstrations and hunt for contestants for the American edition of their TV show. She heads to the airport with Miss Gloria, the octogenarian former roommate who went along on her honeymoon (“Long story,” Hayley tells the reader), but things don’t go as planned from the get-go. First of all the B&B where the sisters planned to stay is closed due to arson. Worse, the contestants are a sparse group, ranging from a grumpy guy to a perky lady with sparse baking skills to Rayna, the owner of the B&B, who’s a much better baker but whose controlling husband has forbidden her to compete. While they’re staying on Gloria’s houseboat, the sisters wonder what’s become of their agent and the samples of a new bake-ware line they plan to sell. When Rayna’s husband is murdered, she’s the obvious suspect. You wouldn’t think Hayley’s duties of showing everyone all over the island and providing tasty meals would allow her much sleuthing time, but her curiosity won’t let her ignore the murder. Local gossip and internet searches turn up other people with motives to kill Rayna’s husband, including that mysterious agent, who’s using a false name. A series of humorous and dangerous adventures ensue before the truth is revealed.

Food lore, island delights, and mystery provide something for everyone.

HONEY DROP DEAD
Childs, Laura
Berkley (320 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 8, 2023
9780593200957

Childs invites readers to the latest in her endless stream of cleverly themed tea parties buzzing with potential murder suspects.

Charleston, South Carolina, tea shop owner Theodosia Browning; her tea sommelier, Drayton Conneley; and chef Haley Parker are catering an outdoor tea organized around bees and honey. The event is designed to promote Holly Burns’ Imago Gallery, which has recently been given a boost by a much-needed influx of money from investor Jeremy Slade. The wealthy crowd is annoyed by the clumsy moves required by his protective suit, still gets away after shooting at her. Her boyfriend, detective Pete Riley, and his boss, Burt Tidwell, are upset but know from long experience that once Theodosia’s on the track of a killer, she’s not to be deterred, especially now that Holly’s business is circling the drain. There are certainly plenty of suspects, for Claxton, well known in Charleston political circles as a crook, is in the middle of a messy divorce and has made enemies throughout the artistic community. Holly begs for help, and Haley’s boyfriend is a suspect. So how can Theodosia turn down their pleas?

Historic Charleston and cream teas are a perfect backdrop for genteel murder and mayhem.

THE LONGMIRE DEFENSE
Johnson, Craig
Viking (368 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780593297315

Longmire lovers, rejoice! He’s back with a deeply personal case that uncovers family secrets.

Walt Longmire, sheriff of Absaroka County, Wyoming, has a long record of solving crimes under unorthodox circumstances. This time, Walt’s hunt for a lost tourist leads to an investigation that’s both personally wrenching and dangerous. The search area recalls a story his father told him about an Elk Hunt he went on as a teen with his own father, Lloyd. During the hunt, the state accountant, Big Bill Sutherland, was shot and killed, and his murder is still unsolved. When Walt finds the tourist, he also finds a buried, custom-made .300 H&H Magnum that was probably the murder weapon in the Sutherland case. The owner of that rifle was Lloyd Longmire, a wealthy man and a tough taskmaster who used chess lessons to teach Walt about not only the game, but about life. This coldest of cold cases forces Walt to look into his grandfather, with whom he continued to have an adversarial relationship away from the chessboard. Although Walt and cemetery expert Jules Beldon find an empty coffin in Sutherland’s grave, Lucian Connally, who’d been the sheriff when Sutherland was killed, is extremely reticent about the ancient mystery. But Beldon’s shooting turns the cold case hot, and a long conversation with a childhood friend who’s now an agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives stirs up long-lost memories for Walt. Powerful

Historic Charleston and cream teas are a perfect backdrop for genteel murder and mayhem.
people pressure him to forget the old case, which is tied to vast amounts of money in a hidden fund. It doesn’t matter: Walt has his own moral code, refuses to bend, and is ready to unmask his grandfather as a murderer if that’s where the clues lead.

Learning the history of a beloved protagonist raises an exciting mystery to a higher level.

THE CLEMENTINE COMPLEX

Markus Røed

$17.99 paper | Sept. 5, 2023

The first novel by British comedian and memoirist Mortimer is a rom-com and mystery packaged in one. Our narrator, Gary Thorn, is alone in London with a dull job and no relationship prospects, but life gets more interesting when he goes for a relaxing drink with Brendan Jones, a private investigator who works closely with his law firm. While Brendan chats away, Gary is distracted by a woman sitting at the end of the bar with a book. When Brendan needs to leave after receiving an urgent call, Gary is free to ask the woman about her book, The Clementine Complex. This turns into a multihour conversation that ends abruptly—the woman disappears while Gary is fetching a drink. A defeated Gary is surprised to learn the next morning that Brendan has been found dead. Gary was likely the last person to see him alive. And what about the woman, whose name he never got? Is she in danger, too, or is she suspicious given that she left in a hurry? Gary has many questions, which he bounces off his neighbor Grace, who loves to gossip over meat pies. With heavy reliance on Gary’s rich interior dialogue, the book has little allegiance to the rule of “show, don’t tell.” Gary can’t resist the urge to figure out what’s transpired, so, with good intention and zero preparation, he plods his way through police stations and South London estates in search of answers, hoping to find the woman who’s taken his fancy in the process. Gary’s quirky, self-aware nature is often endearing, especially in how much he subtly cares for others, but the surface-level humor Mortimer uses to give the story pep can be a tough sell, more awkward than funny. The narrative flow is derailed halfway through when our mystery woman becomes the narrator. Despite the whiplash, the fresh perspective—which is raw and humorless in a good way—is welcome. You’ll root for a happy ending despite the flaws.

Quirky, lighthearted, but easy to forget—it could have been a gem with more polish.

THE LAST DEVIL TO DIE

Richard Osman

$29.00 | Sept. 19, 2023

Harry Hole is pulled back home from La-La Land to investigate a series of killings for a most unexpected reason. Inspector Katrine Bratt, head of the Oslo Police Department’s Crime Squad, desperately wants the help of her ex-lover, a terrible cop who’s also the country’s leading authority on serial killers, when Susanne Andersen and Bertine Bertilsen, both of whom have gone missing, turn up dead and disfigured in a truly ghoulish manner. There’s no way, says her boss, Chief Supt. Bodil Melling: Harry’s already disgraced the department in so many ways that he’ll never work there again. Little do they know that Harry’s already agreed to take the case at the request of real estate mogul Markus Reed, who’s under suspicion because he played sugar daddy to both of the victims. The staggering fee Harry demands is $960,000, exactly the amount that one-time movie actress Lucille Owens owes the Esposito family, whose enforcers Harry’s just rescued her from in Los Angeles. Arriving back home, Harry promptly assembles the Aune Group, a cadre of four helpers ever more disreputable than him, and sets them to work knowing that the Esposito family will close Lucille’s account in seven days. Every one of the Aune Group has something to contribute, but they can’t prevent the body count from rising. Like the old pro he is, Nesbø doles out some teasing details about the killer, who calls himself Prim, early on while withholding enough information about Prim’s modus operandi, motive, and true identity to keep the pages fluttering long past bedtime.

A battered hero, a memorably creepy villain, a series of false endings worthy of Jeffery Deaver: What’s not to love?
meeting every week in the Jigsaw Room to solve cold cases—but now find that the murders are hot and coming directly to them. In their last outing, they were helped by antiques dealer Kuldesh Sharma, an old friend of Elizabeth’s husband, Stephen, and now they’re devastated to learn that Kuldesh has been murdered, shot in the head while parked at the end of a dirt road. A missing shipment of heroin seems to have been involved. This gives the gang another chance to fearlessly poke their noses into places you wouldn’t expect to find people their age as the body count grows by leaps and bounds. In a moving subplot, Elizabeth and Stephen come together to face his advancing dementia. Other than that, the characters feel a bit more quickly sketched than usual, though the strands of the plot multiply entertainingly and get tied together in the usual satisfying way. Perhaps Osman knew he needed a break; in the acknowledgments, he promises that this won’t be the last Thursday Murder Club book, but he says his next novel will be about a father-in-law–daughter-in-law pair of detectives. There’s something to look forward to.

Osman serves up another delightful mystery even if he’s not at the top of his game.

**THE TRAITOR AMONG US**

*Perry, Anne*

Ballantine (304 pp.)

$28.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780593359150

Elena Standish is sent to a most unlikely place to ferret out the killer of a fellow spy.

John Repton, who’d been active in MI6 during the Great War, had more or less retired by 1934. But the very last job he agreed to take on—secretly keeping an eye on Wyndham Hall in the Cotswolds—ended with the discovery of his body in a ditch nearby. Urgently needing to know what Repton had discovered and who’d shot him to death, Peter Howard sends Elena and James Allenby, two of his best, to Wyndham Hall to pretend they’re a couple while they ask discreet questions and gather evidence. It seems more and more likely that the motive for Repton’s murder was political. Sir David Wyndham has donated sizable sums to Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts. His wife, Lady Griselda, is clearly more than an old friend of Elizabeth’s husband, Stephen, and now they’re devastated to learn that Kuldesh has been murdered, shot in the head while parked at the end of a dirt road. A missing shipment of heroin seems to have been involved. This gives the gang another chance to fearlessly poke their noses into places you wouldn’t expect to find people their age as the body count grows by leaps and bounds. In a moving subplot, Elizabeth and Stephen come together to face his advancing dementia. Other than that, the characters feel a bit more quickly sketched than usual, though the strands of the plot multiply entertainingly and get tied together in the usual satisfying way. Perhaps Osman knew he needed a break; in the acknowledgments, he promises that this won’t be the last Thursday Murder Club book, but he says his next novel will be about a father-in-law–daughter-in-law pair of detectives. There’s something to look forward to.

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**THE DARK EDGE OF NIGHT**

*Pryor, Mark*

Minotaur (352 pp.)

$28.00 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781508250449

Murder and mayhem in Nazi-occupied Paris.

Success is a double-edged sword for detective Henri Lefort. As one of the few remaining police officers in Paris, he can continue his work keeping the peace for the occupied French only if he can also solve cases for the Germans. When Dr. Andreas von Rauch, who’s clearly an important figure in Nazi medical research, wants Henri’s help finding Dr. Viktor Brandt, a missing colleague, Henri can hardly say “non.” But his good friend Princess Marie Bonaparte wants him to turn his attention to the apparent kidnappings of young charges from a local children’s home. And of course there are still routine police cases to be solved, like the beating death of Edouard Grabbin, whose brother, Dr. Jean Grabbin, whisks his corpse underground almost before it’s cold. Nicola Prehn, administrative assistant at the prefecture and secretly Henri’s sister, weighs in on Princess Mimi’s side, but the consequences of Henri’s failure to solve von Rauch’s case would be severe. Balancing the challenges of his detective’s job with the more prosaic problems of finding eggs and cheese in an occupied city, Pryor creates a vivid picture of life in wartime Paris, a place where the struggle for good over evil may require compromise but must never be abandoned.

It takes a village, but in the end, justice triumphs. A satisfying puzzle in a carefully crafted setting.

**IN HER BLOOD**

*Ramsay, Caro*

Severn House (356 pp.)

$31.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781448380676

The Scottish Highlands provide the scene for another complex and chilling case for a Glasgow detective with troubles of her own.

After closing another case in the Highlands, DCI Christine Caplan is saying goodbye to her local team before beginning her trip home to Glasgow. Her children are in recovery from a near-death experience on an island retreat, and her husband, Aklen, is too traumatized to leave the house. Before Caplan can depart, though, she’s called back to Cronchie, where a man has jumped or been pushed off the Connel Bridge over the Falls of Lora. It turns out that Ted Maxwell, the victim, was stabbed, and he was a psychologist who had been working on a book about children who kill. His death creates panic in officialdom because the notorious Girl A, who was accused of killing at least three people as a child, has just been released from a psychiatric institute—and
the name she chose for her new secret identity is Lora Connell, echoing the site of Maxwell’s death. She herself was nearly killed in a recent fire no doubt set by one of the millions of people who hate her, two of them her own sisters, and is now on the run. The laws protecting underage criminals with mental problems make it hard for Caplan to get information about her, but because she’s actually Gillian Halliday, who lived with her family nearby and is well known to Caplan’s team, she soon learns her history. Meeting the family and Gillian herself moves Caplan to look into the older crimes. Much to her surprise, she feels that something is off about them even as the higher-ups push for a quick resolution to the Maxwell case and set a deadline to wrap it up.

A breathtaking combination of police procedural and twisted psychological thriller.

**PAYBACK IN DEATH**
J.D. Robb
St. Martin’s (368 pp.)
$30.00 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781250284099

In 2061, Lt. Eve Dallas returns from visiting her husband’s people in Ireland to confront the murder of a man whose entire career had been devoted to making mortal enemies.

Before he retired, Martin Greenleaf was a captain in the New York Police and Security Department’s Internal Affairs Bureau. Day after day he gathered evidence against fellow officers who were taking bribes, attacking criminals with excessive violence, using force against partners who refused to go along with their hooligan methods, working hand in glove with organized crime, or establishing criminal networks of their own. Several of the cops Greenleaf targeted escaped the law by killing themselves, leaving behind vengeful spouses, siblings, and children. Now Greenleaf himself is dead, apparently by his own hand (though it doesn’t take Dallas more than a few minutes to disprove that theory to her satisfaction).

Which of the many, many enemies he’d toiled to bring to justice has turned the tables on him for good? The field is so rich that much of this tale is given over to interchangeable interviews by Dallas and Det. Delia Peabody of basically interchangeable suspects. A breakthrough comes when Dallas observes that the manner of Greenleaf’s death closely echoes that of one of those bad cops—and the parallels will thicken as she pursues the case. And a major obstruction presents itself when Det. Joe Lansing of the IAB accuses Dallas of disloyalty to the blue line and launches a violent attack on her himself.

It’s just another day in a near-future landscape filled with dead, dirty cops.

**DEATH BY A THOUSAND SIPS**
Rue, Gretchen
Crooked Lane (336 pp.)
$29.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781639104536

Sorting out her witchy powers might help a nosy tea shop owner solve a small-town murder.

Phoebe Winchester has just about adjusted to her new life in Raven Creek, Washington, where she runs the Earl’s Study, the tea-and-book shop she inherited from her dearly departed aunt Eudora. The fact that Eudora also secretly owned the deeds to half the shops on Main Street is helpful, though it was a surprise to Phoebe, who’s more a bargain hunter than a money haver (and she plans to follow Eudora’s lead in devoting the rental income to improving the town). The properties aren’t the only surprise inheritance from Eudora: Phoebe’s just learned that she’s part of a long line of people with mystical powers, or, as some might say, a witch. Since she’s still figuring out the rules governing her powers, she mainly uses them to amp up the potency of her teas. But she’s not above stopping time if, for example, her life is in mortal danger. Threats to her well-being arrive more often than she’d like. Even her trip to check out some mass-market paperbacks at an auction leads to a murder, which, in turn, leads to the killer going after Phoebe when it seems she might know too much. And Phoebe does know too much, thanks in large part to the help she gets from both her PI friend and hopeful boyfriend, Rich Lofting, and her ginger tabby, Bob, who’s almost as determined to investigate as he is to eat treats. Can Phoebe find the killer before she’s caught in the crosshairs, or will Eudora’s legacy end with her?

Heavy on recipes, cats, and other such details that will delight or detract, depending on the reader.

**THE BODY IN THE BACK GARDEN**
Waddell, Mark
Crooked Lane (272 pp.)
$28.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9781639104406

The hit-and-run death of his aunt brings a freelance writer to Canada’s Vancouver Island and a confrontation with his past.

Luke Tremblay has just broken up with Bryce, the boyfriend with whom he shared a home in Toronto, when he gets the unexpected news that his estranged aunt has left him her house and antiques shop in Crescent Cove, which may be just the lifeline he needs. Still bitter over the fact that his beloved aunt Marguerite had joined the rest of his family in cutting him off when he came out as gay, Luke plans on selling the place to finance his future. But memories of happy childhood summers with Marguerite come flooding...
Mexican father and a Roman mother, at least a day to get back. Mounted Police both attractive and intimidating, is shocked. Rick's case and Betta's is that both are solved mainly by chance. Pisa on the trail of a pastel original that disappeared from a side food and wine. Unfortunately, the visit is cut short when Rick and Zeke needs Rick to fill in. While staying at the hotel the agrees. To his surprise and delight, Filomena turns out to be a evidently, Mackenzie was searching for letters worth a fortune if the prospect of combining his time reliving his bright college years in Zeke's company with a visit to an elderly widow, but he

There may be both a romantic and sleuthing future for this pair who share wounds from the past.

A reunion of old friends is marred by murder. Translator Rick Montoya has just finished up an assignment in Palermo when he gets a call from his old fraternity brother Zeke Campbell. Zeke, who's leading a tour of New Mexicans around Italy, hopes to reconnect with Rick in Rome. Since it will take Rick, son of a New Mexican father and a Roman mother, at least a day to get back to his adopted hometown, they agree to meet in Assisi, the tour's next stop. Rick's uncle, police commissario Piero Fon-terry Ettore Biraldo, the tour guide, and when Biraldo meets his inevitable bad end, Rick helps the police track his killer. Meanwhile, Rick's girlfriend, art investigator Betta Innocenti, is in Rome, set out for the dead city than a god-summoned monster attacks their caravan, forcing Kissen and Elo to reveal their capabili-

In a kingdom that slaughtered the gods and criminalized their worship, two god-slayers—a mercenary and a knight—join forces on a pilgrimage to save two other lives. Years ago, Kissen lost her leg after the people of her village shifted their allegiance to a fire god and burned her family home to the ground. Only a desperate bargain with the sea god her father served saved her life. Now she works as a veiga: a state-sanctioned killer of gods. Under young King Arren's rule, all forms of worship have become illegal, as it is humans' faith that gives birth to the gods and powers them. A series of violent events leaves Kissen as sole protector to Inara, a young girl orphaned by fire and treachery and bound to a small, shrineless god called Skedi. Together, the three must journey to Blenraden, the city where the gods died, to sever Inara and Skedi's connection. Unbeknownst to Kissen and her charges, another godkiller walks in their midst. Knight-turned-baker Elo witnessed the carnage in Blenraden firsthand. It cost him everything. His mothers left the kingdom in the war's aftermath, unwilling to give up their faith. Then the king waltzes back into his orbit, afflicted with a deadly curse. Elo must join the next pilgrimage he can find—Kissen's pilgrimage— if he wants to save his old friend. No sooner has the group set out for the dead city than a god-summoned monster attacks their caravan, forcing Kissen and Elo to reveal their capabilities—and their godkilling weapons as well. In addition to being exquisitely paced and character-driven, Kaner's novel features a widely diverse cast. Queerness does not draw ridicule in Kaner's invented world, and Kissen is bisexual. Many secondary and tertiary characters are queer. Both heroes and two secondary characters have disabilities; he's living with PTSD, while she's an amputee and ambulatory wheelchair user with a handcrafted metal leg. One secondary character also uses a wheelchair, and another is deaf. Elo is coded as Black. Inara and several tertiary characters have disabilities; he's living with PTSD, while she's an amputee and ambulatory wheelchair user with a handcrafted metal leg. One secondary character also uses a wheelchair, and another is deaf. Elo is coded as Black. Inara and several tertiary characters are coded as nonwhite. Kissen is white, and Skedi is a fantasy creature resembling a jackalope. 

An un-put-down-able start to an engrossing low-fantasy trilogy bordering on grimdark.
A delicious treat for fans of the Shades of Magic series and a lush, suspenseful fantasy in its own right.

**THE FRAGILE THREADS OF POWER**

SCHWAB, V.E.

Tor (656 pp.)

$26.99 | Sept. 26, 2023

9780765387493

The opener for a new series set in Red, White, Grey, and Black London.

It's been seven years since Kell, Lila, and Holland defeated the evil force known as Osaron. Lila has spent those seven years as captain of a ship, exploring her new magical world and occasionally spying for the Crown. Kell has spent them learning to fight with ordinary weapons now that wielding his magic causes him intense pain. Holland, of course, gave his life to defeat Osaron. But now a shadowy organization called the Hand is plotting against Kell's brother, King Rhy, and they've set their sights on a powerful magical object. Lila, Kell, Rhy, and Rhy's husband, Alucard, will all be drawn into new danger in their efforts to uncover the plot and protect their family. Meanwhile, a young girl named Tes with the rare ability to see and manipulate the threads of magic is hiding out in Red London, fixing magical objects—and Kosika, the young queen of White London, will do whatever it takes to restore her world's magic. Returning to the world of her fantastic A Darker Shade of Magic (2015) and its sequel, Schwab gives readers more of everything they love about that series: dynamic, unconventional characters; suspenseful plots; rich worldbuilding; and compelling relationships. New characters Tes and Kosika more than hold their own against returning fan favorites. Schwab’s pacing is confident, assured, and the book weaves a masterful spell on the reader.

A delicious treat for fans of the Shades of Magic series and a lush, suspenseful fantasy in its own right.

**THE CIRCUMFERENCE OF THE WORLD**

TIDHAR, Lavie

Tachyon (256 pp.)

$17.95 paper | Sept. 5, 2023

9781616963620

When a mathematician goes missing while searching for a legendary science-fiction novel, his wife hires a disabled book dealer to bring him home.

Maybe the universe’s energy really does get recycled, because this eclectic speculative novel manages to be simultaneously contemporary, nostalgic, and retro in a way that wouldn’t be unfamiliar to the SF icons to which it pays tribute. It’s a whoodunit in structure but steeped in heavy philosophy with a few Beat flourishes to boot. Delia Welegtabit grew up on a remote island where her proximity to the stars gifted her with a love of mathematics. In London circa 2001, Delia is married to Levi Armstrong, another young mathematician who dreams of making sense of the universe. After Levi disappears in search of a long-lost copy of an obscure 1962 SF novel called Lode Stars by Eugene Charles Hartley, Delia hires Daniel Chase, whose prodigious literary knowledge is blunted by his prosopagnosia (face-blindness), to find him. Immediately, Daniel is summoned by Oskar Lens, a shadowy underworld figure whose delusions and paranoia make him a very dangerous adversary indeed. Stylistically, we’re deep into Jonathan Lethem territory (Chandler-esque detective story with a heavy dose of weird) before Tidhar pulls back the curtain on the wizard himself, Hartley, whose book speculates that we’re all sentient memories swirling inside a black hole. Menace endures, as predatory parasites dubbed “eaters” prey on these sentient memories unless one possesses a coded copy of Lode Stars, which protects its charge. In a familiar turn, Robert Heinlein drunkenly suggests to Hartley that if he wants to make millions, he should really start his own religion, which inspires the author to found the Scientology-esque Church of the All-Seeing Eyes before disappearing himself. The plot may collapse into noodle-bending nonsense, but Tidhar’s rich portrayal of the pulpy golden age of science fiction, distinctive characters, and nimble turns of phrase make for a cool confection.

A nifty artifact about the perils and prognostications of the science fictional world.

**WHERE PEACE IS LOST**

VALDES, Valerie

Harper Voyager (400 pp.)

$19.99 paper | Aug. 29, 2023

9780063085930

When a powerful empire threatens the denizens of a remote planet, a mysterious refugee comes out of hiding to fight back.

Kel Garda keeps to herself. As far as citizens of the planet Loth know, she’s yet another refugee of the Prixori Anocracy’s violent war of expansion. Technically that war ended five years ago, but when an abandoned battle machine—a “demolisher”—whirs to life in the lush jungles of Loth, the peaceful people have no way of stopping it from destroying everything in its path. And when they call their distant Prixori overlords for help, the Pale, as they’re known, can’t be bothered to send aid. The people of Loth place great value on protecting the natural life on the planet, avoiding building more than the bare minimum of invasive infrastructure, and as such they have few resources to defend themselves against the Pale’s military tech. Though Kel feels a responsibility toward the kindhearted people of Loth who took her in after the war, she has her reasons to stay off the Pale’s radar and doesn’t intend to do more than attend meetings discussing what to do. When two mysterious offworlders show up to those meetings claiming to be able to shut down the demolisher, Kel finds their timing suspicious. But when her young, adventurous friend Lunna enthusiastically volunteers to guide the offworlders through the wilderness, Kel is forced to
join them and find out for herself if the offworlders really do want to help Loth and if she’ll be able to continue hiding her true identity. Valdes is a delightful storyteller. Her characters are lively and detailed, and her worldbuilding is immersive without being confusing. The restorative justice culture of Loth is effectively contrasted with the violence of the Pale empire, and Valdes explores the complicated question of whether it’s possible to retain your values and ideals while fighting back against injustice and cruelty.

A solid SF adventure story.

A perfect potion of cozy, romantic, and enchanting fun.

A small-town chef tries to balance caring for her three nieces with a promising romance.

After her brother and sister-in-law die in a car accident, Bryce Weatherford inherits custody of her wild, unpredictable, lovable nieces: Addie, age 5; Cecily, 8; and June, 12. Though she’s not exactly prepared to be a parental figure, she’s determined to make the best of it—and figure out a way to make ends meet financially for her new wards. A disastrous trip to the grocery store results in her crossing paths with Marine veteran Ryker Matthews, and amid strewn containers of baby food, she might actually be developing a crush at first sight. But Bryce isn’t the only one who has a lot on her plate, both in the professional and emotional sense. Ryker, whose left leg was amputated below the knee after his last tour in Afghanistan, is still dealing with PTSD and isn’t sure he wants to subject Bryce to his struggles. Nevertheless, they continue to run into each other all over town, and with each new encounter, both sides of this couple start to have an increasingly hard time remembering why they wanted to avoid dating each other to begin with. Pair that with several meddling members of Ryker’s family—many of whom readers may recognize from previous books—and the way small-town gossip can spread like wildfire, and you’ve got a recipe for hilarity and heartwarming moments. While Newton’s latest romance isn’t lacking in funny scenarios, it’s not afraid to delve into some poignant and personal subjects. Grief and learning to move on after loss are significant themes, but these heavier elements are balanced by a heartfelt portrayal of a family unit that only becomes stronger after time and trials. A late-stage miscommunication feels unnecessary to the plot, but the final resolution is satisfying enough to leave a smile on any reader’s face.

A charming, candid rom-com.
“Two artists find love as they become embroiled in a dangerous counterfeiting scheme in Regency London.”

THE DUKE GETS DESPERATE
Quincy, Diana
Avon/HarperCollins (384 pp.)
$9.99 paper | Sept. 26, 2023
978006247499

An unusual inheritance sparks love between a businesswoman and a duke.

After a long journey from America, Miss Raya Darwish and her aunt Majida are immediately shocked once they make it to the English countryside. And not just because they’re from a Palestinian merchant family in Brooklyn, now across the ocean from the family business to which Raya devoted herself before being cut out of it entirely. She is expecting to finally meet her cousin Deena, who married a widower duke and then was widowed herself. Instead, she’s greeted by the livid Duke of Strickland, Anthony Carey. Deena has died unexpectedly, and even more unexpectedly, she’s left Castle Tremayne to Raya even though it’s been home to Anthony’s family for centuries. Having no option but to accept, Raya swiftly turns her entrepreneurial mind to revitalizing the crumbling and impoverished castle she now owns, shocking everyone she talks to with ideas like inviting visitors to pay for tours (and building a proto–gift shop to boot). Because her ideas involve Anthony’s part of the estate, she keeps pushing, and his early distaste for her experiments is soon outweighed by his desperation to save his beloved home and some grudging admiration. The more time they spend together, the harder it is for them to resist the heat that thrums under each interaction, and before long they begin to explore their chemistry despite being well aware of the dangers. It’s only when they are compromised that they start to admit that a marriage between them could be for more than convenience—but it’s also when they realize someone unknown might have sinister plans for them as well. The tension between Raya and Anthony is so well drawn that even though the two become intimate rather early in the book, the story still feels like a strong slow burn along the enemies-to-lovers path, and Quincy’s fans will enjoy another clever heroine set against and then paired with a man actually worth her time and attention. A solid start to a new historical series from one of romance’s most dependable writers.

A winning Victorian romance.

MY ROGUE TO RUIN
Ridley, Erica
Forever (352 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
9781538726112

Two artists find love as they become embroiled in a dangerous counterfeiting scheme in Regency London.

The Wynchesters—an eccentric crew of six adopted siblings—are known for using their unique talents to help people in need, taking on even seemingly impossible cases. Marjorie’s artistic prowess means her contributions typically occur from the safety of the Planning Parlor within the Winchester residence, but when the family is alerted that a notorious money-lender called Snowley is pawning off forged coins on the destitute in exchange for their few valuables, Marjorie wants to prove herself by taking the lead and going out in the field to take him and the operation down. Meanwhile, Lord Adrian Webb has returned to London from Rome, where his family had banished him seven years earlier, hoping to repair his relationship with his younger sister. When he visits Snowley, to whom he had been furnishing antiquities to sell, with the intention of ending their arrangement, he learns that Snowley knew the artworks were actually forgeries Adrian had created himself. Now Snowley is blackmailing Adrian into counterfeiting money. When Marjorie shows up under the guise of wanting to work for Snowley, she and Adrian initially antagonize each other, despite their mutual attraction, but they connect as truths are revealed. This is the fourth installment in the Wild Wynchesters series and will most appeal to those already in love with this eccentric bunch. It’s exciting to watch Marjorie, who has partial deafness and is cued as a synesthete with eidetic memory, grow in confidence. Adrian’s character arc is less authentic since, despite being referred to as a rake and a scoundrel, his actions are always based on honorable ideals. There’s kissing and pining throughout, but mostly the intimacy takes a back seat to the entertaining hijinks.

Not as compelling as earlier installments but still an enjoyable read featuring a distinct family.

THE LOVE PLOT
Young, Samantha
Berkley (352 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Aug. 29, 2023
9780593438633

Opposites attract when a flighty gig worker and a gruff veterinarian fake a relationship.

Star Shine Meadows is the daughter of “self-proclaimed hippies” and takes odd jobs to keep her bills paid, from dressing up as a mascot to holding someone’s place in line for a new smartphone. Star first meets Rafe Whitman while playing Princess Merida from Pixar’s Brave at his niece’s birthday party. But when Rafe’s cousin, Veterinarian Dr. Clay Whitman, needs a last-minute replacement for his gig as Santa, he sends Rafe to check out Star. The two initially clash, but their chemistry is undeniable. As they get to know each other, they realize they have more in common than they thought. But can they make it work in the real world when Rafe’s family doesn’t approve of Star’s gig work? Opposites attract in this charming romantic comedy.

A light-hearted romantic comedy.
party. She’s drawn to his stoic demeanor, poking and prodding to get him to crack a smile, but she soon learns that the only soft spot Rafe has is for his furry (and sometimes feathered or scaled) patients. While Rafe takes great pleasure in his job as a veterinarian, his temperament often comes up short when it comes to people, especially the nosy, meddling family members who can’t stop hounding him about settling down. He doesn’t anticipate running into the extroverted Merida from his niece’s party again, but when he does, he makes her an offer he doesn’t think she’ll refuse. Rafe will pay Star to pose as his girlfriend just to get his family off his back for a little while. Since Rafe’s pay far exceeds what Star frequently cobbles together from her litany of jobs and freelancing, she accepts. Young’s contemporary romances are often overloaded with sexual attraction; Star starts fantasizing about Rafe the second she sees him. While Star and Rafe’s romance is chock-full of sex and silliness (an honorable mention to Rafe’s vet practice full of animals with large personalities), that sometimes feels like a barrier to reaching anything deeper. Buying into a forever kind of love with Star and Rafe is a big ask since their chemistry seems more suited to a friends-with-benefits arrangement until someone more fitting for each of them comes along.

Just like the main couple, this book is great for a quick fling, but don’t expect any staying power.
SOLVING THE CLIMATE CRISIS
Frontline Reports From the Race To Save the Earth
Berger, John J.
Seven Stories (480 pp.)
$28.95 paper | Sept. 26, 2023
9781644213223

Not a polemic but a sober presentation of mitigation techniques for our most significant global threat.

Berger, a prizewinning environmental journalist and author (Beating the Heat, Climate Myths, Restoring the Earth, etc.), begins with the bad news: Around the world, millions have already died or have been sickened or displaced by climate change. The U.S., he writes, “still counts on fossil fuel for four fifth of its energy needs, and many influential politicians remain opposed to decisive action.” He presents reasonable if not completely convincing arguments that reversing climate change will not require “belt-tightening or rationing.” Rather, it will bring prosperity, increased employment, and long-term economic security. Berger emphasizes nations, mostly in Europe, that have set goals of zero carbon emissions in the coming decades and are making dramatic progress. He admits that vigorous action from American politicians is unlikely, but many blue states and even some cities are taking up the fight. The author offers admiring portraits of hardworking individual activists, and a dozen chapters describe how to reduce and ultimately eliminate greenhouse gases. The good news is that wind and solar power prices continue to fall, and battery and hydrogen technology continue to improve, so 100% clean electricity and electric cars will be viable eventually. In chapters on decarbonizing agriculture, shipping, aircraft, forestry, and dirty industries such as steel and cement production, Berger emphasizes imaginative startups, evidence that progress is slow but perhaps steady. The final 120 pages, on international efforts and suggestions for further action, are the least uplifting. Long before the Trump administration’s embrace of science denial, American leaders bluntly refused to accept international guidelines. Consequently, most international agreements are toothless. Throughout, Berger downplays complex geoengineering solutions but then devotes a long, mildly skeptical chapter to concepts such as extracting carbon dioxide from the air, giant space mirrors to block the sun, and planting a trillion trees.

A solid overview of mostly sensible tactics, some of which are succeeding.
“Built on meticulous, diligent research, this book is key reading for those interested in geopolitical issues.”

**TARGET TEHRAN**

Two respected journalists delve into Israel’s moves to counter Iran’s nuclear gambit.

The Middle East has long been a labyrinth of age-old grudges and ever shifting allegiances. In the past two decades, Iran has emerged as a player with nuclear ambitions, prompting Israel to think of the nation as one of its major enemies. Bob and Evyatar, both contributors to the *Jerusalem Post*, have deep connections to Israel’s security agencies and government processes, and they begin their book with Mossad’s theft of a truckload—literally—of documents from Iran’s nuclear archive in 2018. The material provided proof that the country had been systematically violating a range of treaties and agreements but also indicated how far Iran was prepared to go to attain nuclear capability. Israel’s response was a multitiered campaign, combining cyberwarfare, sabotage, airstrikes, drones, and assassinations. The authors fill out the details through interviews with numerous Mossad officers, but the most important change, they suggest, might turn out to be the willingness of several Arab states to reconsider their attitudes toward Israel. Growing Iranian belligerence toward everyone in the region made some level of acceptance start to look desirable, and a series of secret meetings took place. The outcome of these moves was the U.S.–sponsored Abraham Accords, which have evolved into a broad framework for cooperation. The problem is that Iran shows no sign of shelving its nuclear plans. It has become better at hiding and protecting assets and is building cyberwarfare and drone weapons of its own. “The Mossad’s secret war is not over,” write the authors. “Indeed, it may never end.” It is a sobering conclusion, but it is hard to see any alternatives. Throughout this remarkable narrative, the authors provide valuable context to the new Middle East picture.

**BREAKING FREE**

*The Lie of Equality and the Feminist Fight for Freedom*

Bianco, Marcie

PublicAffairs (336 pp.)

$29.00 | Sept. 5, 2023

9781541702424

Revising the meaning and goals of feminism.

Bianco, a cultural critic and editor at the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, makes her book debut with a bold and compelling critique of feminism’s focus on equality. Describing herself as “a capital-A, capital-F Angry Feminist,” the author asserts that women have been duped into believing “a myth perpetuated to coax women into complicity with their oppression.” What have been identified as political, economic, or social inequalities, she claims, “are nothing but the measured effects of the discrimination of difference in relation to the white supremacist cis-heteropatriarchy.” The term equality, she contends, is unclear, with different meanings for men and women, for those with power and those without. Rather than adopt a politics that aims for attainment of the same rights, privileges, and power as white men, Bianco proposes that feminists aim to dismantle these patriarchal institutions and engage in embracing freedom. Freedom of body, mind, and movement, she asserts, involves “an ongoing process of self-creation and world-building rooted in accountability and care.” Accountability, which she sees as “the critical difference between white freedom and feminist freedom,” is central to her argument. Feminism must become “an ethics from which a politics emerges,” a value system grounded in respect, integrity, and collective well-being. Bianco draws on feminist scholars and critics—Simone de Beauvoir, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Barbara Johnson, to name a few—as well as her own experiences as a 40-something Harvard-educated white woman, lesbian, and athlete to discuss salient issues for women’s lives, such as abortion, gender, sexuality, queer identity, race, capitalism, and assisted death. Practicing freedom, she writes, can counter the “equality mindset” that posits a “hierarchical opposition of man above woman” and instead “can create a world that values the dignity, belonging, and joy of all people.”

* A cleareyed and impassioned plea for a just world.
As one of the founding members of iconic hip-hop group Public Enemy, Chuck D is a legend in the world of popular music, beloved for his politically charged lyrics and forceful, resonant delivery. However, many readers may not know that he’s also a visual artist who studied graphic design at Adelphi University, from which he graduated in 1984 and earned an honorary doctorate in 2013—the same year Public Enemy was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

All of his abundant creative abilities are on display in the first two books in his newly created imprint at Akashic, Enemy Books: STEWdio: The Napptic Grovel Artrilogy of Chuck D (June 6) and Summer of Hamn: Hollow-pointlessness Aiding Mass Nibilism (Oct. 3).

In our starred review of STEWdio, we noted, “The Public Enemy mastermind combines art and hip-hop rhymes to provide his compelling, personal views on the chaotic years between 2020 and 2022.” Collected in a slipcase, the three volumes—“There’s a Poison Going On,” “45 Daze of Red Octobot,” and “Datamber Mindpaper: Attack of the Screenagers”—feature the author’s trademark rhyming couplets paired with his hyperimpressionistic sketches, which contain echoes of both graffiti art and Jean-Michel Basquiat. The book has the feel of a diary, but it also has enough of a narrative throughline to keep the pages turning.

Chuck D chronicles the effects of the pandemic, the tumultuous 2020 presidential election cycle, and the many deleterious effects of our digital, smartphone-obsessed culture. “Politically and economically,” he writes, “the news is gone nuts....everyone is scared and angry.” He also includes glimpses of his occasionally rocky relationship with Flavor Flav and other musicians, and he offers intriguing portraits of significant historical and cultural figures, from Sidney Poitier to Questlove and, of course, a handful of members of the chaotic Trump administration. Our reviewer concluded, “In an engaging, distinctly hip-hop style, Chuck D reveals important lessons from the early pandemic years.”

In Summer of Hamn, the author maintains a tighter focus, investigating “how the U.S. has been held hostage by gun violence and a growing sense of hopelessness.” He chronicles many major news events of the past couple years, capturing their urgency as well as the depressingly rapid increase of hatred plaguing the country. Every issue he tackles, he does so with vigor, hard-won knowledge, and even dark humor. On abortion: “The Supreme Court overturns Roe vs. Wade, the government now thinks it can control women’s bodies that Mother Nature made.” On NATO: “NATO does not include any of the Black world[’s] word on its position....Thus NATO stands for “No African Thoughts or Opinion.” ” On Elon Musk: “Sending shiny phallic rockets into space....But folks instead talking how genius Elon is populating the Hums race.”

Most of the events Chuck D chronicles involve climate change and, especially, gun violence: “40% of the world’s guns owned....400 million guns in a place 300 million call home.” Through his potent combination of images and unapologetically candid words, the author effectively demonstrates one of the great underdiscussed causes of anxiety in the U.S. today: We aren’t safe anywhere. “4 7 Elevens are hit with robbery shooting murder in Southern California,” he writes, “setting off a manhunt making convenience stores nervous on every corner.” Though Hamn comprises only one volume, it’s no less powerful than the sprawling STEWdio. Our reviewer calls it a “focused, fresh, urgent text filled with pictures worth 1,000 words and rhymes worth thousands more.”

Chuck D has been an important advocate for social justice issues since the mid-1980s. In his first two books, he continues that work via a new medium, extending his voice into the literary world, where it should be welcomed and celebrated.

Eric Liebetrau is the nonfiction and managing editor.
“A memorable meditation on hunger for food and love, childhood in a totalitarian regime, and resilience.”

THE HUNGER BOOK
A Memoir From Communist Poland
Brewer, Agata Izabela
Mad Creek/Ohio State Univ. Press
(240 pp.)
$24.95 paper | Sept. 29, 2023
9780814258781

A searing memoir about growing up behind the Iron Curtain, motherhood, addiction, and finding sustenance in the natural world.

As children, Brewer and her younger brother, Tomek, would peel sheets of skin off their fingers and palms—a sign of a vitamin deficiency—and compare who had torn off the most. They grew up in 1980s Poland, a country beset by political unrest and mired in an economic crisis. Store shelves were empty, fuel was scarce, and citizens queued for rations. Consequently, their family did what many rural Polish families have done for generations: forage for mushrooms and wild berries. “Mushroom hunting,” writes Brewer, “is a national sport in Poland.” She wonders whether her mercurial and alcoholic mother intentionally ate a poisonous mushroom to escape “a life she never wanted to live.” That suicide attempt was just one of many over the years. When things got too dicey at home, she and Tomek would walk to their grandparents’ house for food and love. “As with our beloved mushrooms,” writes the author, “my world was both toxic and lifegiving, and I learned to navigate Mother’s land mines, to receive her blows, and to recover on Grandma’s lap, regaining strength to weather the next family crisis.” Interspersed throughout the book are recipes from her childhood, including fish aspic, fermented rye soup, and bigos, a stew of sauerkraut, sausage, and, of course, mushrooms. Brewer’s psychic wounds may have not yet fully healed—“As wpadka, a birth-control accident, I will never know whether I was wanted”—but now a mother herself, she knows firsthand the demands of parenthood and how trauma passed down through generations can leave its mark. She can also recognize different sides of her mother: “her youthful enthusiasm, her love for animals, her sensitivity and creativity.”

A memorable meditation on hunger for food and love, childhood in a totalitarian regime, and resilience.

THE MYSTERIOUS CASE OF RUDOLF DIESEL
Genius, Power, and Deception on the Eve of World War I
Brunt, Douglas
Atria (384 pp.)
$28.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781982169909

A World War I–era tale about an important invention and a mystery surrounding its creator.

In his latest, Brunt, the author of Ghosts of Manhattan, chronicles the life and work of Rudolf Diesel, who disappeared in September 1913. While the word diesel is well known in the English language, most readers know little or nothing about Diesel and the innovative internal combustion engine he invented. The author’s interest in history and politics shines through in his well-researched, engaging book. In addition to describing the

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engine and its applications, Brunt provides a clear picture of Diesel the inventor, the polyglot, the man dreaming of social justice and a peaceful world. “The process of invention is inherently linked to the social and economic challenges of the time,” writes the author, “and inventors like Rudolf Diesel were generally working in response to forces beyond their control.” The text is equally fascinating when the author delineates the pursuits of Kaiser Wilhelm II, John D. Rockefeller, and Winston Churchill, all of whom were factors in Diesel’s life. Brunt’s curiosity about Diesel is contagious even if a good portion of the narrative is about his contemporaries, whether inventors, politicians, or business tycoons. The author’s theory about Diesel’s disappearance rests on this extensive backstory, though it lacks definitive proof and remains confounding. Regardless, Brunt brings readers on a pleasant excursion across Europe and North America, chronicling the stories of German aspirations to trump British naval power and the landscape of the U.S. before it became a true world power. Also intriguing are Diesel’s accurate predictions about pollution, solar power, and even rising nationalism, and the book’s parallels to present-day innovations and their societal and political implications make it a worthy read. After all, Diesel lived in tumultuous times that bear striking similarities to the present.

Weaving together technological, economic, social, and political threads, Brunt offers much to ponder.

**LEADERSHIP IS OVERRATED**

How the Navy SEALs (and Successful Businesses) Create Self-Leading Teams That Win

*Buckett, Kyle & Chris Mefford*

HarperOne (256 pp.)

$29.99 | Aug. 29, 2023

9780063209909

Another entry in the library of special-forces warriors–turned–business gurus, but with many points worth pondering.

“Most people don’t quit their jobs. They quit their bosses.” So write former Navy SEAL Buckett and corporate executive Mefford, who reject the current mania for business-leadership books in favor of what a CEO such as the late Jack Welch would likely consider anarchy: The operative notion is that bosses hinder the more productive organization of loose teams whose members are eager to contribute ideas and actions to the common good, much as military people ideally operate as colleagues in a common enterprise. One exercise to test whether a given civilian enterprise is working as an effective team is “killing the leader,” borrowed from the military as a thought experiment to find out what would happen if the leader were suddenly to be absent, whether because of death, retirement, or vacation. “What we learn from combat,” write the authors, “is that if you are weak, eventually something stronger will come to take you out.” A major contributor to that weakness in the business world, they add, is a bad boss, either uninspiring or incapable—and all too often inclined to petty tyranny. Workers don’t want that, write Buckett and Mefford. Instead, they want to feel as if they’re not cogs in a machine, trusted and as autonomous as possible, with leaders who encourage but don’t interfere. “The solution to workplace dissatisfaction doesn’t lie in high-functioning leaders; it lies in high-performing teams,” they write. The point is well taken not just on the civilian front, but also by scanning the headlines—with, for instance, a democratic Ukraine holding its own against a better-armed and more numerous but poorly led Russian army.

Better than most books in the genre and a welcome manifesto for creating productive workplaces.
“A masterful profile of a most consequential American.”

MILTON FRIEDMAN

The Last Conservative
Burns, Jennifer
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (592 pp.)
$35.00  |  Nov. 14, 2023
9780374601140

The first full-length biography of the 20th century’s free market champion.
To call this book merely a biography of Milton Friedman (1912-2006) is a disservice. It would be difficult to imagine a more comprehensive portrait of the influences, hard economics, and personal struggles and triumphs that shaped his life. From Friedman’s upbringing in New Jersey as the son of Jewish immigrants to his work on economic policy in the federal government during the New Deal, his scholarship at the University of Chicago, and the Nobel Prize in economics, Stanford history professor Burns sets Friedman’s story within the context of the evolution of 20th-century economic theories and the individuals who influenced them, including luminaries such as John Maynard Keynes and Friedrich Hayek. The author examines Friedman’s work with the concepts of monetarism, price theory, and free market capitalism; his conservatism and reliance on tradition and first principles in the development of new economic interpretations; and his association with the American conservative political movement. Burns briefly touches on Friedman’s popular TV series Free to Choose, which gave him an even wider audience. The program, notes the author, “proved a major platform for Friedman’s views, dovetailing with the emergent anti-government, tax-cutting sentiment the Reagan campaign was built on.” Burns also delivers a wonderful profile of the central figure in Friedman’s life, his wife, Rose, a formidable intellect and economist in her own right, in addition to discussing the role several other women economists played in his career. Three generations of women in my family had primarily been single mothers,” she writes. “Three generations of women in my family struggled to make ends meet…. Three generations of women in my family had been in emotionally tumultuous relationships with chaotic men.” When she was younger, the author was drawn to rough, charismatic gang members, and she also bore significant emotional burdens for other family members, becoming “Parentified” — i.e., “enlisted into the role of family caretaker.” However, “acknowledging my own experience as a Parentified Child was never about pointing fingers or assigning blame,” she writes. “Parentification is rarely done with care advocate and policy adviser, breaking a multigenerational cycle of poverty, domestic abuse, and limited education was “a radical act of healing.” In this memoir, she aims to correct the “sugar-coated, stereotypical narrative about social mobility and the American Dream.” After years of therapy for trauma-induced anxiety, panic attacks, and suicidal thoughts, the author has learned to recognize symptoms and syndromes that she could not identify when she was growing up. Campoverdi maps out some of the emotional relationships in her family, especially the experiences of the women. “Three generations of women in my family had primarily been single mothers,” she writes. “Three generations of women in my family struggled to make ends meet…. Three generations of women in my family had been in emotionally tumultuous relationships with chaotic men.” When she was younger, the author was drawn to rough, charismatic gang members, and she also bore significant emotional burdens for other family members, becoming “Parentified” — i.e., “enlisted into the role of family caretaker.” However, “acknowledging my own experience as a Parentified Child was never about pointing fingers or assigning blame,” she writes. “Parentification is rarely done with
malicious intent, and in my case, I truly believe that everyone was doing the best they could with what they knew and had.” Campoverdi was a high achiever, and she earned degrees at USC and Harvard’s Kennedy School. Despite enormous debt, she was sure that her big-name education was “the single most powerful professional ‘validator’ I could earn.” Ultimately, the “breakaway guilt” of succeeding where her family did not humbled her, and she went on to great success in politics, health care activism, and documentary production. In this psychologically astute work, the author calls out her difficult childhood experiences in order to demonstrate how to overcome stigma and trauma.

An inspiring story and an invaluable resource for first-generation immigrant children striving for success in America.

BRUSHED ASIDE
The Untold Story of Women in Art
Charney, Noah
Rowman & Littlefield (232 pp.)
$45.00 | Oct. 15, 2023
9781538170991

An encyclopedic series of short biographies focused on overlooked women in art history.

In this “herstory,” Charney, a professor of art history and author of The Devil in the Gallery and The Collector of Lives, aims to “teach the history of art using only female artists.” While he succeeds at finding representatives for each major historical movement, the author frequently leans too far into his subjects’ lives and omits descriptions of their work. The book is underillustrated, many features are forgettable due to their lack of visual information, and Charney rarely paints a picture with his prose. This is particularly frustrating as he explicitly touts the importance of balancing biography with art appreciation. Regarding Judith and Holofernes, a violent work by baroque master Artemisia Gentileschi that was likely influenced by her own history of sexual abuse, Charney writes, “this masterpiece should be considered as a great artwork unto itself, avoiding an over-focus on Artemisia’s biography that turns the work’s analysis into a revenge fantasy while ignoring its technical brilliance.” Despite this, much of the text is too focused on biography. To his credit, Charney offers a unique twist and expands the scope of his history to include women patrons and collectors, many of whom were instrumental in the formation of major museums. He closes with a new take on Linda Nochlin’s 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” offering a lukewarm urge to reframe the discussion. He finds her argument “concerning, potentially destructive to the art historical narrative, to empowering women, to giving credit to those heroines of the past. The same point can be made in a supportive, inclusive way.” Unfortunately, Charney’s book falls short of being empowering, as the cascading biographies eclipse the spirit of his subjects. Readers intrigued by the subject should turn to Katy Hessel’s The Story of Art Without Men.

A well-intentioned but underdeveloped new perspective in art’s discourse.

I WASN’T SUPPOSED TO BE HERE
Conyers, Jonathan
Legacy Lit/Hachette (320 pp.)
$29.00 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781538742501

A heartfelt memoir about overcoming long odds to rise from poverty, dysfunction, and the tyranny of low expectations.
Conyers takes his title from a terrible fact: His mother, addicted to crack cocaine, wanted to terminate the pregnancy, but her medical problems would have put her at too much risk. “My mother reluctantly agreed to keep the baby, but she didn’t stop smoking crack,” he writes. “Neither did my father.” His father wound up in jail, while his mother shuffled between housing projects in New York and a crime-riddled neighborhood near Virginia Beach. When he “started to learn that my parents’ devotion to their drug habit was stronger than their devotion to me,” Conyers resolved to live by his considerable wits, helped along by teachers who tried to keep him off the streets. Even so, he writes, “being smart and doing sports weren’t going to keep me safe or alive in the South Bronx,” which required the protection of a gang. The author drifted between often brilliant but occasionally indifferent moments in school until he wandered into a debate class and found that he was a natural fit for a competitive art that relied in equal parts on hard facts, diligent research, and meaningful emotional argument. Throughout, as he stresses, he selected and populated the proverbial village that would raise him, paying attention—if sometimes grudgingly, in weaker moments—to mentors who gave him memorable advice, such as one principal who said, “If you stay ready, you don’t have to get ready when opportunity comes your way.” Conyers seized those opportunities, taking another teacher’s advice “not to give up or wait for the world to change its rules for me,” becoming a respiratory therapist and attentively raising a strong family of his own while cultivating the extended family he celebrates, among them a childhood friend who, long imprisoned, “is still part of my village.”

Inspirational but never sentimental, with many lessons on “adding value to the world.”
When 48-year-old Darrin Bell—a Pulitzer Prize–winning editorial cartoonist maybe best known for his syndicated work that unapologetically explores various social and political issues—was a boy, he desperately wanted a water gun. His mother bought him one, but something was off: The toy was green. It looked utterly fake.

When Bell protested—“Why doesn’t it look like a real gun?”—his mother, who’s white, said that her decision just might save her Black son’s life. “The world is...different for you and your brother,” she explained. “White people won’t see you or treat you the way they do little white boys.” They won’t see “pure innocence,” Bell recalled, paraphrasing his mother, but rather “a threat to be dealt with.”

Bell’s captivating new graphic memoir, *The Talk* (Henry Holt, June 6), is filled with these kinds of stories—stories from his childhood and adulthood that informed his understanding of the often brutal realities of race and racism in the U.S.

In a starred review, Kirkus called *The Talk* “a beautifully drawn book, rich with insight, humor, and hard-won knowledge.” Bell and I exchanged emails about his latest work. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Why did you decide to create *The Talk* at this point in your life?

This wasn’t the book I’d set out to create. I wrote a story about three generations of Black men in my family, and that’s the one I’d sold to the publisher as part of a two-book deal (the topic of a second book was TBD). I wanted to write that story for my children. But when the police murdered George Floyd and the summer of protest began, I felt that this story needed to be told first. I thought that my children needed this story more, while they’re still young. I wanted it to be something we could read together while having the talk and something they could someday read to their own future children, when the time comes.

You explore a variety of racist incidents, from your encounter with the cop who freaked out over the green water gun to the college classmates who insisted that, actually, “colonialism was GOOD for Africa.” What is it about a cartoon that makes it a uniquely powerful vehicle to interrogate these kinds of experiences?

A picture tells a thousand words. We think in both words and images, so we’re hard-wired to respond to cartoons and to sequential art. When a cartoon or graphic novel has both words and images, it resonates in both sides of our brains. It creates a message that’s bigger than the sum of its parts.

Was there a story in *The Talk* that was particularly challenging to revisit?
The chapter “Scenes” was the most challenging, because I had to grapple with a profound sense of guilt over how little I appreciated what my mom did for us when my brother and I were kids. She was protecting me, but all she got from me in return was me being embarrassed and ungrateful. As I created that chapter, I had to relive those feelings in order to convey them. But as an adult with the benefit of hindsight, it was hard to relive those childhood feelings without being ashamed of them. When I finished the chapter, I called my mom and thanked her and told her that I think that a lot of readers may come away from *The Talk* seeing her as the hero of my story—because she is.

Many of the panels in this book have a blue, brooding wash. This made me wonder: Do you locate your style or approach within a particular artistic tradition or aesthetic tendency?

I guess you could say that it’s in the tradition of storyboard art. Aside from my comic strip “Candorville” and my editorial cartoons, I also freelanced as a storyboard artist for a while. Storyboards generally dispense with unnecessary color and opt for tones and washes, only using other colors when necessary. In *The Talk*, I used full color for the TV screens in the department store, for police lights, and for a few other things to signify what I was focused intently on at the time.

**Could you tell us a bit about the process of making *The Talk*?**

My editor [Retha Powers] and I talked through the story in a single phone call, and then I sat down and outlined it, breaking it into chapters—about 40 of them. Then I wrote and sketched one chapter at a time, in order. I sent Retha each chapter when it was done and waited for her notes before moving on to the next one. The first draft of the book was over 640 pages.

Once I turned that in and Retha sat with it for a while, she told me which storylines she thought were unnecessary. This seemed to be almost as painful for her as it was for me, because those cut storylines added a whole other dimension to the book. But ultimately I agreed that that’s why they needed to go. Without them, the story is more focused and effective. Besides, Retha made the point that those cut chapters would work better in the next book, and I think that she was right. After I came to terms with the cuts, I drew the final pages.

When I read this book, I was struck by how much space you give for the entire scope of Black humanity. This reminded me of how, far too often, Black people aren’t given much dimensionality in popular culture. **What are your thoughts on this?**

This is true, unless people know where to look. I’m old enough to remember a media landscape where Black people were almost exclusively used as two-dimensional window dressing on most TV shows and most films. We still are. The vast majority of executives and creatives in Hollywood are white, so they’re writing what they see, not what they experience. But there’s been progress. HBO’s *Girls* was raked over the coals for its depiction of an almost entirely white Manhattan (I guess that it was the same NYC seen in *Sex and the City*), but HBO also streamed Issa Rae’s *Insecure*, which was several seasons of in-depth character studies. It was funny, poignant, heartbreaking at times, and nuanced. There are many others.

I feel that it’s part of a trend that began in the late 1980s, with Bill Cosby’s *A Different World*. It was a subversive sitcom, in that it had characters who seemed to embody familiar—even clownish, at times—stereotypes (probably to appeal to white audiences who were comfortable with them), but over time, they snuck in a lot of nuance and fully fleshed out the characters. I believe that about three years later it inspired *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, in which some of the most prominent characters (Will and Uncle Phil) made that transition into nuanced, multidimensional characters in the final seconds of the very first episode. Then there was a show called *Roc* and another called *Soul Food* (based on the movie). A generation of writers and producers who were raised on those shows created recent shows, such as *Queen Sugar*, *The Chi*, *Atlanta*, *Black-ish*, *Being Mary Jane*, *Pose*, *Empire*, and more.

Too often, Black people are done a disservice in pop culture. That’s why shows, films, books, and graphic novels that present the full range of humanity shine like diamonds in a sandbox.
THE BLUE MACHINE
How the Ocean Works
Czerski, Helen
Norton (416 pp.)
$32.50 | Oct. 3, 2023
9781324006718

An eclectic collection of essays exploring the ocean and its impact on the lives of humans.

In a book replete with diagrams and illustrations, London-based physicist and oceanographer Czerski, author of Storm in a Teacup, begins by discussing what “the blue machine” is and how it works. The major physical influences include temperature, salinity, density, and spin. The author continues by discussing the shape of the ocean, including the historical debate regarding continental drift and evidence that the first Americans passed along a coastal route 16,000 years ago. She also shares her complaint regarding the sentiment that “We know more about the Moon/Mars than we do about the deep sea” and explains why it is untrue. Some of Czerski’s most fascinating explorations are below the surface: She writes intriguingly about the “messengers” of the blue machine, light and sound, as well as the “passengers” and “voyagers” of the ocean, such as plankton, penguins, turtles, seabirds, and fish. Finally, Czerski discusses the future of the ocean and asks us to consider our relationship with it, noting that science must play the leading role in guiding our actions. The burning of fossil fuels and changing land use have led to an energy imbalance, which ends in the ocean with heat. “More than 90 per cent of all the additional energy accumulating on Earth because of human changes to the climate system has ended up in the ocean as heat,” she writes. Furthermore, “with a deeper knowledge of the ocean comes the responsibility to be good citizens of our ocean planet. The benefit of hindsight tells us that, for the most part, we have not been good citizens over the past two hundred years.” The book is packed with statistics, which may deter some readers, but diligent environmentalists will be pleased with the author’s rigor.

A compelling read for science buffs and ocean enthusiasts.

LARRY MCMURTRY
A Life
Daugherty, Tracy
St. Martin’s (560 pp.)
$35.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781250282330

The late Pulitzer Prize–winning Texas novelist receives a thoughtful yet appropriate critical treatment in the hands of literary biographer Daugherty.

Larry McMurtry (1936-2021) once said that he was “drawn to stories of vanishing crafts…or trades,” such as cowboying and bookselling. The Last Picture Show (1966) was a perfect example, a depiction of a tiny crossroads town in north Texas, where McMurtry grew up, where there was nothing for young people to do and, with the death of the town’s moral heart and patriarch, no hope for a brighter future. The author got out of that town, Archer City, as soon as he could, partly to get away from a malevolent father who had little sympathy for his bookish son’s interests. So it was that McMurtry wound up in Houston, teaching at Rice University and scouting for books while building the wherewithal for a bookshop of his own. He frequently retreated to back rooms and moldy basements to write, and if Sherman Alexie criticized his later revisionist Western Lonesome Dove as colonial, McMurtry gave voice to many a voiceless Texan, especially the taciturn, repressed women of his small-town youth. Daugherty, who has chronicled the lives of Donald Barthelme, Joan Didion, and Joseph Heller, is a perceptive critic who isn’t shy pointing out that McMurtry’s literary output was of decidedly mixed quality. He would write a classic like Last Picture Show, then follow it up with a sequel—or, in this case, several sequels—that tended to make the collective whole weaker. McMurtry’s vision of the disappearing frontier and of the dead-end hamlets...
that followed it yielded his best work (including *Horseman, Pass By* and *Streets of Laredo*), but his later-in-life projects with partner Diana Ossana on screenplays such as *Brokeback Mountain* will endure, too. Despite his frequent ill temper and hermetic tendencies, McMurtry emerges as a well-rounded, if quirky human—and certainly a memorable one.

A definitive life of the novelist/bookseller/scriptwriter/curmudgeon of interest to any McMurtry fan.

**THE INTERNET CON**

*How To Seize the Means of Computation*

Doctorow, Cory

Verso (192 pp.)

$19.95 | Sept. 5, 2023

9781804291245

A meaty manifesto for, among other things, returning the internet to the public domain.

“This is a book for people who want to destroy Big Tech,” writes free-speech advocate and science-fiction writer Doctorow. “It’s not a book for people who want to tame Big Tech. There’s no fixing Big Tech.” Do you hate Facebook? Most people do, notes the author, but we’re on the platform by way of the process of “network effects”—i.e., we are there because our friends are there, and our friends are there because we’re there—and no one wants to be the first to jump off. Still, Doctorow adds, there are ways to fight today’s tech giants. One example comes

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—Jeff Riley Author of *Big Time: The People, The Places & The Game of Oregon 8-Man Football*

"One of the most useful sections in the book is a list of common mistakes students make... ‘Please don’t use the word passion in your college essay. Period. Instead, show me what passion led you to do:’"

“A straightforward guide that makes use of the author’s extensive experience.”

—Kirkus Reviews

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from Apple, which for years endured a Microsoft Word that was so flawed outside the Windows platform that it lost computer sales to Microsoft by virtue of those same network effects. People who relied on a reliable version of Word for their livelihoods stuck to PCs even if they hated them. The solution: Steve Jobs tasked a group of programmers with reverse-engineering Microsoft Office—figuring out how the program worked from the ground up—and then doing Office one better by creating the software suite originally called iWork, which could open Word documents. The result was that “Microsoft gave up” and turned Office into an open format. Doctorow revisits other stories that were less successful—Napster, for example, which revived long-out-of-print music but was crushed by a litigious recording industry, a success story that should have been but came up against the forces of monopoly and the legal system that makes it possible. Doctorow calls for more reverse-engineering, more “adversarial interoperability,” and more decentralized social media platforms such as Mastodon that, incidentally, are less likely to harbor trolls and Nazis.

A small-l libertarian battle cry for a technology that’s truly liberating, just as its pioneers intended.

**ROCKET MEN**

_The Black Quarterbacks Who Revolutionized Pro Football_
_Eisenberg, John_
_Basic Books (416 pp.)_
_$32.00 | Sept. 5, 2023_
_9781541600409_

A history of the agonizingly slow acceptance of Black quarterbacks in professional football.

Who recognizes the name Frederick Douglass “Fritz” Pollard? A Black Illinoisan born in 1895, Pollard was taught by his parents “to interact respectfully with whites but also to stand up for themselves when necessary.” As veteran sportswriter Eisenberg notes, he later became “the NFL’s first Black quarterback” as well as “the first Black player to participate in the game that became known as the Rose Bowl...and the first Black head coach in the NFL.” Pollard is not better known because after his time on the field, which ended in the mid-1920s, Black players were frozen out of the game, “and by the time the tiniest trickle of Black players resurfaced after World War II, the quarterback position had evolved, emerging as football’s most glamorous and complex role, deemed so important and challenging that owners and coaches would not dare trust a Black man with it.” That lack of trust was born of pure racism, of course, and the unfounded assumption that Black players lacked the intelligence to captain a team. Eventually, players such as Buffalo’s James Harris proved that assumption wrong—though Harris, a star college player, was selected No. 148th in the NFL draft, “a slap in the face.” Finally, in 1974, then with the Los Angeles Rams, Harris “became the first Black quarterback to start an NFL playoff game.” It would be another decade before two Black quarterbacks faced each other. Two decades after that, when Michael Vick ran afoul of the law, Black players were again effectively frozen out of the position. Now, of course, the situation has changed utterly: Aaron Rodgers, Eisenberg points out, is the NFL’s highest-paid player, but after him come four “Black quarterbacks with contracts worth more than $1 billion combined.”

A vigorously told story of the battle for equity on the gridiron, a battle that is still playing out.

**TALKING TO MY ANGELS**

_A Memoir_
_Etheridge, Melissa_
_Harper Wave (288 pp.)_
_$32.00 | Sept. 5, 2023_
_9780063257450_

New Age–tinged memoir by lesbian rock icon Etheridge, recounting the highs and lows of a long career.

To paraphrase French philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “I am a spiritual being having a human experience,” writes Etheridge. She’s
also a survivor of many a rough patch, from seeking the approval of an emotionally distant mother who considered her queer identity a "psychological illness" to kicking cancer and enduring a couple of very ugly breakups—and, worst of all, the death of a son to a fentanyl overdose. Etheridge's book of revelations begins on a heady note, her mind on a hard-earned vacation courtesy of a whole bunch of pot-laced cookies. She had an epiphany that "love is within us and all around us" and that maybe she didn't have to try so hard. Still, for all the past-life-regressing and consultations of astrological charts, the author seems to be a get-it-done, practical-minded Midwesterner with no end to her work ethic. Would-be songwriters stand to learn quite a bit from studying her process as well as the pointers from those who taught her—e.g., a jazz guitarist who instructed, "Doesn't matter what notes you play. Just never go out of time." It took a while for Etheridge to hit the big time, but she amassed enough material over years of hard work that she could field an at-home pandemic concert series every night for a month without repeating herself. Another lesson she discusses is the importance of connecting with one's spiritual being, "assisted, of course, by ingesting a lot of cannabis."

On that note, Etheridge serves up a meaningful, even helpful elaboration of Don Miguel Ruiz's famed "four agreements," the last of which should form the heart of anyone's life practices: "Just do your best, always."

A must for Etheridge fans, with plenty of lessons for striving musicians.

A MYRIAD OF TONGUES
How Languages Reveal Differences in How We Think
Caleb Everett, Caleb Everett
Harvard Univ. (288 pp.) $27.95 | Sept. 19, 2023 9780674976580

An expansive look at how humans communicate.

Everett, a professor of anthropology and psychology and author of Numbers
and the Making of Us, offers an enlightening examination of human communication based on the findings of linguist field-workers—himself included—as well as researchers in areas such as cognitive psychology, data science, and respiratory medicine. Whereas early theories about language commonalities and evolution were largely based on languages spoken in “Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies,” a wider range of inquiry into more than 7,000 languages has revealed “unexpected and profound” linguistic and cognitive diversity. The author discusses variations in words designating time and space, noting that “some aspects of time that seem so ‘natural’ to us English speakers may seem unnatural to speakers of many other languages.” Some languages have no tenses to indicate past, present, and future, while others have more than three tenses. Similarly, even within similar environments, “people talk about space in sometimes unpredictable ways”—e.g., using egocentric or geocentric ways of referring to spatial orientation. In denoting kinship, too, languages may vary according to the speaker’s relationship to another individual. In languages that have gendered nouns (Spanish, French, German), categorization of people and objects is motivated, “in some cases but not in others, by associations with biological sex.” Everett draws on abundant research investigating sensory words, such as those referring to color, taste, and smell, to reveal great variety “across the world’s languages. He identifies WEIRD languages as having a particularly “impoverished language of smells.” Physiognomy and environment contribute to linguistic diversity as well. “The relationship between bite type and labiodental consonants,” writes the author, “ultimately hints at a relationship between the environments in which people live and some of the sounds they use to distinguish their thoughts when communicating.” Surprisingly, though, one word seems universal, “conveying a common thought in a predictable phonetic package”—the monosyllabic “huh.”

An engaging, informative overview of interesting linguistic matters.

**CHARLIE CHAPLIN VS. AMERICA**

*When Art, Sex, and Politics Collided*

Eymon, Scott

Simon & Schuster (432 pp.)

$29.99 | Oct. 31, 2023

9781982176358

A history of the ideological, cultural, and personal campaign against the motion picture industry’s most independent and incandescent light of the 20th century.

Eymon, author of biographies of Cary Grant, John Wayne, John Ford, and other major names in film history, presents a beautifully composed and unique look at how Chaplin was characterized as an immoral sexual deviant and Soviet-sympathizing subversive. The author vividly documents the federal government’s relentless pursuit of Chaplin, particularly the notorious House Un-American Affairs Committee and J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI, whose file on Chaplin grew to 1,900 pages, many of which were leaked to the artist’s most mendacious and vociferous antagonists in the press. Eymon also showcases his keen knowledge of filmmaking by dissecting and analyzing Chaplin’s work, particularly focusing on specific elements of his most socially significant productions: the darker, farcical aspects of capitalism in *Modern Times*; the anti-Nazi sendup of Hitler in *The Great Dictator*, which found him besieged by the isolationist U.S. government, the British government, and the Nazis themselves; and the audience-disappointing *Verdoux*, the idea for which Chaplin purchased from Orson Welles. Eymon’s insightful, articulate approach illuminates the fruits of his lifelong research, whether he is discussing Chaplin’s grilling during a paternity suit in which he was wrongly convicted (which gave aid and comfort to his enemies); his hands-on directing and the graceful athleticism of his acting; or the consistency of his somewhat naïve political views amid the tectonic shifts in American political sentiment following World War II. While Eymon clearly admires Chaplin, he does not descend into idolatry. The author starkly portrays Chaplin’s personal shortcomings and idiosyncrasies as well as his winning, losing, and recapturing of his audience. Eymon also shows his happiness and domestic tranquility in his marriage to Oona O'Neill, whom he wed when he was 54 and she 18, a situation that established another launching pad for public outrage.

A brilliant must-read about the epic and turbulent life and times of a cinematic titan.
Inc. in San Francisco. “For a little gay boy from Toledo, San Francisco was Disneyland or Oz,” he writes. “It only existed in dreams and movies.” He continued on to upper management jobs at Lands’ End, Disney, Claire’s, and Dreamworks, where he was global head of consumer products and further developed a leadership philosophy fostering curiosity, learning skills, and, above all, acceptance of the changing realities of the corporate landscape. Employing a sincere, affable tone, Fielding addresses many issues involving social justice, and he never masks his increasing frustration with the politicization of the queer community’s struggle. He also shares an emotional segment about caring for his mother as she dealt with early stage dementia. Throughout this encouraging book, Fielding inspires leaders of all sizes and colors to embrace diversity, build community, and use intuition to fight against social injustice and intolerance. The author is also realistic: “While some days are better than others, the fight is truly never over.”

Accessible, compassionate business and life advice from a prominent queer corporate leader.

Loud, long-overdue applause for some of pop music’s most talented singers.

In this collaboration, Flam, a New York City–based writer and interior designer, and Liebowitz, author of the poetry collection National Park, unfold an extensive oral history of the many dynamic girl groups from roughly 1950 to 1970. These groups, usually comprised of young Black women, represent a powerful era of popular music that often goes unrecognized. Many readers may recognize such individuals as Darlene Love or Shirley Alston Reeves or recall groups singing backup for Sam Cooke, but the importance of these women to modern music has been downplayed. Groups like the Chantels, the Blossoms, the Shirelles, the Vandellas, and more performed an array of memorable songs. The authors state their purpose of applauding these young women who were often seen as “fleeting investments by a music industry that gave them remarkably shortened careers.” Many of them experienced extreme abusive control from management as well as racism while touring. This oral history, based on more than 100 interviews, offers a well-selected, lively collection of interviews, and the authors allow the primary players to tell their own stories. Readers will form a fellowship with each of these young women as they rehash their compelling careers. Famous songwriters and performers such as Cher, Carole King, and Whoopi Goldberg chime in to either build on a particular story or to explain the relevance of a specific musician or group. Goldberg sums it up well: “I think that particular time with The Supremes, The Marvelettes, and Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, that was a really moving and shifting time in the country as well as in neighborhoods and realizing that there was no door that could keep you out if you were willing to knock the door open.”

A fast-paced, welcome celebration of groups that have been “at risk of erasure from the canon of pop music history.”
A conclave of writers gathers to consider the late Larry McMurtry (1936–2021).

“He was the first novelist I read who took Texas seriously but not reverently, who made it possible for me to see my own state as fair game, as a legitimate literary place that I didn't have to feel self-conscious in either writing from or about.” So writes Stephen Harrigan, novelist and historian, who is among the better known of the writers who reflect on and remember McMurtry's life and work. A number of themes emerge. One is the lonely nature of small-town life in Texas, which afforded McMurtry material for his breakthrough novel, The Last Picture Show; another is the author's essential place in the literature of Show–time steely fellow in real life. Informed by a herpetologist, McMurtry “just looked at my friend as if he were staring at a blank wall.” As Joe Specht writes, nor did McMurtry ever work on an oil drilling rig, which explains why he sometimes got the language of oilmen wrong. He may have been ornery and sometimes hermetic; however, as his longtime writing partner Diana Ossana notes, he was also loyal and kind. Above all, he was a reader, famed for turning his hometown of Archer City into a town of concatenated bookstores. Indeed, he did his seven-days-per-week of work writing five pages—no more, no less—first thing in the morning so that he could get back to reading, and his advice to would-be novelists was always the same: “Read, read, read.” Other contributors include Sarah Bird, Geoff Dyer, and Alfredo Corchado, and the book features an introduction by the editor and a foreword by novelist Stephen Graham Jones.

Sprinkled with surprising revelations, this is a good collection for every McMurtry fan's library.

In this compelling account, Goodheart, author of 1861: The Civil War Awakening, takes readers to the Andaman Islands, a remote Indian archipelago located in the Bay of Bengal. The inhabitants of these islands lived largely in isolation prior to the establishment of a British penal colony in 1858, unsurprisingly bringing with them a series of epidemics to the Native peoples. Goodheart focuses on North Sentinel Island, located at the southwestern tip of the archipelago, whose hunter-gatherer inhabitants have been particularly resistant to outsider interference and are often mistaken for cannibals. While the origins of the Sentinelese are unclear, their branch of the human species remained separate from others for perhaps 50,000 years. In 2018, North Sentinel Island drew the attention of the world following the death of John Chau, an American missionary who was killed by the Sentinelese when he visited the island in an attempt to convert them to Christianity. Goodheart recounts stories of individuals who have been drawn to the Andaman Islands as well as stories from his own two expeditions. He reveals disturbing details about the 1879 visit by Maurice Vidal Portman, replete with images that Portman captured. According to his diaries, Portman admitted his efforts to befriend the Sentinelese were unsuccessful and had in fact “increase[ed] their general terror of, and hostility to, all comers.” Goodheart ably captures the mystery of the place. “When I started thinking about North Sentinel Island,” he writes, “I saw it as a place somehow exempt from this conception of time, a place that both was history and also lay outside history.” Nonetheless, time has taken a toll: In 1858, the population of the Andaman Islands was estimated to be roughly 5,000. By 1931, it was 460, with the Sentinelese perhaps numbering “fifty souls.”

A thrilling book that will leave you contemplating the concept of civilization.
requires, and the particular challenges facing LGBTQ+ youth living in poverty. These are all important issues, and Goyal is an undeniably compassionate guide, but his cultural commentary doesn’t quite address any one issue with enough depth. The author remains focused on the teens who make their way through El Centro, and their stories are powerful, both heart-breaking and checkerered with hope. The personal narratives lend intimate context to numerous systemic issues, and the threads about Emmanuel are particularly original and memorable. However, Goyal does not offer a truly clear lens through which to understand his main characters’ stories: Has El Centro saved them, allowed other schools to shirk their responsibilities, or served simply as a checked box? Perhaps the uncertainty of that answer is the point, but many readers may be left wanting more. One can expect that as his academic career matures and his research about and relationships with his subjects deepen, Goyal will be a forceful contributor to the work on many of the devastatingly and frustratingly intertwined topics he is only able to touch on in this book.

A well-intentioned, straightforward narrative that teases the complexity of a series of societal issues.

PASSIONATE MOTHERS, POWERFUL SONS
The Lives of Jennie Jerome Churchill and Sara Delano Roosevelt
Gray, Charlotte
Simon & Schuster (368 pp.)
$29.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781668031971

A portrait of the mothers who nurtured two prominent politicians.

Canadian historian Gray, author of Mrs. King and Sisters in the Wilderness, draws on abundant sources to create an engaging dual biography of Jennie Jerome Churchill (1854-1921), mother of Winston, and Sara Delano Roosevelt (1854-1941), mother of Franklin. The two had markedly different personalities, but “the examples of resilience, acumen, and loyalty that Jennie and Sara set, the initiatives they took, the impressive support that they provided, and the networks they built, helped mold their sons’ characters and careers.” Gray recounts each woman’s family background, childhood, and young adulthood, when each met her husband. Jennie, 19, “shapely and coquettish,” met 24-year-old Lord Randolph Churchill on a yacht where they were guests of the Prince and Princess of Wales; Sara was 26 when she married James Roosevelt, a widower twice her age, whom she had met at a small dinner party. For Jennie, the marriage meant entry into British aristocracy; for Sara, it meant alliance with a prestigious Knickerbocker family, though one not as wealthy as her own. Jennie’s first son was born seven months after the wedding; Sara’s only child—she was advised, after a difficult delivery, to have no more—was born in 1882. “Knowing there would be no more babies, she dedicated herself to protecting the one she had,” writes Gray. “From the day of his birth, her son would be the center of her attention.” Jennie’s marriage, like her husband’s political career, was stormy. The couple was always in debt, due in part to Jennie’s expensive tastes. “Her zest in spending was one of her charms,” a friend commented. Both were widowed in their 40s. While Jennie’s flirtatiousness and three marriages led gossips to call her a “wicked seductress,” Sara’s imperiousness made her daughter-in-law, Eleanor, portray her as “snobbish, domineering, and unkind.” Gray sees those stereotypes as ill-fitting, convincingly portraying her subjects as ambitious, astute, and determined.

A sympathetic portrait of formidable women.
As a TV news reporter, Gutman has built a reputation not only as a thrill-seeker who has “swum with anacondas in the Amazon and tiger sharks in the Bahamas,” but also for displaying “joyful fearlessness” in the face of every conceivable disaster. Yet his trademark imperturbability belied a struggle with a panic disorder that stemmed from a fear of presenting on live TV. Gutman dismissed his problem as “just nerves” until a diagnosis of panic disorder made him try all conventional “cures” available, including antidepressants, ADHD and anti-seizure medication, mindfulness, and meditation. When nothing—including indulgence in superstitions—worked, he transformed himself into a “human laboratory experiment.” He tried less orthodox approaches like hypnosis and breathwork, both of which propelled him onto a “road less traveled” to healing. His openness to more unconventional treatment methods increased, and he began visits in earnest to healer-guides in the U.S. and South America. One, a clinical nurse in San Francisco, plied Gutman with psilocybin mushrooms that helped him access suppressed memories and feelings. Another, whom he met at an ayahuasca retreat in Peru, poisoned his system with tiny amounts of toad venom to induce bodily purification. Two doctors in Ojai, California, gave Gutman doses of ketamine that helped him understand as never before the need to “release control” and move toward “self-forgiveness and tenderness.” The author’s condition ultimately improved—not because one psychedelic had helped more than the other, but because all his experiences led to the “emotional surrender” that brought him the better inner balance he had been seeking. Both warm and candid, this book is sure to offer helpful doses of hope, humor, and wisdom to anyone suffering from panic disorder.

Insightful reading.

THE SUBVERSIVE SEVENTIES
Hardt, Michael
Oxford Univ. (304 pp.)
$27.95 | Sept. 6, 2023
9780197674659

An academic inquiry into the democratic impulse behind the progressive and revolutionary movements of the 1970s.

Whereas the social movements of the 1960s “marked the end of an era,” those of the subsequent decade “mark the beginning of our time,” writes Hardt, a professor of political theory in the literature program at Duke. “Subversives” spent the decade “challenging authority, laying siege to the established order, undermining the time-honored way of life.” Most importantly, they combined political activism with “autonomous democratic social project[s]” meant to create “a new society.” The strategy was to “dismantle and overthrow the social structures of domination” and experiment with new forms of work, collective governance, and property ownership. The movements avoided hierarchical decision-making, pursued autonomy from the state and capitalism, refused to prioritize one form of inequality and oppression (e.g., worker exploitation) over another (e.g., women’s liberation),
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articated the intersectionality of injustice, and embraced the
strategic multiplicities essential to collective struggle. Hardt
offers numerous examples from around the world: peasant lib-
eration in Nicaragua; the Kwangju uprising against military dic-
tatorship in South Korea; the Black Consciousness Movement
in South Africa; opposition to the building of Narita airport 50
miles outside of Tokyo; Black autocorporo insurgency in the U.S.;
anti-colonial movements in Portuguese colonies; and gay libera-
tion in the U.K.; among many others. So threatening were these
movements that states abandoned mediation and reform for
violence and repression, and capitalists redirected investment
to nonunionized, low-wage countries. Although many of these
movements failed to realize their goals, Hardt insists that “we
need to analyze and appreciate [them] relatively independently
from the resulting outcomes.” Here were the seeds for greater
autonomy, recognition of the multiplicity of life, heightened
democracy, and personal and collective liberation, “the master
concept for the era.”

In this major contribution to movement politics, Hardt
deftly combines inspirational stories with strategic insights.

A cautionary tale from the counter-
cultural past, full of revolutionary glory
and ugly criminality.

In 1963, Gary Goodson (1945-1978) left his home in Phoenix,
Arizona, to study business at the University of Utah. Discharged
from the Air Force for perceived psychological problems,
Goodson transformed himself into Thomas King Forçade—the
latter tellingly pronounced to rhyme with facade—and found his
fortune in two parallel careers. The first, writes former Entertain-
ment Weekly editor Howe, was taking over the operations of a
faltering alternative-press venture called the Underground Press
Syndicate, whose purpose was “to pool the resources of dozens of
budget-crunchcd publications, to share the content and revenue
from national advertising deals.” Forçade’s new career soon drew
the attention of the Phoenix police and their own underground,
a network of outwardly groovy informants, and then, in time,
the Secret Service and the FBI. One of Forçade’s most glori-
ous moments as a muckraking journalist was demanding White
House and other governmental access for underground newspa-
pers, prevailing in a court case that, Howe notes, was cited as
precedent when the Trump White House tried to expel journal-
ist Jim Acosta nearly half a century later. A revolutionary rabble-
rouser with ties to the Yippie offshoot called the Zippies, and
on the enemy’s list of older activists such as Abbie Hoffman and
Allen Ginsberg, Forçade proved a brilliant firebrand. He was
also a good capitalist, playing both sides of the legal fence. He
smuggled and sold drugs of all kinds and, in 1974, launched the
magazine High Times, born, according to one account, when “we
were sitting around getting stoned on nitrous oxide and laugh-
ing gas one day when someone said ‘Hey, why not write about
getting high?’ ” The magazine was instantly successful, which
oddly seemed to accelerate Forçade’s downward psychologi-

cal spiral and its tragic conclusion. It adds up to an impossibly
tangled drama, but Howe chronicles it expertly.

A fascinating resurrection from the dark side of the 196os
and ‘7os.

The author recounts the shocking abuses she suffered at a boarding ac-
demy and takes aim at the “Troubled Teen Industry.”

“What you will read here is upsetting,” writes Ianelli, “espe-
cially if you have suffered abuse….This is not a story of trauma
but of triumph over trauma.” At age 15, the author was com-
mitted to the Family Foundation School, a boarding academy
in rural New York that incorporated anger and violence into
its troubled-teen program. “The Family is not unique. You need
to understand that,” the author writes. “The Family is a pin-
hole is a multibillion-dollar industry that uses the same basic
approaches, mindsets, and techniques on ‘troubled’ teens. Pro-
longed restraint, beatings, starvation, savage verbal attacks…
this is standard stuff.” Punishments included moving huge
rocks back and forth from one pile to another for consecutive
days as well as digging graves. Despite its facade as a high school,
writes the author, “there were no classes my first year.” Ianelli
describes being sodomized by a violent cook in the school
kitchen. After the school priest (“that former Catholic piece
of shit”) failed to help her, she was locked in the boiler room,
taped inside a blanket, eating from a dog bowl. As the author
recounts, the horrific abuse continued. “The abuse becomes
the reason not to believe the abuse, and the worse the abuse,
the more the story is disbelieved,” she writes. Although efforts
by the author and fellow survivors contributed to the Family
being shuttered in 2014, she writes, “This abuse is happening today,
right now, as you read this. The Troubled Teen Industry that cre-
ated and enabled the Family is still here, as massive as ever.”

Online, Ianelli uses the identity Survivor993, “for the number
of days I’d been imprisoned at the Family,” and she now lives in
an undisclosed location.

A devastating explication of widespread overlooked abuse
and a call for change that must be heeded.
Get the ultimate inside scoop on the best new books.

Scan the QR Code to listen now:

New episode every Tuesday
As always, the author offers much food for thought about a variety of geopolitical issues.

**THE LOOM OF TIME**

A study of how an overdose of sham-ing and corresponding shamelessness has made reasoned debate impossible. You should be ashamed of yourself. In today’s polarized, overheated political environment, it has become the go-to attack for one’s enemies. But what does it mean, and what role does shame play in modern society? Keen, a professor of conflict studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science, delves into these issues. He differentiates shame from guilt, noting that guilt relates to a particular action, while shame makes the person question their own worth. In this sense, shame is much more damaging and internalized, and it can generate deep-seated psychological problems. Keen sees shame as essentially a social construct, arising when fundamental rules or norms are broken. Shame

**THE LOOM OF TIME**

Between Empire and Anarchy, From the Mediterranean to China

Kaplan, Robert D.

Random House (400 pp.)

$28.99 | Aug. 22, 2023

9780593242797

The bestselling author specializing in geopolitics returns to the Middle East to deliver another tour de force.

Drawing on 50 years of experience interviewing officials, intellectuals, historians, and fellow journalists and reading seemingly every history and scholarly work from Herodotus to Gibbon to Toynbee, Kaplan is convinced that “the big story in the Middle East today is not necessarily the failure of democracy—but the departure of empire.” After the breakup of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, Britain and France had their moments, followed by the US and the Soviet Union. The 1991 Soviet collapse and disastrous U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan delivered the kiss of death, so “for the first time in modern history the region is in a post-imperial phase.” Western scholars deplore empires, but nations with an ancient imperial tradition (Turkey, Iran, China) have no doubt that the world can benefit from their cultures. That humans yearn for democracy is a peculiarly Western fantasy. In reality, given a choice between dictatorship and disorder, a large percentage of the population, Americans included, prefers the former. In Turkey, Recep Erdoğan has been in office for two decades, evolving into another democratically elected autocrat. He has embraced Islamism, reversed national idol Kemal Atatürk’s fierce secularization, and revived the expansiveness of the former Ottoman Empire, which Turks have always admired. Egypt is still recovering from the Arab Spring, during which the Muslim Brotherhood won a free election but could not establish order, so most Egyptians did not object when the nation’s military returned to power. Kaplan points out that the U.S. regularly denounces lack of democracy throughout this region, from Libya to Saudi Arabia, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, and Iraq, apparently unaware that this would mean government by Islamists whose rule in Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan does not inspire confidence. American officials urge these nations to adopt progressive policies absent in the U.S. until recently. As always, the author offers much food for thought about a variety of geopolitical issues.

Little encouraging news but brilliantly delivered.

**SHAME**

The Politics and Power of an Emotion

Keen, David

Princeton Univ. (352 pp.)

$35.00 | Oct. 3, 2023

9780691183756

A study of how an overdose of sham-ing and corresponding shamelessness has made reasoned debate impossible. You should be ashamed of yourself. In today’s polarized, overheated political environment, it has become the go-to attack for one’s enemies. But what does it mean, and what role does shame play in modern society? Keen, a professor of conflict studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science, delves into these issues. He differentiates shame from guilt, noting that guilt relates to a particular action, while shame makes the person question their own worth. In this sense, shame is much more damaging and internalized, and it can generate deep-seated psychological problems. Keen sees shame as essentially a social construct, arising when fundamental rules or norms are broken. Shame

**WALK THROUGH FIRE**

A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Triumph

Johnson, Sheila with Lisa Dickey

Simon & Schuster (256 pp.)

$27.99 | Sept. 19, 2023

9781668007136

An entrepreneur and philanthropist tells the story of how she fought sexism and racism to become America’s first Black female billionaire.

In 1965, Johnson learned how unforgiving society could be to women when her family suddenly collapsed. At the time, divorce laws did not obligate her philandering father to offer financial support, and her accountant mother—who suffered a nervous breakdown after the split—could not get a loan or credit card without her husband’s signature. Johnson fought back by excelling in school and working multiple jobs to help the family. A music scholarship to the University of Illinois freed her to pursue dreams of a career in the arts. However, university life also brought her into contact with Bob, the husband-to-be who would help shape her life, for better and often for worse, over more than 30 years. Jealous and sometimes cruel, Bob developed an interest in media that Johnson tirelessly supported through successful arts ventures like Youth Strings in Action. In 1980, the pair founded Black Entertainment Television, yet the more she helped and supported Bob, the harsher he became. His disregard for her emerged with later revelations that he was having affairs with female BET executives like company president Debra Lee. An eventual divorce exacerbated the author’s lifelong feelings of being “unloved” and “never good enough.” Despite earning billionaire status with the 2000 sale of BET to Viacom, Johnson still faced racism along her new path as hospitality industry entrepreneur and distinguished patron of the arts. Yet the strength and perseverance she forged during the “toxic part of my life” became the foundations on which she built hard-won happiness. This highly readable book will appeal not only to BET fans, but to all women seeking entrepreneurial fulfillment in a male-dominated world.

A warmly candid memoir from a successful business icon.

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A warmly candid memoir from a successful business icon.
can have a positive side if it acts as a spur to a reconsideration and improvement of one’s life, but in many cases, it can eat away at a person for decades. The author is well versed in the subject matter, but some of the chapters don’t connect to his theme. He makes his intense dislike of Donald Trump abundantly clear. While it’s undeniable that Trump has demonstrated shamelessness many times during his life, these passages feel more like polemic than academic analysis. There are plenty of examples of shamelessness on the left of the spectrum that could have balanced his account. In fact, Keen admits that trying to shame someone often turns into a counterproductive exercise, with the target displaying the attacks as a sign of standing up to enemies. The author claims that he seeks “to hold up this murky object of shame to the light.” It’s a worthy objective, but the book would have been more effective with greater discipline and less hyperbole.

Keen synthesizes a wealth of research to explore the dynamics of shame, but a lack of focus leads to mixed results.

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**HOW WORK WORKS**

The Subtle Science of Getting Ahead Without Losing Yourself

King, Michelle P.
Harper Business (320 pp.)
$32.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780063224575

A respected expert on the way workplaces really operate provides a wealth of advice.

In her latest book, King, a successful consultant on organizational culture and the author of *The Fix: Overcome the Invisible Barriers That Are Holding Women Back at Work*, casts a wide net, examining the informal rules and practices of workplaces. These rules are often more important than workflow charts and duty statements, but they can be difficult to discern, especially for people whose training is primarily in a technical field. The author focuses on a few essential areas: navigating informal networks, developing awareness, learning adaptive skills, gaining promotions, and finding meaning. She sees “soft skills” as critically important in the age of diversity and remote work. “In the new world, we must learn how to bridge our differences with others so we can collaborate, innovate, and solve complex problems,” she writes. “This means working with people who don’t share your background or identity.” She tracks the process of observing colleagues and more senior executives for guidance on the implicit rules, and she suggests that offering assistance to others is a positive avenue for building connections. For leaders, creating a more inclusive workplace means sharing information and being willing to take chances when allocating projects to stretch employees’ abilities. For employees, readiness to move outside your comfort zone and then seeking feedback builds a presence in crucial networks and marks you as capable of bigger things. In terms of job satisfaction, the keys are good personal relationships and linking individual efforts to a greater objective. King provides practical advice although she has a tendency to repeat her points more than needed. But this is a small issue with a book that would be a useful read for anyone trying to navigate the modern workplace.

With the authority of experience, King shows how knowing the informal rules is the path to advancement and fulfillment.

**WHILE YOU WERE OUT**

An Intimate Family Portrait of Mental Illness in an Era of Silence

Kissinger, Meg
Celadon Books (352 pp.)
$30.00 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781250793775

A stark examination of the tragic cost of untreated mental illness. Award-winning Milwaukee Journal Sentinel investigative reporter Kissinger examines the country’s inadequate mental health system through the experiences of her own troubled family. “We were a family of eight children,” she writes, “born over a span of twelve years, to parents with serious illnesses who gobbled tranquilizers and drank themselves silly many nights.” Her mother was repeatedly hospitalized for anxiety and depression; her father, who exhibited inexplicably sudden mood changes, eventually was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Both were alcoholics. In light of their parents’ behavior, the children felt “like little deer teetering through the forest, vulnerable and unprotected.” During Kissinger’s childhood, her mother would go missing periodically. No explanation was given to the children; once, she and her sister were packed up and taken to a relative’s house for a few days, not knowing why or if they would ever be retrieved. By the time she was in high school, it was clear that many of her siblings were suffering from depression, and one of her sisters repeatedly tried to kill herself. Sent to the Menninger Clinic for treatment, she returned home “meener and more physically abusive than ever.” With the help of her siblings, Kissinger pieces together the depression, paranoia, and mania among them that had never been talked about as they were growing up.

After every crisis, she writes, “we simply went back to our old routines with no therapy or family discussions. None.” Unsurprisingly, mental illness became her focus as a journalist, and her reportage on her county’s mental health resources led to reforms of state law and won a George Polk Award. Expanding that investigation for this book, Kissinger identifies endemic problems in dealing with mentally ill individuals, including housing, social support, medical treatment, and hospitalization. When, she asks, should a person’s right to autonomy “yield to their safety or the safety of others?”

An impassioned argument for reform in caring for the afflicted.
“Leamer excels at dissecting Hitchcock’s filmic genius and odd proclivities.”

**HITCHCOCK’S BLONDIES**

The Unforgettable Women Behind the Legendary Director’s Dark Obsession

Leamer, Laurence
Putnam (368 pp.)
$29.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780593542972

The author of *Capote’s Women* digs into Hitchcock territory. Donald Spoto covered this territory in *Spellbound by Beauty*, but Leamer puts his own distinctive spin on it—breezy, juicy and eminently readable. Ever since the devoutly Catholic Hitchcock was young, “blond women were the epitome of female beauty, and he fixated on them.” He was always trying to mold his heroines “into the heroine of my imagination.” The eight actors Leamer profiles “knew the truths of his art as well as anyone.” His silent film *The Lodger*, starring June Howard-Tripp, a beloved musical star, “revealed his passion for blondes and his pleasure in making them suffer.” Madeleine Carroll was his wife’s choice for Novak until she was ready for *Psycho*, notes the author, “he gave her a ‘film expressly conceived to allow her to soar.’” Hitchcock’s move to Hollywood led to *Spellbound* with Ingrid Bergman, his “ultimate woman.” He was totally smitten with her. With *Under Capricorn*, he gave her a “film expressly conceived to allow her to soar.” *Dial M for Murder* brought Grace Kelly into Hitchcock’s world, and he treated her with “deference that he had shown with none of his other actresses.” She would return for the brilliant *Rear Window*, “considered by critics one of the best thrillers of all time,” and the playful *To Catch a Thief*. With Kelly married to a prince, Hitchcock emotionally wore down the underrated Kim Novak until she was ready for *Vertigo*. For *North by Northwest*, Hitchcock “transformed” the demure Eva Marie Saint into a “svelte, sexually provocative woman of his imagination.” In *Psycho*, Janet Leigh dies early but hovers over the entire film. The attack of poor Tippi Hedren in *The Birds*, notes the author, was the “most controversial scene Hitchcock ever filmed.”

**WANDERING THROUGH LIFE**

Leen, Donna
Atlantic Monthly (208 pp.)
$26.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780802161581

This brief, chatty memoir by the author of the bestselling *Guido Brunetti* mysteries earns its title. Leen’s approach to autobiography is pretty much the opposite of what readers may expect from the author of a successful series of whodunits. “I am feckless and unthinking by nature and have never planned more than the first step in anything I’ve done,” she announces early on, and then proceeds to illustrate this proposition by one charming non sequitur after another. After brief chapters on her family, she turns to more or less disconnected anecdotes and discussions—e.g., the tomato-selling scam she ran as a young woman; a detailed description of *Saudipoly*, a “Bored Game” she developed with two friends to break the tedium of work they’d taken in Saudi Arabia; and recurring salutes to the music of Handel (“He’s given me endless pleasure, and I shall continue to give him what he deserves: endless love”). The structure that emerges from these memories, which clearly bring Leon joy, is not so much episodic as essayistic. The author repeatedly avoids or understates obvious turning points like her decision not to pursue an academic career (though the reason she gives in passing is highly amusing), her professional activities, and her decision to move to Italy and then to leave 25 years later. Apart from her story about the fascination with honeybees that inspired one of Brunetti’s most memorable cases, fans will search these pages in vain for any hint of her writing process. Her tone throughout, lacking both the delicacy and the gravitas of her detective stories, is so cheerfully self-deprecating that it seems especially odd that she takes time out twice to assure the readers she invites into her world—but rarely into her mind—that she’s never used drugs. Delightfully approachable but disappointingly unrevealing.

**TYRANNY OF THE MINORITY**

Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point

Levitsky, Steven & Daniel Ziblatt
Crown (384 pp.)
$28.00 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780593443071

Chilling study of how recent political turmoil demonstrates that, “far from checking authoritarian power, our institutions have begun to augment it.”

“The assault on American democracy was worse than anything we anticipated in 2017, when we were writing our first book, *How Democracies Die.*” So write Levitsky and Ziblatt, both professors of government at Harvard. While the Jan. 6, 2021, assault on the Capitol provides a clear flashpoint, the authors weave a complex discussion, illuminating fault lines in the delicate nature of democracy that the Trump presidency (and its enablers) blatantly exploited. “The republic did not collapse between 2016 and 2021,” they write, “but it became undeniably less democratic.” The authors bolster their wide-ranging narrative with geopolitical and historical examples and informed analyses of the intricate mechanisms of governance. “Most twenty-first-century autocracies are built via constitutional hardball,” they write. “Democratic backsliding occurs gradually.” Compromised politicians propel it by amplifying the dangerous ideas of extremists. Levitsky and Ziblatt emphasize that democracies must become multiracial to survive, explaining...
America’s fitful progress since Reconstruction. “Without federal protection of voting rights,” they write, “any semblance of democracy in the South was soon extinguished… the South succumbed to nearly a century of authoritarianism.” In the 1960s, civil rights legislation established a legal foundation for multiracial democracy, which Republicans largely supported. Now, the same party embraces racial grievances and electoral lies and endorses violence, demonstrated in the aftermath of Jan. 6: “Most Republican leaders acted as semi-loyal democrats. They professed to play by democratic rules but in reality enabled authoritarian behavior.” The authors conclude by advocating for potential reforms, including prosecution of antidemocratic forces and promotion of voting rights. They also urge optimism even as they gloomily warn that “the mapping of the partisan divide onto the urban-rural divide risks converting some of our most important institutions into pillars of minority rule.”

A well-organized and convincing argument, although procedural minutiae occasionally dilute otherwise passionate writing.

GOLDA MEIR
Israel’s Matriarch
Lipstadt, Deborah E.
Yale Univ. (288 pp.)
$26.00 | Aug. 15, 2023
9780300255311

Comprehensive biography of the famed Israeli leader whose legacy has come under criticism in recent years.

As Lipstadt, a professor of modern Jewish history and author of Antisemitism: Here and Now and History on Trial, amply demonstrates, Golda Meir (1898-1978) was a woman of action, and she had a way with a sharp riposte: When Richard Nixon commented on Abba Eban’s appointment as her counterpart to his Henry Kissinger, saying, “Just think, we now both have Jewish foreign ministers,” she replied, “Yes, but mine speaks English.” When a British official told her that German POWs would build military bases in Palestine during World War II, she pointed out that Jews were already there and in need of work. When he answered that Jewish militants tended to blow up British structures, she replied, “Nazis are more reliable?” More than possessing a sarcastic streak, Meir held fast to a number of beliefs that both hampered and furthered her goals: that the Arab nations were bent on annihilating Israel, the great powers were not to be trusted, and “her total devotion to the Zionist dream realized in a socialist context.” As Israel’s sole woman prime minister, she defended these views against both conservatives and a generation of younger Israelis such as Moshe Dayan while retaining strong ties to David Ben-Gurion and his cohort. “Golda and her fellow veterans dismissed this cadre of younger leaders as ambitious technocrats,” writes Lipstadt, while they strongly criticized her for her performance during the Yom Kippur War, which “became a little Vietnam, a never-ending encounter with continual losses and no change in the situation.” In this always thoughtful analysis, the author closes by wondering whether depictions of Meir as “stubborn” and unable to see shades of gray might not have been rendered as “firm” and “decisive” if Meir had not been a woman.

A nuanced account of a leader whose influence endures in the Middle East.

INTERSTELLAR
The Search for Extraterrestrial Life and Our Future in the Stars
Loeb, Avi
Mariner Books (256 pp.)
$28.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9780063250871

What will be our interstellar future? In 2021, astrophysicist Loeb, the chair of Harvard’s department of astronomy, recently shook up the astronomical world with his book Extraterrestrial, in which he argued that some kind of artifact from deep space recently passed through Earth’s solar system. In this follow-up, the author delves into our possible reactions when we encounter even more evidence of extraterrestrial civilization. Loeb believes that life exists elsewhere, looming beyond us like Oz, that it began long before Earth was born, and that other forms of life may be billions of years ahead of us—or extinct. He laments that we have not prioritized the search for extraterrestrial technology and unidentified anomalous phenomena. Here and elsewhere, politicians have failed to push for further research, as have many scientists, Loeb notes with chagrin. “The fastest way to ascend the ladder of civilization is to reach in hopeful expectation of another civilization (even if only by way of a long-discarded artifact) extending us a hand up,” writes the author. He discusses in detail his ambitious Galileo Project, which seeks to identify UAP in space, perhaps on Earth and even under the ocean. Loeb consistently argues that “humanity, if it wants to persist, will need to leave this planet. The cosmic clock is ticking. In a few billion years, the Sun will begin to die and life as we know it on Earth will perish.” Throughout, he rambles widely across a variety of topics, including the idea of interstellar Xenia, or hospitality—we should welcome visitors even if they’re just hardware and AI. “To those concerned that AI’s arrival augurs humanity’s annihilation,” he writes, “I urge optimism.” As for dark matter, we still don’t know what it is. Loeb is an excellent motivational speaker for the importance of science, but this occasionally dry text lacks the exploratory drama of his previous book.

Studded with intriguing insights but mostly for fellow believers.
“A tasty sojourn through the landscape of America’s endangered foods, served with a scoop of energy and a dash of hope.”

ENDANGERED EATING

ON OUR BEST BEHAVIOR
The Seven Deadly Sins and the Price Women Pay To Be Good
Loehnen, Elise
Dial Press (384 pp.)
$28.00 | May 23, 2023
9780593243039

An analysis of society’s behavioral expectations for women.

The author, a former editorial projects director of Condé Nast Traveler, contends that women have been unwittingly programmed to behave in a certain manner in order to be accepted. “Where did this beast come from?” she asks, “how did it get its power, and why was I so willing to submit?” I began to trawl through history to locate the early murmurs of when goodness and acceptability were conjoined for women.” Loehnen shows that the framework for this programming arose via the Seven Deadly Sins found in Christian teachings. The author explores the origin of the sins and examines each in relation to the modern life of women. As Loehnen points out, the sins were based on the “Eight Thoughts” of a fourth-century monk named Evagrius Ponticus, which additionally included the concept of “sadness” and became a teaching tool for the church. While the concepts referenced in the book do have strong religious underpinnings, the author’s language and writing style are more secular in nature and will appeal to a wide audience. “Even if you consider yourself an atheist, or agnostic, or opposed to organized religion, the moral codes directed by the Seven Deadly Sins have influenced you,” she writes. “They are not solely the provenance of the church; the sins have permeated culture.” Throughout, Loehnen demonstrates that women have limited their lives based on these artificial restrictions and must strive to break free from this “tool of oppression.” For example, out of fear of appearing slothful, women often deny themselves rest. For fear of appearing gluttonous, women often deny their own hunger. Afraid of being deemed “unhinged,” women are often apprehensive about expressing their anger.

An engaging work that offers an opportunity for pause and reflection regarding our daily choices.

ENDANGERED EATING
America’s Vanishing Foods
Lohman, Sarah
Norton (320 pp.)
$28.95 | Oct. 24, 2023
9781324004660

A food historian argues that preserving the richness of what we eat is part of recognizing our cultural legacy.

Good food is one of the great pleasures of life, notes Lohman, and a tragedy of modern times is that the development of agribusiness corporations threatens to reduce the variety on our plates. In her 2016 book, Eight Flavors, the author explored America’s culinary history; here, she comes at the subject from another angle, traveling around the country to investigate traditional foods that are returning from the edge of extinction. As her guide, she uses an online catalog called the Ark of Taste, produced by an organization called Slow Food International, which is dedicated to preserving food diversity. She finds plenty of optimistic stories, such as the orchardists keeping apple types alive and the breeders of longhorn cattle, which have gone out of fashion with beef producers. Many of the foods that interest Lohman have roots in Indigenous cultures, and the story of the displacement of traditional Hawaiian culture to grow sugar cane has a tragic aspect. The author is willing to go deep into the rituals of traditional food preparation; for example, she happily gutted salmon caught by Native Americans and spent hours wrangling over the best way to make the fish delicious.

A laugh a minute, barring a few graywater and slaughterhouse moments.
American methods on the Pacific coast and helped butcher a Navajo-Churro lamb. Along the way, she looks at the legacy of wild rice, the origin of peanut farming, and the resurgence of the Buckeye chicken. At the end of each chapter, Lohman includes recipes of the foods featured, and they all sound delicious. The result is a package that is enjoyable, entertaining, and meaningful. The author encourages readers to begin their own journey of culinary discovery: “The secret of the Ark is that you don’t have to travel very far at all….There’s probably a rare food practically in your backyard.”

A tasty sojourn through the landscape of America’s endangered foods, served with a scoop of energy and a dash of hope.

**PUNISHED FOR DREAMING**

_How School Reform Harms Black Children and How We Heal_

_Love, Bettina L._

St. Martin's (352 pp.)

$29.00 | Sept. 12, 2023

9781250280381

An uncompromising indictment of education reform. Educator Love, co-founder of the Abolitionist Teaching Network, expands on her previous book, _We Want To Do More Than Survive_, to offer a stark critique of 40 years of education policies that were deliberately crafted “to punish Black people for believing in and fighting for their right to quality public education.” Why, she asks, “instead of learning,” are Black students “punished with low expectations, physical violence, surveillance, standardized testing, and frequent suspensions?” The author condemns education reform under Nixon, Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton for enacting an agenda “that ushered in a new sort of Black bondage, a system in which Black Americans would be educationally neglected, economically starved, denied assistance, and incarcerated for selling drugs that the government itself allowed to be put out on the street.” Such policies, she asserts, are a form of white rage, “organized, well-funded, and cruel.” Policymakers with superficially progressive ideas—Bill and Melinda Gates, Mike Bloomberg, and Barack Obama, for example—nevertheless perpetrate harmful educational practices such as charter schools, virtual schools, and vouchers. “Many charter schools,” Love asserts, “are awash in corporate sponsors, philanthropic dollars, and the expectation that failure is an important part of the entrepreneurial process.” Love faults George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind policy, which emphasized standardized testing and graded schools on test scores. “I worked at an F school in Florida,” she writes, a depressing experience for both teachers and students. Love calls for supporting abolitionists in their fight for “healing justice, environmental justice, disability justice, health justice, immigrant justice, reproductive justice, economic justice, body justice, gender justice, and LGBTQI justice.” She advocates, as well, for reparations that would go beyond economic restitution to include funding “well-resourced state-of-the-art schools with curricula that honor different cultures and traditions with love and admiration.”

An impassioned plea for educational justice.

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**KICK OUT THE JAMS**

_Jibes, Barbs, Tributes, & Rallying Cries From 35 Years of Music Writing_

_Marsh, Dave_

Simon & Schuster (336 pp.)

$28.99 | Aug. 15, 2023

9781982197162

Selected essays from an acclaimed music critic.

Marsh (b. 1950) was a founding editor of _Creem_, where he was mentored by his colleague Lester Bangs, and he has also been an editor and writer for the _Village Voice_, _Rolling Stone_, and other publications. He has also published numerous books on bands and musicians, including Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Bruce Springsteen, the Who, Michael Jackson, and Sly and the Family Stone, and he is a committee member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame known for his unapologetically candid opinions on rock. Most importantly, though, he’s someone who truly loves music, regardless of genre or style. This volume brings together his best essays from 1984 to 2017, ranging from the personal to the political and everything in between. A self-proclaimed “musical omnivore,” he tackles artists as varied as Nina Simone, Green Day, and Madonna—who, he writes with characteristic humor, “has entered the rarified ranks of those pop stars who function as lightning rods for assholes.” The author also explores lesser-known musicians such as gospel singer Dorothy Love Coates (“In her music, the African American tradition of the social gospel comes to full, fierce life”) and the Chinese rock artist Cui Jian (“Chinese, with its guttural intonations and short words, is perfectly suited to rock and roll”). Throughout, Marsh’s deep passion for the music and the artists he writes about provides a bassline of energy and excitement. The author breathes new insight into well-known artists and provides avenues of discovery for new music while maintaining humor and heart. Many of the best essays are not about artists but the industry itself, including critiques of record companies that remain relevant today and astute analyses of music’s relationship to politics. Springsteen, for one, offers Marsh an avenue to examine Ronald Reagan, and Kurt Cobain leads to a larger discussion of the punk revolution.

Heartfelt and often amusing, these essays will have you reaching into your record collection to listen with fresh ears.
A riveting exploration of the cost of the nation’s fascination with an iconic weapon.

**AMERICAN GUN**

**THE TRUE STORY OF THE AR-15**

McWhirter, Cameron & Zusha Elinson
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (496 pp.)
$32.00 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780374103859

How an influential gun design became central to debates over Second Amendment rights.

In this superb history of an innovative weapon, McWhirter and Elinson, who both cover the gun industry for the *Wall Street Journal*, track the invention of the AR-15 rifle in the 1950s, adoption by the American military in the 1960s (where it was known as the M16), and gradual rise to notoriety toward the end of the 20th century and into the 21st as it became, in the semiautomatic form in which it was sold to the public, a favored choice of mass shooters. The authors begin with an exploration of the life and career of Eugene Stoner (1922-1997), a gifted engineer who sought to create a weapon superior to those used by American soldiers in World War II. The authors then give insightful commentary on the evolution of Stoner’s signature creation, disastrous deployment in Vietnam after ill-considered modifications, slow introduction to civilian gun aficionados and gradually rising profile in pop culture, provocation of outrage after being used in notorious crimes, and eventual transformation into a symbol of freedom embraced by the National Rifle Association and hard-line gun-rights advocates. This is a meticulously researched and impressively informed book; despite careful explanations of technical details, the narrative moves along briskly and engagingly. Furthermore, McWhirter and Elinson clearly and fairly handle the sometimes-complex motivations of those seeking to promote the AR-15 along with the frequently base impulses of those looking to profit without moral concern. What emerges, too, through accounts of individuals who have fallen victim to gun violence, is a harrowing sense of the enormous suffering wrought by this invention and the seemingly insurmountable political resistance to mitigating it in any significant way. Ultimately, readers gain an unsettling and timely understanding of how “a device created to protect America [is] wounding it.”

A riveting exploration of the cost of the nation’s fascination with an iconic weapon.

**HIGH BIAS**

**The Distorted History of the Cassette Tape**

Masters, Marc
Univ. of North Carolina (224 pp.)
$20.00 paper | Oct. 3, 2023
9781469675985

In a thoroughly enjoyable romp, Masters delves into the secret history of the cassette tape.

People of a certain age can remember the day they made their first mixtape, putting songs recorded from the radio or borrowed records onto a cheap cassette. This was new; this was personal; this was insubordinate; this was control. Masters, a journalist who contributes to an assortment of publications, sees the rise of the cassette as a critical pivot in popular culture, moving the center of gravity from industry music producers to consumers. This line would end with streaming, but there were many important stops along the way, and Masters examines them all with the passion of a true aficionado. When blank cassettes and recording machines began to appear in the late 1960s, record industry executives went into a panic. However, they were unable to stop the wave, and the music business continued to grow regardless. Bands like Metallica got started with self-distributed tapes, and many others followed. Over time, the recording quality improved. Bruce Springsteen’s classic album *Nebraska* was recorded on a four-track tape, and the emergence of hip-hop also owed much to the cassette. The Walkman and its clones played to another strength of cassettes: inherent portability. There were many culture commentators who argued that the advent of digital devices would spell the end for the cassette, but Masters responds: not even close. Wandering through the back alleys of the indie scene, he finds a new generation of musicians making good use of cassettes, often mixing found sounds into their recordings. Some of these creators break into the mainstream, but many others are happy to remain underground. “The compact cassette has an uncanny ability to rise from its grave time and again,” the author concludes, often in an unexpected form.

With energy, insight, and wit, Masters provides a welcome examination of an often overlooked cultural turning point.

**OF TIME AND TURTLES**

**Mending the World, Shell by Shattered Shell**

Montgomery, Sy
Illus. by Matt Patterson
Mariner Books (272 pp.)
$28.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780358458180

A celebration of a magnificent animal. Melding science and memoir, naturalist Montgomery, author of *The Soul of an Octopus*, *The Hummingbirds’ Gift*, and other celebrated nature books, shares her experiences as a volunteer at the Turtle Rescue League, in Massachusetts, where, along with wildlife artist Patterson, she worked laboriously to care for “the most imperiled major group of animals on earth.” Turtles fall victim to myriad threats: They are often run over by vehicles, “dogs and cats chew them, lawn mowers and farm equipment shred them, curious children harass and kidnap them, and asphalt and concrete displace their nesting areas.” Some are caught in the illegal wildlife trade: “A single Yunnan box turtle could command $200,000 on the black market. A Chinese three-striped box turtle, whose powdered plastron is rumored (incorrectly) to
Jordan B. Peterson, and Andrew Tate. If you don't know who those people are, you are not the author's target reader. In fact, it's not completely clear who that might be—boys? girls? parents? men?—and this is reflected in some fluctuations of tone, focus, and interestingness.

In the right hands, this book is reassuring, enlightening, and inspiring; in others, it's OK to skim.
Tell It Like It Is
My Story
Neville, Aaron
Hachette (288 pp.)
$29.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780262048590

The title of the musician’s breakthrough hit provides a mission statement for his memoir.

Neville has long been a study in contrasts: a man with the physique of a longshoreman but the tremulous, fluttering voice of an angel; a family man and devout Christian whose narrative recounts a life of being led into temptation—stealing cars on a regular basis, getting into fights where he wasn’t sure whether he had killed someone, injecting heroin, which he started at age 16, leading to a long battle with addiction. His tone throughout is that of a kind and loving man, one who knows how reckless and stupid his behavior was, how much he hurt his wife, whom he married as a teenager, and his parents, who stood by him. He doesn’t excuse himself, but he provides plenty of context on growing up Black in a racist, segregated New Orleans, where the color of your skin could get you harrassed for suspicion of something, warranted or not. Most of his brothers experienced similar trouble, as did a couple of his sons. Yet his plainspoken account leaves readers sharing his conviction that his life has been something of a miracle and that “my voice was my salvation.” His unique vocal style draws from both the hearted crooning of Nat King Cole, Sam Cooke, and the harmozing doo-wop groups. His marriage survived more trouble than most could withstand, and his career flourished through a second act—as featured vocalist with the powerhouse Neville Brothers—and then a third, through his Grammy-winning duets with Linda Ronstadt, decades after “Tell It Like It Is” had seemed to cton his life from a warming planet. Even so, Princeton geoscientist Michael Oppenheimer reminds us, “most migration occurs within rather than between countries”—often climate-related, too, as with the depopulation of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Many of the policy-minded contributors offer vehicles for strengthening direct democracy, a proposition that seems, if not entirely out of reach, difficult to attain given a hostile Congress and a vast, well-funded conspiracy that opposes it. One such vehicle, write Arizona State University president Michael Crow and ASU senior research fellow William B. Dabars, is an academic culture that dares to become more activist in order to reinvigorate and revitalize our experiment in democracy.” Kim Stanley Robinson provides the afterword, and other contributors include William J. Barber III, Frederick W. Mayer, and Richard Louv.

A valuable book for climate and progressive activists alike.

Democracy in a Hotter Time
Climate Change and Democratic Transformation
Ed. by Orr, David W.
MIT Press (296 pp.)
$24.95 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
9780262048392

A collection of essays linking the possibilities of combating a warming climate with preserving a democracy increasingly under threat.

In his spot-on foreword, Bill McKibben notes that many of the world’s leading autocrats are bound up in the fossil fuel business—Putin, for instance, and the murderous Saudi regime; but also, in this country, the Koch brothers, who “have done more than anyone to deform our democracy.” The point is well taken: As climate scientist James Hansen warned, “We cannot fix the climate until we first fix democracy.” Some of the reasons are obvious. In an anti-majoritarian age, only a tiny number of people benefit economically from a regime that threatens the planet with irreversible climate change, just as only a small number of people benefit from tyranny. Democracy and social justice involve recruiting the largest possible number of people into the decision-making process even as the enablers of that tyrannical minority propagate “about democracy being out of reach,” as Frances Moore Lappé puts it. Meanwhile, we also have knock-on problems to deal with, such as immigration from poor nations to rich ones, the former of which suffer disproportionaly from a warming planet. Even so, Princeton geoscientist Michael Oppenheimer reminds us, “most migration occurs within rather than between countries”—often climate-related, too, as with the depopulation of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Many of the policy-minded contributors offer vehicles for strengthening direct democracy, a proposition that seems, if not entirely out of reach, difficult to attain given a hostile Congress and a vast, well-funded conspiracy that opposes it. One such vehicle, write Arizona State University president Michael Crow and ASU senior research fellow William B. Dabars, is an academic culture that dares to become more activist in order to reinvigorate and revitalize our experiment in democracy.” Kim Stanley Robinson provides the afterword, and other contributors include William J. Barber III, Frederick W. Mayer, and Richard Louv.

A valuable book for climate and progressive activists alike.

Pageboy
A Memoir
Page, Elliot
Flatiron Books (288 pp.)
$29.99 | June 6, 2023
9781250878359

An Oscar-nominated actor and activist shares his story.

Page (b. 1987) made headlines when he came out as queer in 2014 and again when he let the world know that he was a trans man in 2020. The latter revelation was Page reintroducing himself on his own terms. The former was more complicated. In 2008, just after 20-year-old Page had shot to fame as the title character in the indie hit Juno, journalist Michael Musto used his column in the Village Voice to insinuate that Page was queer. At a time when he should have been enjoying his breakout film’s critical and commercial success, Page was enduring prurient public scrutiny and intense private pain. This dynamic was familiar to the young actor, as was the speculation about his sexuality. The author started acting professionally at the age of 9, but he had already learned to play a part. From his childhood as a “tomboy” to his days as a closeted celebrity, Page yearned to

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be someone other than the person others expected him to be. Anyone looking for a dishy tell-all should look elsewhere. While the author describes his romances with other boldface names and shares anecdotes about unnamed Hollywood figures that will undoubtedly lead to speculation, he is primarily interested in examining what it was like for him to grow up—and become famous—repressing his authentic self. He remembers the heartache of unrequited crushes and the impossibility of forming authentic relationships while living a lie. He recounts bullying and abuse, from his peers and from his family. He reveals how his body dysmorphia led to self-harm and disordered eating. He testifies to the lifesaving power of gender-affirming care and a loving community. Page is clearly aware not everyone who wants to transition has his resources, but he also understands that representation matters and that telling his truth might make it a little bit easier for others to live theirs.

An affecting and timely memoir.

I AM ASKING IN THE NAME OF GOD
Ten Prayers for a Future of Hope

Pope Francis
Trans. by Stephen R. DiTullo
Image (160 pp.)
$22.00 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780593727522

Pleas by the pope for a kinder world. In his latest book, broad in scope yet brief in length, Pope Francis presents readers with 10 requests made “in the name of God.” These requests are sweeping in context: an end to war, universal access to health care, fighting against hate speech and fake news, open doors for immigrants and refugees, and “politics that works for a common good.” He also asks “that the culture of abuse be eradicated from the Church.” These petitions mirror the author’s lifelong interest in people living in poverty, under oppression, in places of conflict, and otherwise at the margins of society. Though clearly addressed to everyone, including non-Catholic Christians and those of other faiths or no faith, the book is far from universally accessible. Given Francis’ style and approach, readers may picture him delivering a speech to an audience of bishops, with a mix of aspirational and bureaucratic language. On one hand, Francis fills the book with such high-minded statements as, “I call on those in Politics to live daily with a strong sense of austerity and humility.” On the other hand, he consistently references and quotes Latin-titled encyclicals and other official church documents, which even many lay Catholics will not recognize or understand in context. The author offers interesting commentary on Catholicism in this moment in time, however. The book serves as an expansion on many of the themes originating in the Second Vatican Council, especially given the pope’s calls for ecumenism, caring for the poor, and focusing on human rights, and it would make a good complement to Pope John Paul II’s Crossing the Threshold of Hope. Though these two works differ in many ways, they both address universal themes and provide insights into two important modern papacies.

Though lacking universal appeal as a volume of prose, the book promotes positive change for a broken world.

GOING FOR BROKE
Living on the Edge in the World’s Richest Country

Ed. by Quart, Alissa & David Wallis
Haymarket Books (368 pp.)
$19.95 paper | Oct. 3, 2023
9781642599657

An anthology presented by the Economic Hardship Reporting Project that explores social inequality and economic injustice in the U.S.

The EHRP is “a nonprofit organization that keeps journalists, essayists, and photographers in the national conversation on economic injustice.” Edited by executive director Quart and managing director Wallis, this collection of essays, poems, and photographs, originally published in leading magazines and journals, highlights the valuable insights gained by these journalists in confronting their own hardships. By publishing these works, the EHRP seeks to mobilize people “to fight for economic justice.” The book is divided into five sections: The Body, Home, Family, Work, and Class. These emotionally charged and heart-wrenching narratives are both wide-ranging and powerfully rendered. Journalists from a variety of backgrounds share their experiences, including a woman who was forced to perform her own abortion following the shutdown of clinics in Texas and a 40-something man who donated plasma in order to pay the rent. One woman was homeless for two years, and she demonstrates the anxiety of feeling constantly on alert as well as the cyclical effects sleep deprivation has on homeless individuals. Another journalist shares how her assumptions about people without houses changed following her experience taking in a couple in Los Angeles. Other topics include inequalities in maternal health care for the uninsured and underinsured; the dangers low-wage workers are often expected to endure, which were particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic; struggles with racial identity; and the power of shared community. In addition to the editors, other contributors include Camonghne Felix, Kim Kelly, Elizabeth Rubin, Michelle Tea, Mitchell S. Jackson, and Astra Taylor. “The writers represented here,” writes Quart, “may have lost their jobs, their homes, or even the narrative thread of their lives, but in confronting those hardships they have gained valuable insights into problems facing millions in this country.”

A penetrating collection that is certain to challenge the readers’ views of those living in poverty.
“Reminding us that ‘how it comes out rests...in our own hands,’ Richardson empowers us for the chapters yet to come.”

**DEMOCRACY AWAKENING**

Notes on the State of America
Richardson, Heather Cox
Viking (304 pp.)
$30.00 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780593652961

A fresh historical interpretation of American democracy and its many challenges.

Since its birth, the U.S. has been caught between two competing schools of thought, one tending toward authoritarianism and the other seeking to widen its embrace of pluralism. So argues Richardson, a professor of U.S. history, author of *How the South Won the Civil War*, and creator of the popular Substack newsletter “Letters From an American.” “America is at a crossroads,” she writes. “A country that once stood as the global symbol of democracy has been teetering on the brink of authoritarianism. How did this happen?” In the calm, deliberate prose her newsletter readers will recognize, Richardson traces the rise of the modern right wing from the 1930s, finding its roots in a New Deal–era rejection of governmental intervention. It struggled against the post–World War II liberal consensus but gained ground with Nixon’s Southern Strategy and culminated in Trumpism. The author devotes 10 chapters to the Trump presidency, which she calls “the authoritarian experiment.” Her summary of the excesses of the era is laid out with her trademark combination of passion and restraint, the explicit comparisons to European fascism bolstered, horrifyingly, by Mein Kampf, among other voices from both past and present. However, Richardson doesn’t end with the wreckage left by Trump. Following a dismal recap of the 2021-2022 Supreme Court session, she takes readers back to the nation’s founding, writing about the emergence of our imperfect union and its halting expansion of rights. Never losing sight of the fact that it was “those excluded from an equal seat at the table [who] would redefine what it meant to be an American, keeping a dream of human equality alive,” the author escorts readers to the modern era. It’s an unusual but effective structure, allowing Richardson to do what she does best: show her readers how history and the present are in constant conversation.

Reminding us that “how it comes out rests...in our own hands,” Richardson empowers us for the chapters yet to come.

**WHITE HOLES**

Rovelli, Carlo
Trans. by Simon Carnell
Riverhead (120 pp.)
$25.00 | Oct. 31, 2023
9780593545447

The bestselling author and theoretical physicist looks at “the elusive younger siblings of black holes.”

Since white holes may be an inevitable consequence of black holes, Rovelli, the author of *Seven Brief Lessons in Physics* and *Reality Is Not What It Seems*, begins with an explanation, noting that white holes are essentially the reverse of a black hole. Since the 18th century, scientists knew that, as a universal force, gravity from an extremely massive star should slow its light’s speed to zero. That concept made little sense until Einstein showed that light never slows but that gravity distorts space, so light near a massive body appears to curve. The more massive the body, the greater the curve until the light doubles back. Einstein insisted that no such body existed, but his equations permit it, and they eventually turned up. All stars eventually run out of fuel and collapse. Average stars like our sun end up as tiny, immensely dense dwarfs. The largest stars, however, continue to collapse, ultimately to an infinitely tiny, infinitely dense point. Their light doubles back, resulting in a black hole, from which nothing that enters can leave. Even time stops dead at its edge, or “event horizon.” Mathematics, Einstein’s included, doesn’t work when dimensions are infinitely small or large, so physicists don’t know what happens when a black hole forms. That hasn’t stopped them from speculating, and Rovelli leads one school favoring the production of white holes, a bizarre concept that is still purely theoretical. Calling on quantum mechanics, which deals with minuscule phenomena, he explains that the collapsing star never becomes infinitely small but “bounces,” leading to a white hole. There, matter can leave but never enter; “a white hole is a black hole with time reversed.” Rovelli works hard, sometimes successfully, to explain matters, but he is dealing with phenomena so complex that he often gives readers permission to skip ahead.

Heavy-duty popular science not for the faint of heart.

**WHAT WE REMEMBER WILL BE SAVED**

A Story of Refugees and the Things They Carry
Saldaña, Stephanie
Broadleaf Books (272 pp.)
$28.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781506484211

A journalist and religion scholar who has traveled widely in the Middle East delivers poignant, humanizing stories of war refugees from Syria and Iraq.
In these stories, gleaned from travels in 2016 and 2017 in Iraq, Syria, Kurdistan, and Greece, Saldaña, the author of A Country Between and The Bread of Angels, uses the theme of what refugees in flight were able to carry with them—often only the clothes on their backs. On Aug. 6, 2014, the Islamic State group invaded an ancient Christian community in Qaraqosh, Iraq, and 44,000 Christians were forced to flee. In Amman, Jordan, where many relocated, the author met a woman named Hana, who described how she and the other women re-created their previous social world, in which the sewing of dresses was an important tradition. “So I learned that objects could speak or elicit a memory,” writes Saldaña. “And I learned that when the places you love begin to disappear, you begin to live in them all the time.” In Istanbul, she tracked down Hozan, a famous Kurdish buzuq player, and his musician friend Ferhad, both from al-Hasakeh, Syria, which was riven by that nation’s civil war. Saldaña also recounts the horrendous conditions in a refugee camp in Greece called Moria, which was designed for 2,300 people but, by 2017, housed more than 7,000. The author’s exploration of Moria is particularly heartbreaking, as she clearly portrays the awful plight of the refugees as well as the unwillingness of many Western countries to assist. Finally, Saldaña traveled to a convent in Germany where a group of Yazidi, “members of a small and highly persecuted religious minority from northern Iraq,” found shelter from the violence of IS. Throughout this compassionate book, the author demonstrates the resilience of refugees, who carry with them their precious languages, cultures, and memories.

Memorable personal stories that give much-needed depth and humanity to what are otherwise merely numbers.

**BIG BETS**

**How Large-Scale Change Really Happens**

Shah, Rajiv

Simon & Schuster (320 pp.)

$28.99 | Oct. 10, 2023

978166804388

The president of the Rockefeller Foundation shows why big problems require big responses.

Often, the world’s problems seem too large and complicated to even describe, let alone overcome. Shah recognizes this sense of being overwhelmed, but he insists that finding a solution is always possible. The author’s experience is appropriate to his subject: He started his career at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, where he played a central role in a massive program of vaccination in developing countries, and he went on to serve as the administrator for the United States Agency for International Development under Barack Obama. As the author notes, there was a debate about the most effective way to improve public health through philanthropic aid, but when the goal of vaccinating 900 million children was eventually set, everyone signed on. The key was to break down the problem into manageable segments, determining the crucial obstacles. Keeping the target firmly in mind reduced the danger of becoming bogged down in complexity. Reliable metrics were also necessary to gauge progress and identify problems with implementation. Shah took the methodology with him when he jumped into the head role of the Rockefeller Foundation. He had to gain the endorsement of heads of state and corporate leaders to provide financial backing, political support, and technical expertise. He guided a number of important projects to fruition, including a program to bring sustainable electricity to rural areas in India. While Shah underlines the critical role of experts in any “big bet” project, he also accepts that input from the community being affected is essential. He concludes each chapter with a distilled list of lessons, highlighting the importance of a clear purpose and firm strategy. His tone occasionally becomes a bit self-righteous, but in the end, he offers a lot of important information about getting from vision to outcome.

Mixing inspiration and practical advice, this is a useful read for leaders at every level.

**AMERICAN CASTLE**

**One Hundred Years of Mar-a-Lago**

Shanklin, Mary C.

Diversion Books (304 pp.)

$29.99 | Sept. 12, 2023

9781635768961

A history of a grand mansion and its numerous occupants.

In the 1920s, writes Shanklin, “across the Sunshine State, the steamy lure of tropical weather, flour-colored beaches, queen palms, orange trees, cheap land, and more cheap land drew hundreds of speculators.” One structure sat on 17 acres behind a low rise that one structure sat on 17 acres behind a low rise that served as a buffer against the region’s frequent hurricanes. That was an important consideration: In 1928, a hurricane “levied the ultimate regressive tax on its victims.” Though the white citizens living in the mansions did fine, hundreds of Black workers brought in to build and maintain the new estates drowned and were either buried in mass graves or burned. Mar-a-Lago was relatively unscathed, though its owner, Marjorie Merriweather Post, complained that the winds had uprooted a number of palm trees. The property wasn’t cheap, but Post wasn’t concerned. The heiress to a fortune built on cereal, she had even more money at her disposal thanks to her marriage to financier E.F. Hutton. So wealthy were they that they went on a 10-week Caribbean cruise while the world staggered through the worst days of the Great Depression. Post eventually turned the keys over to the National Park Service under the aegis of Interior Secretary Stewart Udall, but NPS never had an adequate budget for the place. As such, it was returned to the Post Foundation in 1980 and, in 1986, sold to Donald Trump, who inflated its value and sucked in Chase Manhattan Bank into floating 99.97% financing. When creditors suddenly called in $2 billion in notes, Trump developed it into a golf club with a historic easement that “could unlock a trove of tax breaks for Mar-a-Lago’s owner.”
In a grifters’ paradise, that seems fitting, though doubtless Post, a major donor to the Democratic Party, wouldn’t be pleased with the current occupants.

A well-told story that’s full of surprises, its storied subject generating headlines for a century.

THE BLACK ANGELS
The Untold Story of the Nurses Who Helped Cure Tuberculosis
Smilios, Maria
Putnam (448 pp.)
$29.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780593544921

A breathless but illuminating conquest-of-disease narrative.

In her first book, Smilios explains that, unlike fiercely contagious infections (measles, strep, polio) that attack quickly, tuberculosis comes on slowly, with symptoms that emerge over weeks or months. By 1900, prosperity and improved sanitation had vastly reduced infections among the middle-class, but the poor still suffered in densely packed, dirty tenements. Convinced that the infected endangered the citizenry, New York built a dedicated TB hospital to isolate the worst cases on Staten Island. When Sea View Hospital opened in 1913, it quickly overflowed with patients suffering from an incurable disease, cared for by overworked staff, most of whom became infected. By the 1920s, white nurses began quitting, attracted by better job options for women. Sea View employed a few Black nurses, but most white-run hospitals did not, and nursing schools refused to admit them. Black nursing schools existed, but their graduates often had trouble finding work. Understaffed at the best of times, Sea View faced disaster, so it aggressively recruited Black nurses, who soon became a majority. Smilios narrates the story through the eyes of individuals such as Edna Sutton. Born in 1901 in Georgia at a time when treatment of Blacks in the South was loathsome, she graduated nursing school but found no work until she responded to a recruitment notice from Sea View in 1929. Readers who can tolerate the author’s docudrama fictionalization will gnash their teeth at what follows. Always short-staffed, the hospital’s nurses worked exhausting 12-hour shifts. Therapy was drawn-out, gruesome, painful, and ineffective. Smilios digresses regularly to describe treatment of Black nurses as well as the efforts of researchers working on anti-TB drugs. Inevitably, many were tested at Sea View. Progress fighting both TB and racism was slow. However, by the 1950s, TB became curable, TB hospitals vanished, and nursing organizations dropped their all-white policies.

Vivid accounts of medical and racial progress with a mostly happy ending.

SCATTERSHOT
Life, Music, Elton, & Me
Taupin, Bernie
Hachette (384 pp.)
$30.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780306828676

Elton John’s longtime songwriting partner tells his life story.

Taupin (b. 1950) spent his early years in rural Lincolnshire, England, where his father was a farm manager. Early on, he imprinted on American country music and rockabilly performers and Western movies. After hearing Marty Robbins’ “El Paso,” Taupin realized that he “wanted to write stories.” Dropping out of school at age 15, he worked at odd jobs, first at a printing plant, then a poultry farm, while absorbing more American roots music from Yanks stationed at a nearby Royal Air Force base. At age 17, Taupin answered an ad in a music magazine for a songwriter, and he traveled to London and met a piano player named Reg Dwight, later to become famous as Elton John. The two hit it off immediately, although it took a good bit of time for their collaboration to spark an eventual string of hits. Taupin interestingly chronicles their first years working together; when the fame finally arrives, the book turns into a string of encounters with celebrities, interspersed with tales of rock-star excess around the world. While some of the bits are insightful or revealing, there are dozens of variations of these escapades available elsewhere. Only in the last couple of chapters, when Taupin writes about settling down on a California ranch to raise cutting horses and live out his childhood cowboy dreams in rodeo competition, does the book recover some sense of the author as an individual. A late-life venture into visual art adds another dimension to the self-portrait. The author’s main insight about songwriting is that his material comes from observing what goes on around him. “My penchant for observation was a constant,” he writes. “I loved writing, I loved chronicling life, and every moment whether I was cogent, sober, or blitzed, I was forever feeding off my surroundings.”

A feast for fans of celebrity gossip; less interesting for those curious about where the music comes from.

COLORFUL PALATE
A Flavorful Journey Through a Mixed American Experience
Tawney, Raj
Empire State Editions/Fordham Univ. (160 pp.)
$24.95 | Oct. 3, 2023
9781531504571

A Puerto Rican, Indian, and Italian man uses food memories to tell the story of his childhood.
“A timely consideration of the geopolitical role of American prisons.”

AMERICAN PURGATORY

In the introduction to this linear, food-based memoir, journalist Tawney writes, “So, what am I? A magnificent concoction conceived in a pivotal period in late-twentieth-century America.” Born to a Puerto Rican and Italian mother and an Indian father, the author has been profoundly shaped by the racist assumptions built into a world unwilling to accept families “undefined by a single group or birthright.” Even when he was young, he writes, “I knew somehow that I was entering a world that wouldn’t easily digest me, that couldn’t possibly see life through my eyes, full of a rainbow of colors, flavors, aromas, faces, and perspectives.” In kindergarten, Tawney’s teacher sent him to what appeared to be a classroom for English language learners after stumbling over his name. When he returned home, upset and humiliated—both by his teacher’s confusion and his classmates’ jabs about his sequined Barney the Dinosaur jacket—Tawney soothed his jangled nerves by cooking chicken with his mother using a tandoori recipe provided at the end of the chapter. The remainder of the book follows this pattern: In a chapter about weekend visits to his Puerto Rican grandmother, Elsie, the author includes a recipe for Elsie’s meatballs. In a story about a high school party he threw with his band, he includes a recipe for his mother’s pakoras and chutney. While Tawney hints at his parents’ troubled relationship and his own strained relationship with his Indian father, he shies away from vulnerability or circumspection, leaving readers to speculate about how these conflicts originated or resolved. At times, the author’s anger sparks moments of true, visceral feeling, but overall, the awkward prose, alienated narratorial voice, and chronological structure combine to create a finished product that is predictable and mundane.

A disappointing memoir about a multiracial family and their cuisine.

AMERICAN PURGATORY

Prison Imperialism and the Rise of Mass Incarceration

Weber, Benjamin
Illus. by Ayo T. Scott
The New Press (304 pp.)
$28.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
9781620975909

How America used prisons to consolidate its global power.

Weber, a professor of African American and African studies, shows us how “prison imperialism” has repeatedly been employed by the American government to subjugate groups identified as threatening to the nation’s ambitions. “Over successive eras of empire building,” writes the author, “intersecting ideas about race, crime, and punishment, not only within the United States but around the globe, have been central to making mass incarceration and the modern American state.” Weber explores not only how a teeming “purgatory” was created by large-scale prisons, but also how long-standing efforts at resistance were carried out, beginning on slave ships and extending to contemporary prison abolitionists. The author makes a compelling, well-illustrated case for how American methods of controlling those deemed unruly have been guided by an ideology of white supremacy. Especially incisive are the sections detailing the significance of techniques developed by American prison officials in the Philippines, including a “banal and bureaucratic form of record keeping [that] became a lynchpin of the rise of the American surveillance state.” Also striking are Weber’s discussions of brutal policies commonly deployed in penal colonies, such as family separation and forced labor. The author delivers a convincing overview of America’s use of incarceration as an imperial tool, though the treatments of some complex subjects—such as how Native Americans responded to the colonialist aims of boarding schools or how American penitentiaries adapted techniques developed in other parts of the world—are sometimes rushed and in need of elaboration. Nevertheless, Weber drives home the importance of reckoning with the nation’s penal history: “As the migration to American cities of militarized police and torture techniques from overseas sites like Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib renew concern over the consequences of war making at home, the United States continues to train police forces and export its model of incarceration abroad.”

A timely consideration of the geopolitical role of American prisons.

INVERSE COWGIRL

A Memoir

Weigel, Alicia Roth
HarperOne (240 pp.)
$18.99 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
9780063295285

An intersex advocate maps a journey from the closet to committed activism. Diagnosed with complete androgen insensitivity syndrome as an infant, Weigel underwent nonconsensual surgeries (like the removal of internal testes) well before her first birthday. By recouping her body, doctors and her parents hoped to help the author “pass” as a woman—albeit an infertile one—one later on. Instead, Weigel became haunted by feelings of dissociation from childhood on. In her first book, the author traces her journey to physical reclamation by telling the stories behind the tattoos inked on her body. Her first essay revolves around a shoulder tattoo of an orchid. Derived from the Greek word for testicle, the orchid (as a symbol) represented Weigel’s excised testes, which resulted in postmenopausal symptoms by the time she reached kindergarten and forced her into permanent reliance on hormone replacement therapy. In the essay titled “Figa,” the author explores how a closed-fist tattoo acquired on one of her many travels around the world came to represent the “struggle for safety” that female-presenting bodies like hers too often experience in a world that victimizes not only sexual minorities, but anyone who deviates from the (racist, classist, patriarchal) “norm.” Another essay reflects on how going to Austin to help former Texas Sen. Wendy Davis train the next generation of
female activists led her to work on the infamous Texas “bathroom bill.” That project led Weigel to a public coming out about her intersexuality, helped her forge life-changing alliances with intersex and trans activists, and inspired her to proclaim her presence to the world with a finger tattoo that reads “I ExyST.”

Insightful, fierce, and candid, this book is a welcome addition to the growing body of personal accounts about living as a member of one of the most marginalized, silenced, and misunderstood of sexual minorities.

An inspiring, eye-opening memoir that will educate many readers.

THE END OF EDEN
Wild Nature in the Age of Climate Breakdown
Welz, Adam
Bloomsbury (288 pp.)
$28.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781635575224

Detailed case studies of climate breakdown.

Attempting to fully comprehend the magnitude of global climate change can feel next to impossible. In this deeply researched and disturbing book, photographer and environmental writer Welz helps us understand it "through smaller stories." Moving among far-flung ecosystems — e.g., the Mojave Desert, South Africa’s Cape Floral Region, the high-altitude grasslands of Central Asia — the author presents climate change in focused snapshots. Each case study of an ecosystem tracks how small increases in local temperature ripple through and cause damage. In New England, where cold winters once killed off most winter ticks, “a tiny increase in winter minimum temperatures” now helps ticks survive the cold months to infest and kill 90% of moose calves before they can reach adulthood. In the Kalahari, where average midday temperatures rose 3 degrees Celsius in the past decade, hornbills are lethally overheating as they try to gather food, unable to adequately feed themselves or their young. Through these eye-opening stories from around the world, Welz makes a vigorous, multifaceted case for acting against species extinction as the planet keeps warming. He is convincing in his arguments that plants and animals have intrinsic rights to exist; destroying biodiversity impoverishes the human experience of the world; and, because organisms on Earth have evolved remarkably wide-ranging adaptations, we can’t possibly anticipate how those that seem to have no “obvious use” to us now may become necessary to our survival as our environment changes. By the time Michelle Yeoh (who provides a foreword to the book) stepped up in the wildly enjoyable Everything Everywhere All at Once, Asian faces on the screen were no longer remarkable. Fortunately, most of the movies Yang discusses can be accessed in some way, and many readers will find themselves making a list. Perhaps the author might have delved deeper into the future of Asian American cinema, but this is not a fatal shortcoming, and the book is a fun, informative piece of work.

Whether you dip into it or read it from cover to cover, this book brings a hidden history to life.

THE GOLDEN SCREEN
The Movies That Made Asian America
Yang, Jeff
Black Dog & Leventhal (304 pp.)
$40.00 | Oct. 31, 2023
9780762482221

A wide-ranging celebration of Asian Americans in film.

Once opened, this book is hard to close. Lushly produced with a mix of screenshots and illustrations, it unravels the history of Asian cinema in the U.S., punctuated by interviews with important figures. Yang, co-author of Rise: A Pop History of Asian America From the Nineties to Now, has worked in this area for long enough to speak with understated authority, and he looks at 136 films, providing reviews and background information. He groups them into categories such as immigration, family, action, and romance, which demonstrates the breadth of Asian cinema. His criteria for inclusion seem rather loose, with some movies made by Asian directors, some made in Asia that were imported by U.S. distributors, some with Asian headline stars, and others where only a minor character is Asian. In Hollywood movies in the postwar era, Asian characters were often portrayed by Westerners with heavy makeup and appalling accents, and most were pushed into stereotypical roles. But there was a slow process of change, helped along by directors like John Woo and Ang Lee. On the anime side, the visually stunning Akira (1988) broke through to the American teenage audience. Slumdog Millionaire won a slew of awards, and the huge success of Crazy Rich Asians cemented the commercial viability of Asian-themed movies. By the time Michelle Yeoh (who provides a foreword to the book) stepped up in the wildly enjoyable Everything Everywhere All at Once, Asian faces on the screen were no longer remarkable. Fortunately, most of the movies Yang discusses can be accessed in some way, and many readers will find themselves making a list. Perhaps the author might have delved deeper into the future of Asian American cinema, but this is not a fatal shortcoming, and the book is a fun, informative piece of work.

Whether you dip into it or read it from cover to cover, this book brings a hidden history to life.
These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

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MAMA'S SLEEPING SCARF
Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi
Illus. by Joelle Avellino
Knopf (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
978-0-593-53557-8

A young Black child plays with her mama's sleeping scarf while Mama is gone.

In her children's book debut, Adichie (writing as Nwa Grace-James) presents a story of a girl named Chino who admires her mother's soft, silky scarf. When Mama has to go to work, she offers Chino her sleeping scarf to play with until she returns. The green fabric with “big red circles” and “little blue circles” can be a blanket for her stuffed bunny, a curtain for peekaboo, and a scarf for Chino, which she wears at dinner when Mama comes home. Finally the scarf returns to Mama at bedtime. Throughout the day, spent playing games, eating snacks, and exercising with Papa, Grandpa, Grandma, and Bunny, the scarf connects Chino to Mama. Avellino's playful illustrations depict a family with a range of skin tones and hair colors, a refreshing reflection of the true diversity of the Black community. Bright, fantastical backgrounds with repeating circular patterns feature various shapes and colors while placing the focus on Chino’s relationships with her loved ones. The straightforward text lingers on each scene, inviting readers to dwell in Chino’s world. This is a cozy read-aloud to help little ones wind down before a nap or bed. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

Solidly reassuring. *(Picture book. 3-6)*

DEEPHAVEN
Aldridge, Ethan M.
Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins
(288 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780063283169

A student at a mysterious boarding school faces a supernatural mystery.

Guinevere “Nev” Tallow is a first-year student at Deephaven Academy, which they had never heard of before receiving a mysterious pamphlet and letter inviting them to attend. As they attempt to settle into their new life, they discover that the locked east wing of the dormitory harbors a secret, as does the seemingly flawless prefect, Patience...
I came relatively late to graphic novels; when I was growing up in the ‘90s, no teacher or librarian ever recommended one to me, and it wasn’t until I took a course on graphic novels in library school that I really understood what made these books so special. I’m a bit envious of today’s kids, growing up with access to so many wonderful works of graphic literature. Every year, I’m bowled over by the new middle-grade offerings I see, and this year is no exception. These titles are among my favorites of 2023 so far; they’ll have children and adults alike spellbound.

Zach Weinersmith and Boulet’s *Bea Wolf* (First Second, March 21) is a modern-day retelling of *Beowulf* that recasts the protagonists as suburban children waging war against the forces of evil: teens and adults. The monster Grendel becomes Mr. Grindle, a cantankerous middle-aged man with the power to preternaturally age anyone he touches; our hero is Bea Wolf, a “flower-skirted fighter” with the strength of 60 kids in each hand. Weinersmith’s marvelously dramatic verse is matched beat for beat by Boulet’s grotesquely gorgeous artwork, and though the story is laugh-out-loud hilarious, it’s also threaded with a sense of sorrow for the fleeting nature of childhood.

Betty C. Tang’s *Parachute Kids* (Graphix/Scholastic, April 4) follows three kids who, in 1981, emigrate from Taiwan to the United States, where they must live on their own after their parents return home due to visa issues. Though Tang doesn’t gloss over the difficulties that the siblings encounter, her cheerful artwork makes their challenges feel manageable; this is a moving, forthright, yet ultimately uplifting look at the immigration experience.

Jerry Craft’s *School Trip* (Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins, April 4) finds Jordan Banks at a crossroads as junior high comes to an end: Should he attend art school or stay at Riverdale Academy Day School? As one of the few Black students at RAD, Jordan once felt out of place, but he’s made good friends, and he faces a tough choice. A class trip to Paris is a much-needed distraction. Like *New Kid* (2019) and *Class Act* (2020), this installment includes plenty of visual gags and humorous excerpts from Jordan’s sketchbook, all of which make the more serious excerpts—the frustrations of marginalized students, mean-spirited Andy’s realization that he’s a bully—go down easy.

In Pedro Martín’s ‘70s-set graphic memoir, *Mexikid* (Dial Books, Aug. 1), a trip south of the border proves eye-opening. Born in the U.S., young Pedro has never felt as strong a connection to Mexico as his parents and older siblings, who were born there, but that changes on this journey, especially as he grows closer to his abuelito. Accompanied by charming, retro-style illustrations, this is a heartfelt ode to family and culture.

In Noah Van Sciver and Marlena Myles’ *Paul Bunyan: The Invention of an American Legend* (Toon Books/Astra Books for Young Readers, Aug. 8), a timber marketing executive traveling through Minnesota by train regales his fellow passengers with stories of the famed lumberjack. As the tales get taller, skeptics question him until the myth of Paul Bunyan is finally revealed to be a marketing ploy that conceals darker truths about the theft of land from Indigenous peoples. That Bunyan is the spitting image of the timber exec drives home the point even further. Thoughtful backmatter expands on the historical erasure of Indigenous perspectives and will leave readers eager for more history texts that center marginalized voices.

Mahnaz Dar is a young readers’ editor.
Sleepwell. Nev, who is minimally described but appears white in illustrations, is a clever, self-reliant main character who’s easy for readers to relate to. Despite the evocative atmosphere—the story is set in the 1940s in a remote part of New England—the magical worldbuilding is frustratingly vague. The school may or may not teach magic, and it’s unclear exactly how the universe of Deephaven works or why Nev was invited there. This and many other questions, including character motivations, are left unanswered, which makes it hard to feel satisfied with the otherwise enjoyable, spooky main plotline. Nev’s nonbinary identity is as well as the racial diversity of the supporting cast are non-issues, and readers may enjoy this escape from historical transphobia and racism. The illustrations are a highlight: reminiscent of etchings in an old storybook but with a modern graphic-novel flavor.

Readers will hope the second volume delivers after this partially successful opener. (Supernatural. 8-13)

THE GREATEST KID IN THE WORLD
Anderson, John David
Walden Pond Press/HarperCollins
(368 pp.)
$19.99 | May 9, 2023
9780062986030

Do you have to be good to be great?

Twelve-year-old Zeke Stahls wants to be good—or rather, he wants to want to be good, but he has an irrepressible mischievous streak. He is a dreamer and a schemer, both qualities that can lead to greatness but that, in Zeke’s hands, look more like a series of escalating pranks. Though certainly innovative, these hijinks do not endear him to his teachers and frequently cause his mother, a hardworking single parent, to clean up his messes—literally and figuratively. So it’s surprising to Zeke when he receives a letter from Gordon Notts, charitable programming director of the Klein Agency for the Betterment of All Mankind, inviting him to participate in a competition for the title of World’s Greatest Kid. Aware that he’s no kind of altruist, Zeke disregards the letter, but when Gordon Notts appears on his doorstep, Zeke is presented with a complex problem—a Gordian knot, if you will: Should he participate in an impossible contest on the off chance that he could win the $10,000 prize his family desperately needs? Of course he should. There is no shortage of enjoyable golden-hearted rascal stories in middle-grade fiction, and this one stands comfortably among them. Though readers will find no big surprises here, the character development, pacing, and writing are strong, making it an enjoyable read. Zeke and his family read white.

The world’s OK-est kid makes good in this fun romp. (Fiction. 8-12)

BEAK TO THE FUTURE
Angleberger, Tom
Walker US/Candlewick (208 pp.)
$12.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781536223224
Series: Two-Headed Chicken, 2

Among the infinite universes of the multiverse, anything is possible...even time travel.

The title character of Angleberger’s Two-Headed Chicken (2022) is back (or should we say beak?) and as unhinged as ever. The universe has turned inside out, the beginning of the book is the end, one of the previously dimwitted chicken heads is now a genius and has invented a time-traveling device called the Timecap, and the Astrocap (which allowed the chickens to travel to different universes) has been lost in the infinite possibilities that form the chronoverse. The chicken must attempt to travel through the past without irreparably damaging either the multiverse or the chronoverse. It’s about as convoluted as it sounds, though the story lacks the substance to make sense of that intricacy. Admittedly, this sequel has more of a coherent plot than its predecessor, and its numerous references are slightly more sophisticated. Familiar characters make appearances, with nearly enough background provided to allow this volume to stand alone. The various antics and shenanigans are funny and well served by the dynamic art. Interactive pages create an extra level of engagement, although they occasionally feel like desperate efforts to drum up enthusiasm.

Amusing but little else. (Graphic fiction. 8-12)

TACOS
Asch, Frank
Aladdin (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781481480666

Baby Bear travels to Arizona with Papa Bear and discovers...tacos.

Papa Bear tells his family they can come on his business trip, but Mama Bear can’t go because she’s busy with a library book sale. Baby Bear worries about myriad things she usually manages, but Papa Bear assures him he’ll take care of everything. Readers may raise an eyebrow at Baby Bear’s perception of his father’s ineptitude, but all goes well—mercifully without hackneyed Mr. Mom mishaps. The duo enjoy their flight, swim in the hotel pool, explore “the colorful streets,” and order tacos at a restaurant, but while the bright cartoon illustrations will feel familiar to those who know Asch’s work, they do little to expand on the staid text. The fact that these are Baby Bear's first tacos may also leave readers wondering how the anthropomorphic cub hasn't encountered such a ubiquitous food. Indeed, the depiction of Arizona makes it seem like a strange and unfamiliar locale, belying the diversity of the United States and the Latin presence throughout the country.
Also potentially confusing is the lack of attention to Papa Bear’s business on this trip and what Baby Bear does during Papa’s work time. The pair’s return home is happy once Papa Bear assures Baby Bear that they can make and eat tacos there, too. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Rather bland, especially given the titular food’s customary spice. (Picture book. 3-5)

I AM AN ANTIRACIST SUPERHERO With Activities To Help You Be One Too!
Bacon, Jennifer Nicole
Illus. by Letícia Moreno
Bala Kids/Shambhala (32 pp.)
$18.95 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781645470984

In the wake of the police killing of George Floyd, kids like Malik are learning how to be thoughtfully involved in their communities.

First grader Malik has a lot of questions for Mommy and Daddy when the three of them (all of whom are Black) happen upon a diverse group of people protesting the death of Floyd. The answers Malik’s noticeably distressed parents have to offer are concise but straight to the point—they inform Malik that Floyd was “a Black man who was killed by the police because of the color of his skin” and lay out the basics of racism. A tonal shift in his parents’ expressions and Moreno’s illustrations—from full colors and layered digital brush strokes to a more playfully flattened, minimalistic line drawing style—sees Malik go from frowning at the grown-up–sized problems of the world to learning of actionable, kid-sized solutions. The suggested “superhero” tactics—looking, listening, feeling, and acting—are inspired by named young anti-racist activists like Wynta-Amor Rogers but are made accessible to readers with schoolyard examples; Bacon stresses that these strategies can also be applied to situations where racism isn’t as pronounced or explicit. Activities to reinforce these lessons and a glossary of productive terms to further these discussions at home or in formalized instruction make for an overall productive addition to any collection of youth activism resources. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A smart, step-by-step guide to anti-racism superheroics. (author’s note) (Picture book. 5-8)

WILDFIRE
Bard, Bruno
Colors by Andrea Bell
Little, Brown Ink (288 pp.)
$12.99 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9780316277655

This graphic novel embeds environmental knowledge into a thoughtful and realistic narrative.

When Julianna’s family loses their Western Oregon farm in a wildfire ignited by a bottle rocket launched by some of her classmates, they relocate to Portland. Julianna chooses not to tell her new, politically engaged eighth grade friends about the fire. They encourage her to join the school’s environmental club, and she does so reluctantly as she struggles to understand the deeper, underlying, interconnected causes of what happened. The secret becomes a shared one when Carson, who was part of the group that started the fire, arrives at Julianna’s school and joins the club as part of his mandated community service. As the kids learn more about climate change and take collaborative action through cleanups, tree planting, and protest, the stress Julianna is under builds until she becomes overwhelmed and bravely takes steps toward processing her grief and finding her voice. Thickly outlined, vividly colored art illustrates the story clearly with close attention to setting and mood. Dynamic word balloons stretch and connect across panels, illuminating the natural cadence of spirited everyday conversations. Reflection and curiosity—as well as practical explanations and perspectives about subjects related to environmentalism—are modeled and encouraged by caring, complex characters. As her father reminds Julianna, “two things can both be true.” Main characters are light-skinned; racial diversity is evident in the supporting cast.

A compassionate, action-focused story about climate justice, relationships, trauma, and healing. (author’s note, resources) (Graphic fiction. 8-14)

THE WELCOME HOME
Bates, Amy June
Paula Wiseman/Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781534492325

Their search for something “soft” and “waggy” turns Mr. and Mrs. Gargle-Bittle’s house into a menagerie.

The darling couple with love and a home to share “want… something a little bit lick-your-face-play-fetch-roll-over-rub-its-belly-and-chase-its-tail.” They start with a snail they name Gordon. But Gordon isn’t quite waggy enough, so on they go looking for just the right thing, acquiring an elephant, a whale, an octopus, and a wombat, among many other animals. Finally, they find just the right fluffy, waggy, lick-y sort of creature. Bates’ illustrations are absolute perfection. Each scratch of colored
pencil is expertly used, adding shadow, a glowing warmth, and texture. The title page, depicting a framed portrait of the protagonists, each sporting a yellow flower, makes clear from the start that Mr. and Mrs. Gargleson-Bittle are a quirky, loving, and expressive pair. Everything from their grooming to their joy is believable and apparent. All the creatures they welcome into their home are equally dynamic: the snail curled up in a bassinet, the octopus with its multitasking tentacles, even the disgruntled cat who refuses to fetch. Bates has created two characters whose “the more, the merrier” attitude makes for a deeply loving home where everyone belongs. The gorgeous illustrations and lovely storyline make this an instant classic. Mrs. Gargleson-Bittle is brown-skinned; Mr. Gargleson-Bittle is light-skinned. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A feel-good read deserving of a permanent home on bookshelves. (Picture book 4-7)

I AM DOG!
Bently, Peter
Illus. by Chris Chatterton
Penguin Workshop (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780593520871

“It’s a dog’s life.”

A spotted pup and a dark-skinned child with puffy ponytails play and cuddle and mess their way through a day together. Dog narrates the story. “I am Dog. Dog is me. I like walkies. I like trees.” “I like rolls in foxy pong. Foxy pong is nice and strong.” Dog chases the neighbor cat, steals sausages, and sniffs other doggs. There is much word repetition for rhythm’s sake. “I like scratchy-scratchy tum. I like sniffy-sniffy bum.” In the evening, Dog jumps on the table, making a mess of dinner. “I am Dog. Dog is me.”

“A fine and funny dog’s-eye view of a loving relationship. (Picture book 2-6)

THE WALK
Bingham, Winsome
Illus. by E.B. Lewis
Abrams (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781419747724

Granny is taking her grandchild on “THE WALK,” but she doesn’t say where they are going—only that “there’s a few treasured souls coming, too.” With a backpack, water, and sandwiches, the young narrator and Granny “WALK ON,” stopping at a neighbor’s house, the barber shop, and Mrs. Wong’s. At each stop, the child wonders if they’ve reached their destination, but instead, more people from the neighborhood join their walk. At last, the crowd arrives at the child’s school—but there’s no school today. Granny reveals the reason all these “treasured souls” have walked all this way—“for hope” and to “speak up.” Bingham effectively carries readers through an important yet simple event while conveying its significance as a milestone for an individual, a family, a community, and a nation. The child’s-eye view of the day, clear prose, and strong relationships between characters make this an engrossing read, while statements about injustice are communicated subtly in comments between adult characters and the length of the walk itself—layers that can be unpacked with children who are ready to learn more. Lewis’ work is at its best here; detailed watercolor paintings immerse readers in the life of a multicultural community on a bright day. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

This lovely introduction to an essential topic will be a new classic. (Picture book 4-8)

MONSTER-SCARED
Birkjær, Betina
Illus. by Zarah Juul
Trans. by Katrine Øgaard Jensen & Orien Longo
Transit Books (32 pp.)
$18.95 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781945492747

In this Danish import, a child is certain there’s a monster in the attic.

Creepy monster faces and claws border some of the pages, show up in shadows, and are visible to the young narrator when the child’s eyes are closed. Most of the monochromatic settings are rendered in gray-browns. A few details appear in color: the youngster’s pinkish face and ruddy cheeks, small objects. Despite the menacing beasts conjured in the child’s imagination, there are cozy retreats, and although the mother admits that her offspring’s monster drawing is pretty scary, she explains that the overhead noise is just an animal “building a hidey-hole.” Their conversations contain wry humor. When invited to investigate, the child is too busy. “Busy doing what?” Mom asks. “Something.” I say.” Ultimately, the protagonist braves the steps to discover a pleasant space with “fun things.” The parent unearth a trumpet to add to the child’s one-man-band attempts to drown out the offending sounds. The concluding garret scene reveals a small pink monster mirroring the pose in the child’s drawing. The creature is wearing a striped shirt, a hat, and horned hat, just like the protagonist—food for thought. Birkjær’s portrayal of a supportive mother (who never panders) and Juul’s visual narrative depicting emotional growth in a subtle, inventive manner—starting with the contrasting
**Princess Beautiful** is wildly popular, racking up over 3 billion views. Beautiful, a delightful new addition to the Bad Guys universe, is a true diva, glamorous and self-obsessed yet perpetually uneasy. Each character she encounters is equally dramatic and broad, and every turn of the page brings a moment of Isabella's outburst is par for the course in the life of a superfamous cat. The perils of online celebrity take the form of frantic calamities.

Princess Beautiful needs her vanilla latte! Right now! No, make that a green tea! She's preparing for a date with suave billionaire Catrick Cash, and she's all out of sorts. This sort of-outburst is par for the course in the life of a superfamous cat. Princess Beautiful is wildly popular, racking up over 3 billion views, and her acting career seems a bit off. Princess Beautiful, set up by shadowy enemies, swiftly finds public opinion turned against her. She's arrested, spectacularly destroys a prison bus and a Supermax prison, and is inexplicably terrified, abruptly ordering her into his truck. When Popppop goes missing a day later, Micah's instincts lead her back to Finch House. Torn between keeping her promise to stay away from Finch House and searching it for Popppop, Micah accepts Theo's invitation inside, where she learns that not only is it haunted, she is trapped! More than a mere ghost story, the brilliantly woven, engaging tale that unfolds is one of local disappearances, hidden family secrets, and trauma. Readers will be hooked as Micah attempts to escape Finch House's grip. Micah and Popppop are Black; Theo is cued white.

**A supremely successful, atmospheric tale of horror. (Horror: 8-13)**

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**FINCH HOUSE**
*Bushby, Aisha*
McElderry (208 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781338831825
Series: Cat on the Run, 1


Micah must convince an old, haunted Victorian house to release its hold over her and her loved ones.

Eleven-year-old Micah has lived most of her life in her grandfather’s house. Now she and her mom are preparing to move an hour away. Not only does Micah worry about Poppop being alone, she’ll also miss their weekend trips going through other people’s trash in search of possible treasures. Biking through the streets to avoid packing, Micah notices the run-down and abandoned Finch House, which has a mysterious and sinister past. Though Poppop has forbidden her to go near it, she finds herself drawn to the place. To her surprise, Finch House has been renovated, and a boy named Theo tells her he and his family have moved in. Popppop arrives to collect Micah and is inexplicably terrified, abruptly ordering her into his truck. When Popppop goes missing a day later, Micah's instincts lead her back to Finch House. Torn between keeping her promise to stay away from Finch House and searching it for Popppop, Micah accepts Theo's invitation inside, where she learns that not only is it haunted, she is trapped! More than a mere ghost story, the brilliantly woven, engaging tale that unfolds is one of local disappearances, hidden family secrets, and trauma. Readers will be hooked as Micah attempts to escape Finch House's grip. Micah and Popppop are Black; Theo is cued white.

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**A POCKETFUL OF STARS**
*Bushby, Aisha*
Carolrhoda (248 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781728450698

A British teen tries to save her coma-tose mother through dreams that resemble a video game.

After her parents' divorce when she was 9, Safiya Fisher chose to live with her English dad. Thirteen-year-old Safiya loves playing video games, but her theater-loving mother doesn't understand or respect her interest in them, and their differences are straining their relationship. When Mum has a stroke and ends up in a coma, Safiya instantly regrets pushing her away. During hospital visits, Safiya starts falling asleep and has strange dreams, which she realizes are her mother's memories of growing up in Kuwait. These dreams start to feel like the video games Safiya is always playing, and she becomes convinced she can help her mother wake up if only she can find a way to finish the game. As Safiya visits her mother's childhood home through these dreams, she realizes the similarities between herself and her mother at 13. While Safiya progresses in her video game dreams, her confidence grows, and this trickles into her reality. Tragedy comes early in the novel, while Safiya's exploration and maturation build slowly, pulling readers in as they inevitably become invested in her journey of personal development. Bushby writes with nuance and skill about a mother-daughter relationship fraught with misunderstanding, and Safiya's eventual realizations are equal parts uplifting and heartbreaking.

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**A poignantly written novel that is hard to put down and even harder to forget. (discussion questions, resources) (Fiction: 10-14)**
“An infectiously gleeful celebration of art and being true to yourself.”

MELVINA WHITMOORE (MORE OR LESS A HORROR STORY)

Capalia, Faith
Harper/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780063247826

A woman afraid of everything finally finds her safe place.

From dogs and snails to tracking mud in the house and her shadow, Melvina’s fears certainly run the gamut. For some unexplained reason, Melvina believes a new house will be her safe place. But alas, she’s roused from her bedtime reading by a host of boojums whooping it up downstairs. Melvina runs back to her bedroom only to have the creatures follow her…and apologize for crashing her housewarming party. Melvina joins them, “free to have all the fun she wanted”; she “had finally found somewhere safe.” The abrupt ending doesn’t explain how Melvina got over her fears, and the artwork doesn’t fill in the gaps. Quite the opposite—in fact—the cast of a mummy, a green creature with a removable head, a werewolf, an oozy green blob, a skeleton, a Big Bird–like beast in shorts and shoes, and a cross between a centipede and a dragon may just give readers some new fears. Melvina is a pudgy elderly woman in a turban who wears her orange-and-green fur-trimmed coat in every scene. Her skin is the white of the page.

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Unsatisfying on many levels. (Picture book: 5-9)

THE GOBLIN TWINS

Cha, Frances
Illus. by Jaime Kim
Crown (40 pp.)
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Sept. 5, 2023
9780593480229
9780593480229 PLB

A pair of mischievous siblings discover a new world.

At 601 years old, Doki and Kebi are considered goofy and immature by the other dokkaebi (Korean goblins). Yet that doesn’t hold them back from pursuing their own interests. Doki, who is bright orange with purple hair and one yellow horn, doesn’t like to scare people and instead gives them gold or silver, which he magically conjures up with his club. He also loves spending time in the abandoned house where he lives, reading books. Kebi, his blue-skinned, green-haired, two-horned twin, is his opposite. He loves “scaring people a bit too much” as well as exploring. After hearing that their house in Seoul is going to be demolished, Kebi suggests that the two go to New York, where “there are haunted houses, and people go visit them” (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A sweet, comical Halloween venture for all. (Picture book: 5-9)

LUPE LOPEZ

Reading Rock Star!

Charlton-Trujillo, E. E. & Pat Zietlow Miller
Illus. by Joe Cepeda
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$17.99 | June 13, 2023
9781536209556
Series: Lupe Lopez

Miniature rock star Lupe Lopez takes on her next big battle—reading!

Start a band in kindergarten? Done that! Now it’s the first day of first grade at Hector P. Garcia Elementary School, and our protagonist, whom readers may remember from Lupe Lopez: Rock Star Rules! (2022), is ready. Her goal for the year? Become a Reading Rock Star. With her pencil drumsticks in hand and pals beside her, Lupe swagger into class prepared to read. Her first attempt at reading in class…doesn’t go too well. Worse yet, Victor Valdez (who’s totally in Group B and not Group A for Awesome like Lupe) seizes every opportunity to embarrass Lupe. It sure seems like “the worst day a first-grader ever had at Hector P. Garcia Elementary.” The following day, Ms. Moreno shares a sweet secret with a crestfallen Lupe: “Reading is like music.” Aha! Before long, Lupe bangs out to the beat of reading, one step closer to her rock star dream. A delightful romp, Lupe’s latest adventure leaves on the page with a “BOOM-TI-CAM!” The authors bolster Lupe’s infectious sass even further, serving up the humorous melodrama that boosts her eventual comeback song. Hector P. Garcia Elementary remains a community of primarily brown-skinned, Latine-cued students and teachers, with a few words in Spanish sprinkled throughout. The artwork favors bold blues, lush purples, and creamy pinks, veering from solid swaths to fizzy bursts as Lupe ascends from reluctant reader to Reading Rock Star. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A winning primer on how to rock reading. (Picture book: 6-9)

OH, OLIVE!

Cho, Lian
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins
(40 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780063237490

A young iconoclast shames things up.

Debut author Cho introduces us to the rambunctious Olive Chen, who lives in an orderly, monochromatic town and enjoys splattering, smearing, and licking paint to create exuberantly colorful masterpieces. Olive believes that she is the “most
A First Time For Everything

Travel and first love take center stage in Caldecott winner Dan Santat’s graphic memoir

BY MAHNAZ DAR

Nora Ephron famously said that “Everything is copy”—a statement that Dan Santat might agree with. With A First Time for Everything (First Second, Feb. 28), a graphic memoir that chronicles his 1989 middle school trip to Europe, he shares all: the good, the bad, and the full-body-cringe-inducingly awkward. The book sees 13-year-old Dan grow from an insecure wallflower into a more confident young person as he takes risks. Most terrifying—and wonderful—of all, he meets and falls in love with his first girlfriend, Amy. Along the way, Santat lays bare his most intimate, and embarrassing, memories, from a disastrous speech delivered before an assembly of jeering peers to his first kiss with Amy (aiming for her cheek, he lands on her ear). As he tells Kirkus via Zoom from his home in Pasadena, California, “My job with this book was to lean into those awkward moments, because that’s honestly where the good stuff is when it comes to storytelling.”

The book has been years in the making—he charts its origins to 2018, when one of his sons, then 13, asked him about the first time he’d ever fallen in love. So Santat told both his children about the trip, “Their jaws just dropped wide open, just hearing about what it was like for their father to grow up in the 1980s.” Some adults may raise a few eyebrows—in Munich, where the drinking age was 14 at the time, young Dan, encouraged by a permissive teacher, gulps down a beer; wanders Paris without adult supervision; and is chased by a horde of angry punks after stealing a bicycle in Salzburg. Santat is aware that sometimes parents “try to give off this persona that we are perfect and that we can solve all the problems, because we don’t want our kids to worry about things.” But he wanted to be candid about his experiences, to depict both his triumphs and his mistakes.

Though known for his picture books, among them the Caldecott-winning The Adventures of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend (2014), Santat finds the graphic format a little less constraining. “You can paint these broad strokes—like, we were traveling through London, we were traveling through Switzerland. But then you can laser-focus on particular moments—here we are in the middle of a park, and we’re listening to Beethoven being played with the string orchestra, and I remember dancing with you.”

The book has struck a chord with readers, he adds. “One of the comments that I get from a lot of people is, It felt like I was really there on the trip, it felt like I was on the bus. Maybe there is something to be said about the graphic novel format in terms of injecting someone into a particular time period.”

Santat relied on journals, photos, and letters saved by Amy, whose meticulous notes detailed everything from hotel names to weather conditions. The two also reminisced about the trip; Amy confided that her curly hair on the trip was the result of a perm she hated—a detail that made it into the book. “It was almost like being in character and reliving these moments,” he says.
He’s stayed in contact with other friends from the trip, like Shelley, who told him that she framed a picture of a dragon he drew for her. As Santat worked on the book, he posted sketches on Instagram, and other students came out of the woodwork, sharing their own memories. “In a weird way, the book kind of turned into a yearbook,” he says. “Here’s one last souvenir from this trip from 35 years ago.”

One of the most poignant scenes came from an unexpected source. Young Dan flashes back to a time before the European trip, when Shelley unexpectedly got her period, so he loaned her a sweater and gave her a ride home—something both he and Shelley had forgotten about until his mother reminded him. Moments like these “add color, because you don’t want these one-dimensional characters...the comic relief or the angry girl,” Santat says. Though he “was always willing to put myself through the wringer,” Santat was protective when it came to depicting others’ vulnerable moments; he shared that scene with Shelley to make sure she was comfortable with it.

While Santat had come to terms with some of his more humiliating moments long before writing the book, he believes that creating a graphic memoir can be therapeutic—even if artists never share the finished product with anyone. “It will give you a greater understanding about yourself and why you feel that way. And as a result, you might be able to come to a certain peace with it,” he says.

Writing a memoir can also be a joyful experience, Santat says, especially when revisiting treasured memories. “It’s almost like you’re having a conversation with your younger self. And I think that’s absolutely beautiful.”

A First Time for Everything received a starred review in the Dec. 15, 2022, issue.

magnificent and brilliant artist in the whole wide world.” Her parents, on the other hand, have their doubts. Serious artists, they wonder when Olive does not paint perfectly precise squares and triangles just like them. They send her to art class, but even after a year of lessons Olive does not paint any shapes. She does, however, find admirers among her classmates, who ask her to teach them her trademark style. Together, they envelop the town with an explosion of color, all the way to her parents’ museum....This humorous tale has an undeniable charm and serves as a reminder to serious adults of the wonderful possibilities of embracing new ways of thinking and doing. Cho perfectly captures the pure effervescence of children creating art with her vibrant use of color and Olive’s wide-mouthed, exaggerated expressions as she romps about. Readers will enjoy poring over the small details and stories hidden within the town before, during, and after the color transformation. Olive and her parents are cued Chinese; her classmates are diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An infectiously gleeful celebration of art and being true to yourself. (Picture book 4-8)

PLOOF
Clanton, Ben & Andy Chou Musser
Tundra Books (56 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781774881927

A lonely little cloud named Ploof needs your help.

This interactive picture book directly addresses children, encouraging participation with Ploof. When Ploof is feeling shy, readers are told to clap for encouragement. Similarly, when the cloud “runs...out of steam,” readers are asked to “blow softly on Ploof” to “puff Ploof back up.” The illustrations are simple and clear. For the most part, the recto of each spread includes text set against a white background, while the verso depicts the cloud against a soft, sky-blue background—an effect that focuses readers’ attention on Ploof. This little white cotton ball of a cloud has an expressive face and large, oval-shaped eyes, used to great effect to convey Ploof’s shyness, weariness, and worry. The seek-and-find pages might be the most fun; readers must spot Ploof, who’s hiding among a field of sheep and in a sky full of kites. Interactive books like this are popular for a reason, and this one fits the mold rather than breaking it. Adults and caregivers looking for a sweet, reader-facing read-aloud will be satisfied with this one; those seeking something nonformulaic need to look elsewhere. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Fluffy and fun, as expected. (Picture book 2-5)
An alliterative animal abecedarium for avid apprentices.

THE IMAGINARY ALPHABET

Daigneault, Sylvie
Pajama Press (64 pp.)
$22.95 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781772782998

An alliterative animal abecedarium for avid apprentices. This whimsical yet elegant alphabet book unfolds in a series of 26 vignettes. Daigneault crafts scenes bursting with opportunity for further exploration of each sound. “C,” for example, is “Clumsy Camel Cutting a Crunchy Cake.” The accompanying illustration depicts the long-legged shaggy beast perched on a chair, cutting a toppling cake, while a curious cat looks on (clouds dotting the sky and a candy shop in the background). The letter C on the opposing page is formed out of a prickly cactus. Readers will delight not simply in the sounds, but also in the strange juxtaposition of the quirky subjects, drawn in lavish, ornate style. Of course, even the more uncommon letters are given time to shine. “Quick-tempered Quails Quarrelling in a Queue” finds a line of feathered friends in heated debate along a quay, near a shop selling quiches and quahogs. Some scenes feel a bit cluttered (the hallway where a happy hippo hops is filled with a helmet, a hamster, a helicopter, hornets, horns, hummingbirds, and more), but most strike a delicate balance of both accurate description and intricately added details. A list of other items to spot is appended. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Fun with phonics. (Picture book. 3-6)

THE DREAMATICS

Cuevas, Michelle
Rocky Pond Books/Penguin (240 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780593532225

A story about the power of teamwork, dedication, and how dreams come to be. Ten-year-old Luna Grande lives with her fathers, Dad and Papa, and Murph, the dog she adores. Each night she has vivid dreams that are brought to life by the Dreamatics, a theater troupe at the Lunarian Grand. There are incredible actors, the Unseen Playwright, the Forty-Winks Orchestra, costume designer Tuck, and more—all working together to perform Luna's dreams. They are a happy ensemble who delight in what they do and who love Luna and her family. But one day, when tragedy strikes in Luna's waking world, her dreams are replaced by nightmares, and the Dreamatics are supplanted by Coco and the Bad Dreams.

However, humble stagehand Dormir is determined to save the theater and give Luna her dreams back. This witty, magical, and touching tale will inspire giggles of delight, appreciation of the inner workings of a theater troupe, and wonder at the behind-the-scenes process of dream-making. At its core, this is a story of dedication, loyalty, love, and friendship that takes readers on a roller coaster of emotions and leaves them feeling warm and fuzzy: “Life is not a dress rehearsal....The curtains are up and you are on, so get out there and give it your best shot.” Papa is cued Latine; Dad and Luna are racially ambiguous.

A dreamy, imaginative, and vibrant story full of heart and wordplay. (cast list) (Fiction. 8-12)

CROSS MY HEART AND NEVER LIE

Dåsnes, Nora
Trans. by Matt Bagguley
Hippo Park/Astra Books for Young Readers (248 pp.)
$24.99 | $17.99 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
9781662640544
9781662640575 paper

A new school year brings difficult—and exhilarating—changes for a seventh grader.
In this diary-format graphic novel from Norway, 12-year-old Tuva is looking forward to seeing best friends Bao and Linnéa. The three girls spent the previous school year playing in the woods near their school, but Tuva and Bao are shocked to discover that Linnéa not only has found a boyfriend, she also now scorns their old activities as childish and wants to do “girly things.” Bao has no time for romance, but Tuva is torn between her besties. She still wants to run around in the woods, but she’s secretly curious about love and worried about being left behind. None of the boys she knows seem like soul-mate material. But there’s Mariam, the nice, interesting new girl at school; being around her makes Tuva feel shy, and at first, she’s not sure why. This charming story captures the challenges of navigating strains on friendship bonds; following some emotional highs and lows, the girls reassuringly find their ways back to one another. The sketchy lines of Dåsnes’ digital art combined with the hand-lettered font convey the feeling of a tween’s diary. The fresh color palette with ample white space is visually appealing and effectively adds emotional impact to Tuva’s journey. Baggyley’s translation reads smoothly, and the humorous and intense moments alike read completely naturally. The cast is racially diverse.

An absorbing, sincerely told story of adolescent self-discovery and connection. (author’s note) (Graphic fiction. 9-13)

VEO, VEO, I SEE YOU
Delacre, Lulu
Atheneum (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781665911917

Siblings Marisol and Pepito spot the essential workers in their neighborhood during the Covid-19 lockdown. Thanks to the “bad virus” that closed the stores and restaurants, Mami can no longer cook at Rosita’s Café. Other people, however, do have to work. “Los muy necesarios,” says Mami, the essential workers who make sure there’s power, water, and food. On their way with Mami to deliver food and medicine to older family members, Marisol and Pepito play a game of I Spy (Vevo, Veo) to identify all the essential workers in their neighborhood. “Vevo, veo,” starts Marisol, “a trash collector! He has work!” Pepito sees Nurse Marco returning home from caring for sick people, and Marisol catches Vanessa and Victor hopping in the van that takes them to the chicken plant. All masked, the bus driver, firefighters, and landscaper are hard at work, too. Back at home, Marisol (“Now I see what I had not before”) makes a sign celebrating the essential workers. Delacre ingeniously sets up the game of Vevo, Veo as a conversation between the siblings and Mami that alternates between English and Spanish, leveraging that back and forth to acknowledge the importance of each worker during the unprecedented pandemic lockdown. An author’s note further discloses that these essential workers “were disproportionately Black and Brown.” Fittingly, the collage artwork features a community full of Black and brown folks in a neighborhood rendered in effervescent colors and curved landscapes; the protagonists are brown-skinned and Latine. (This book was reviewed digitally.)
Essentially kindhearted. (Picture book. 4-8)

OH, PANDA
Derby, Cindy
Knopf (40 pp.)
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Sept. 5, 2023
9780593564721
9780593564738 PLB

A great big mountain proves no match for one stubborn little panda.

An intrusive narrator asks Panda about the day’s plans, but our hero is besotted with a magnificent magenta butterfly. Panda follows the fying insect steadily until it flies up the sides of a steep mountain. While the narrator tries to guide Panda back to other activities, the determined bear attempts the climb. After an initial failure (“You’re still a bit too small”), Panda tries again, using sap and branches to get a hold. Nothing works. Only when the narrator accedes to the situation and offers pine-cone snowshoes does Panda reach the summit, and both animal and readers are treated to a breathtaking sight. Children should have no difficulty identifying with the single-minded hero, who gives off some serious Winnie-the-Pooh vibes, while the sometimes-patronizing narrator offers vague parental discouragements. Of course, the real star of the show is the sumptuous watercolor art, infused with deep violets and evocative peaches. In that final image of ice, sunset skies, and flittering butterflies, the book’s earlier subdued colors contrast effectively. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Melding lovely art with toddlerlike determination, this amalgamation of ice castles and vibrant butterflies soars. (Picture book. 3-6)

FAREWELL CUBA, MI ISLA
Diaz, Alexandra
Paula Wiseman/Simon & Schuster (336 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781534495401

Twelve-year-old Victoria is forced to leave her beloved Cuba, not knowing if she will ever be able to return after communist dictator Fidel Castro takes control of the island.

It was a perfect summer on the family finca, or farm, but things start changing quickly. News from outside the island is blocked, and protesters are arrested. Victoria’s father decides he must act fast; as an engineer, Papi knows he and other professionals are being stopped from leaving the country. Forced to abandon everything of value, Victoria, her parents, and siblings
make it to Miami in October 1960; little do they know that they won’t be returning home soon, and life in America is not going to be easy. This is a story of heartbreak that Cuban refugees know well. As Victoria’s family navigates a new culture, where they face misinformed and hostile people, language barriers, and limited job opportunities, Jackie, her beloved cousin left behind in Cuba, witnesses a rise in terror. She ultimately makes the brave choice to leave on her own, through Operation Peter Pan. This accessible story, based on Diaz’s family’s experiences, rings true—the details, including people’s names, food, Spanish words, and more, have an authentically Cuban feel. The main characters are racially diverse, like so many Cuban families. Readers will be able to relate to the coming-of-age elements while learning about an important and difficult part of Cuba’s history.

An evocative and transportive read. (glossary, author’s note) (Historical fiction. 9-13)

A VERY CRANKY BOOK
DiTerlizzi, Angela
Illus. by Tony DiTerlizzi
Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780063206670

A book comes to appreciate story-time with friends. The main character, a blue book, directly addresses readers and is very clear: It is very cranky. Readers should go away now! Find a different book, or go do something else. Even as other books gather, the out-of-sort book firmly declares there is no storytime today. Trying to help, a green book adorned with a monster face shouts, “Boo!”; a goofy-looking joke book begins a knock-knock joke; and the scholarly alphabet book chimes in with “S is for story time!” As the pink fairy-tale book takes charge and begins to tell a story, the very cranky book’s mood slowly improves, but when it declares that it is ready for some reading, it inadvertently ends up insulting most of the other books. The offended books are ready to leave, and the story is about to end when the very cranky book promises to try to be a little more cheerful the next time readers pick it up. The narrative concludes with hugs all around. Humor and creativity abound in both text and illustrations. The very cranky book is larger than life and full of itself. Appealing digitally created illustrations include photos of actual books with added cartoon facial fixtures and details, set against variations of a more muted bookcase backdrop. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Just try to stay cranky during a read-aloud of this one! (Picture book. 4-7)

TAPPING FEET
How Two Cultures Came Together To Make an American Dance
Donohue, Moira Rose
Illus. by Colin Bootman
Reycraft Books (32 pp.)
$16.99 | May 15, 2023
9781478875918

A look at the history of a well-known dance.

In the mid-1800s, Charles Dickens marveled at the fancy footwork of a formerly enslaved man who tapped on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. At the same time enslaved people were fleeing the South for New York City, Irish immigrants flocked to Manhattan to escape the potato famine. New York welcomed neither population, and their shared oppression and mutual love of dance brought them together. Irish Americans danced the jig with a stiff upper body; African Americans moved their whole bodies while tapping, even using some body parts as percussion instruments. As African American and Irish American dancers mixed and mingled in New York’s bustling Five Points neighborhood, William Henry Lane, a Black dancer nicknamed Master Juba, infused aspects of the Irish jig into his performance. Irish American Jack Diamond proposed a dance-off, and after Lane won, they performed together often. The book’s smaller font tells the nonfiction story, while the capitalized Broadway-like font offers a poetic, enticing commentary on tap. Lively images of George M. Cohan, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates, Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Gregory Hines, and Savion Glover appear in the book, but oddly missing is Sammy Davis Jr., perhaps the most iconic Black TV tapper of the 20th century.

Inspirational and informative, this tale of two cultures might spark a love of tap in young readers. (author’s note) (Informational picture book. 7-10)

VLAD, THE FABULOUS VAMPIRE
Drago, Flavia Z.
Candlewick (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781536233322
Series: The World of Gustavo

A vampire struggles with a secret insecurity.

Vladislav Varnaby Roland Dragul is proud of his gothic vampire heritage and displays it through his sophisticated black fashions. He has a secret, though: Behind his tall-collared capes, he hides rosy pink cheeks most unbecoming for the undead. As a fashionista, he’s able to lean into his hobby to disguise his insecurity but is uncomfortable concealing his truth. Just when he’s ready to lead a life of seclusion, his best friend and fellow vampire, Shelley, has a mishap that reveals a shockingly bright physical trait of her own, prompting Vlad to confess his secret. With
GEORGE AND TAO

Dubois, Claude K. Trans. by Daniel Hahn
Gecko Press (48 pp.)
$16.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781776575251

“A darling ode to friendship.”

GEORGE AND TAO

A darling ode to friendship.

In this sweet tale translated from French, a little dog named George meets and befriends a scruffy kitten named Tao. The two of them “look at each other and wag their tails,” and soon they’re playing and roughhousing all day long. Tao is thrilled when George chases him right up the curtain in the living room…until Tao falls. The kitten is scooped up and carried away by a mostly obscured human, and George is left wondering where his friend has gone. Tao isn’t in any of his usual spots—or any unusual ones for that matter. George waits at the door all day long until he is at last happily reunited with his companion, who’s back from a trip to the vet. Veteran children’s author/illustrator Dubois’ straightforward prose is accompanied by loose, expressive watercolor-and-pencil illustrations on simple impressionistic backgrounds. George is brown and very tiny, with adorable floppy ears and exaggerated tails; Tao has orange and brown stripes and is even tinier, though no less cute. While there may not be a sweeping narrative, the illustrations of George searching and waiting for his best friend will surely tug at any reader’s heartstrings. Tao’s return and George’s jubilation will please little ones; this cozy tale is ideal bedtime fare. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An affirming, if somewhat moralizing tale of self-acceptance strengthened by a lovable aesthetic. (Picture book. 4-8)

“Tao and George are best friends.”

HOW ARE YOU, VERITY?

Duff, Meghan Wilson
Illus. by Taylor Barron
Magination/American Psychological Association (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9781433841514

A child learns the nuances of a typical social interaction.

Verity is excited for their upcoming field trip to the aquarium. They know a lot about marine life, like vampire squid and sea sheep (a type of sea slug). Whenever anyone asks Verity, “How are you?” the child responds with interesting facts about sea creatures or the effect of plastics on the oceans. Later, their brother John explains that when most people ask that question, they are just making conversation and don’t want a long answer. Verity experiments, asking different people how they’re doing, and determines that most of the time, “‘How are you?’ seems like a fancy way to say hello,” but other times, people can be tricky to understand. When the field trip is canceled, John asks Verity how they’re feeling. Verity is quiet (“Were they supposed to say ‘Good’ now?”) until John explains he knows Verity must be upset. Verity vents their frustration, John thanks them for sharing, and Verity asks for help with an idea. This gentle, encouraging story centers the experience of a neurodivergent child learning a societal norm—as well as times when it doesn’t apply. The reader’s note offers more information on neurodiversity and advice to caregivers and educators. The illustrations have an airbrushlike quality that, combined with the vibrant colors, emits a playful energy. Verity and John have brown skin and Afro-textured hair, while the neighbors are racially diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An effective breakdown of a common greeting from a neurodivergent point of view. (Picture book. 2-6)

Coretta Scott King’s embrace of her husband’s legacy was one of many ways she fought injustice.

Though young Coretta’s family owned land, they were not exempt from the racial injustice of 1930s and 40s Alabama: overcrowded segregated schools; her family home and her father’s lumber mill being burned to the ground. Still, they persevered. After excelling in high school, Coretta attended Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. When she was denied the opportunity to do her practice teaching in the white public schools, she fought back. After college, Coretta moved to...
From there it’s back to the surface to send Lord Set and his minions down into Duat, the underworld, to Apep’s lair on a rescue mission. Along with exhilarating solar-powered speed racing and challenging puzzles that require outwitting the other gods in a temple, and enlisting an army of demons to terrorize the mortal population. With Thea, a young mortal attendant of Ra’s who wears leg braces and has her hair in Afro puffs, and Apep, the other gods in a temple, and enlists an army of demons to terrorize the mortal population. With Thea, a young mortal attendant of Ra’s who wears leg braces and has her hair in Afro puffs, and Apep, the young narrator and her family, who live in Mumbai, go to the theater to watch Bollywood movies every Friday night. Real life fuses with fantasy as they make their way through traffic—in the child’s imagination, a policeman directing traffic transforms into an action star, travelers on the Bandra-Worli bridge become a crowd of dancers, and the child envisions herself capturing it all on camera. At the theater, while munching popcorn, the family settles in to watch the film and step into the cinematic world for a few hours. By the end of the story, everyone is shaking a leg to the music, with the recognition that Bollywood unites everyone across ages and cultures. The depiction of Mumbai is joyful, the small shops suggesting a 1990s setting. The saturated images are appealing and filled with energy though not quite as lavish as an actual Bollywood film. Still, the nod toward masala film—Bollywood movies that blend genres—is absolutely delightful, as is the young protagonist, whose aspirations will surely inspire many kids to pursue their own goals. Indeed, a flash-forward, showing her as an adult confidently directing her own film, is a charming touch. (This book was reviewed digitally)

A beautiful, realistic, and important story focusing on family and sibling bonds.”

SAVING SUNSHINE

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SAVING SUNSHINE

Faruqi, Saadia
Illus. by Shazleen Khan
First Second (224 pp.)
$14.99 paper  |  Sept. 5, 2023
9781250793812

When their parents take away their phones, twins are forced to figure out how to be friends.

Pakistani American tweens Zara and Zeeshan Aziz are traveling from New York to Key West with their parents, Amma and Abba, for the conference where their mother will become the first Muslim woman honored with a pediatrician of the year award. The kids have different interests—nature lover Zara is a member of an animal rescue society, and Zeesh is into space exploration and NASA videos. Told to stick together, they go kayaking and walk on the beach, where Zara finds a sick logggerhead turtle she names Sunshine. They also meet a kindly veterinarian who’s checking on the turtle. The siblings later work together to help Sunshine return to the sea. While exploring without technology, they overcome their differences, learn more about one another's interests, and start appreciating and supporting each other. Faruqi seamlessly weaves in flashbacks showing the history of their relationship as well as their parents' memories.
and experiences of immigration and Islamophobia. Powerful scenes reveal Zara’s choice to start wearing hijab in sixth grade and how she was treated at school and Zeesh’s racist treatment by classmates that led to his quitting the after-school space club. Facts about animals and outer space appear in text boxes. Khan’s rich, detailed, watercolorlike illustrations enhance the story, capturing the siblings’ passions, emotions, and love for one another.

A beautiful, realistic, and important story focusing on family and sibling bonds. (Graphic fiction. 8-12)

ARE YOU MAD AT ME?
Feder, Tyler & Cody Feder
Illus. by Tyler Feder
Rocky Pond Books/Penguin (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780593615669

A young ostrich copes with anxiety.

Opal Feather’s long neck feels “as wobbly as a spaghetti noodle” whenever she becomes anxious. Her family refers to that feeling as “The Noodles” and tries to help her by offering her empowering compliments, cuddles, and jokes, but these don’t calm Opal. Today is her family’s annual soiree, one of Opal’s favorite days, and she’s tasked with picking up the special tart. She performs the self-calming ritual she relies on before doing something new and scary—e.g., going to the bakery. On the way, she misconstrues the actions of various pals she encounters. Opal repeatedly frets they’re all mad at her (though they each quickly explain that they aren’t). By the time Opal reaches the bakery, her anxiety has exhausted her. However, everyone is proud Opal accomplished her goal. Even better, Opal’s proud of herself, recognizing she faced challenges. This is a comforting story about a problem many kids deal with; it reassures them that worries aren’t unusual and don’t have to be overwhelming. The authors leave readers with the realistic yet optimistic view that anxiety doesn’t disappear altogether but can be confronted through one’s own positive outlook and support from family and friends. Colorful, cartoony digital illustrations are lively and endearing; note the enjoyable seek-and-find opportunity at the end. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Noodles, shakes, whatever you call them: Worries aren’t fun, but they don’t have to interfere with life either. (Picture book. 4-8)

CANTORA
Mercedes Sosa, the Voice of Latin America
Fernández Nitsche, Melisa
Knopf (48 pp.)
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Sept. 12, 2023
9780593645970
9780593645987 PLB

An introduction to an Argentinian singer and social activist known as “the voice of the voiceless.”

Beginning with the future cantora’s birth in a region where “the valleys are vibrant and the high peaks of the mountains reach the sky,” Fernández Nitsche writes lyrically of how Mercedes Sosa first gained attention for her voice in a radio competition and went on to sing folk songs, accompanying herself on a bombo (drum), in support of social causes, becoming “a bridge between cultures, languages, and generations.” Sosa endured arrest (in the middle of a concert!) and years of exile when the military dictatorship that came to power in the late 1970s found her protest songs threatening. The author relegates mention of the subject’s European and Indigenous parentage, as well as most other biographical details, to an appended timeline in order to focus on her spirit and her legacy: “Mercedes’s voice still beats strongly today, just like her bombo did.” And whether standing on stage, behind bars, or amid banner-wielding marchers in the illustrations, swaddled in heavy woven robes, her solid figure has a suitably iconic look. Warm swirls of color throughout make clear the power of her voice. Sosa died in 2009, but a playlist in the backmatter will help younger audiences unfamiliar with her name understand what they’ve been missing. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Soaring tribute to a voice less well known that it should be, at least outside Latin America. (Author’s note, Spanish glossary, select sources) (Picture-book biography. 6-8)

GRANNY SMITH WAS NOT AN APPLE
Fortson, Sarah Glenn
Illus. by Kris Aro McLeod
Peter Pauper Press (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Sept. 1, 2023
9781441339447

The story of the woman behind the tart green apple.

In England, Maria Anna Smith finds work wherever it’s available, plowing, picking, pruning, shearing, shucking, shell- ing, or working as a midwife (historically called “Grannies”). But work is harder to find with the increasing use of machines to do farmwork. Finally she finds work in an orchard and learns all about harvesting and growing apples, which comes in handy when strangers from Australia arrive looking for experienced workers. (Brief notes throughout explore terms, processes, and history, such as the reasons for grafting.) Maria Anna, her husband, and their five children take a chance and board a ship for the four-month voyage. They scrimp, save, and work hard to be able to finally afford their own land, house, and orchard.
By accident, the compost heap where Maria Anna mixed the scraps of her red apples with those of some Tasmanian crab apples sprouts, and she nurtures the seedling, which eventually produces disappointingly green apples that turn out to be surprisingly tart and delicious, and thus a new apple variety is born. McLeod’s illustrations bring history alive on the page, depicting the houses, clothing, and tough working conditions of Maria Anna’s time. All the people are light-skinned. A back-matter note directed at adults explains the impact of the British colonization of Australia on its Indigenous communities. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

History, biography, and orchard science presented in a neat, green, apple-shaped package. (selected bibliography, timeline) (Picture-book biography, 4-9)

A FEW BEAUTIFUL MINUTES
Experiencing a Solar Eclipse
Fox, Kate Allen
Illus. by Khoa Le
Little, Brown (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780316416924

Rich, poetic language explains the process of a total solar eclipse and ponders its effects on the living creatures below.

With a sweeping sense of scope and scale, the author presents the solar eclipse as a luminous stage show that humans are occasionally privileged to view, a part of a dazzling cycle that’s played out for millennia. The meditative verse offers enough factual information and terminology to make this an excellent choice for a science lesson, with readers gaining a solid sense of exactly what happens during the eclipse, especially when the text is combined with the clear and well-sourced backmatter. But at its heart, this is a story about the shared bonds of humanity, and Fox makes this grandiose cosmic event feel intimate and immediate. Jewel-toned illustrations depict racially diverse characters joyfully gathering together as communities, watching with family and neighbors from beaches and parks. As the moon makes its move “into the spotlight,” the paper-doll–like characters watching the eclipse are left bonded: “Once strangers, now we are friends.” Especially effective are the incandescent double-page spreads showing the moving celestial bodies. Lush turns of phrase such as a vast sky “velvet panorama” are captivating to read aloud, while the repetitive refrain “a few beautiful minutes”—referring to the brief length of time of an eclipse—anchors the experience. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Like a solar eclipse, this theatrical work of nonfiction is not to be missed. (information on solar eclipses, selected resources, timeline of an eclipse, instructions on building a sun viewer) (Informational picture book, 6-12)

DEAR ELSA
Fratichelli, Marco
Red Deer Press (240 pp.)
$14.95 paper | July 30, 2023
9780889956865

A pen-pal assignment changes a reluctant participant in this epistolary novel centered on friendship.

When Leo, a Toronto boy in grade 5, is randomly assigned by his teacher to correspond with Elsa, a Boston fifth grader, he’s annoyed. Not only must he write to a girl, but each letter must be at least 250 words long. He expresses his feelings in a haiku appended to one letter: “THIS IS REALLY DUMB (5) / I COULD BE PLAYING OUTSIDE (7) / LIKE I SAID IT’S DUMB (9).” Leo is dealing with a lot: His family’s move from Montreal has been a rough adjustment, he feels excluded at school, and he cycles home by a different route every day to avoid high school bullies. As they continue their correspondence, Leo, who has a tendency to see the glass half empty, is sometimes rude to Elsa, but he also finds solace in having someone to confide in. Optimist Elsa is revealed several months into their pen-pal relationship to be a wheelchair user with spina bifida. Fed up with Leo’s self-pity, she writes, “At least you can walk and run. I can hardly walk at all.” Even though she is developed as a character in other ways, Elsa’s disability ultimately feels like a device to foster Leo’s personal growth. Characters are not physically described and are racially ambiguous.

A story of personal development that hinges on a tired disability trope. (information about haiku, author interview) (Fiction, 8-12)

BLACK GIRLS
A Celebration of You!
Furukawa, Dominique
Harper/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780063205314

“Black girl, it’s your world!”

Whether they have blond curls, sport rainbow braids, or wear hijab, all Black girls are commemorated in this book. Furukawa’s peppery verse chronicles a host of activities at which the characters excel, from “shredding at the skate park” to “making magic in the wings” to “sending rockets into space” to creating with “paint, / pens, prose and poetry.” Collagelike mixed-media illustrations brim with joy, depicting Black girls of various abilities and hues. On a spread portraying a group of girls in a field of wildflowers, “Each shade bursts forth, / magnificent! Black beauty abounds.” Laudably, the book also amplifies diversity in family life (depicting kids “who live with foster parents, Abuela, single mother” or “with mom and dad, a few sisters, and a brother”). Black girls are urged to aim high. The book includes a spread of three girls cavorting in front of the White House and

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concludes with images of icons such as Bessie Coleman, Shirley Chisholm, Madam CJ Walker, Ruby Bridges, Misty Copeland, and Simone Biles — stirring inspiration for future leaders and a wonderful teaching moment for little learners. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An unapologetic exultation of Black girlhood. (Picture book 4-8)

Installed at Lausanne’s Institute of International Excellence for a term while his parents tend to family matters in the wake of a distinctly passive-aggressive letter from Great-Aunt Orfilia (“Please do not be worried. I am not at all hurt. So there is absolutely no need to come and help me while I recover from my recent accident”), young Boris Greycoat soon sniffs out several mysteries while receiving sneering comments about dogs from snootier members of the thoroughly internationally diverse if otherwise human student body. But he receives warmer welcomes from other schoolmates, notably wheelchair-using Chinese German Lotta Chan. As it turns out, there is chicanery afoot, involving the school’s priceless collection of paintings. The way Gifford prepares readers for the exciting denouement is nothing short of artful as Boris reads up on the history of forgery and renowned associates of artiste and fellow wolf Ludwig Vulpinard (whose Munch-inspired The Howl becomes a particular favorite). Along with lots of spot art interspersed with larger snowy Swiss scenes, the author also tucks encounters with lebkuchen (defined in a footnote as “Love cakes—unbelievably delicious spongy gingerbread and jam cookies”) and other delectable desserts into her tongue-in-cheek tale, not to mention multiple reassurances that wolves are amiable company so long as they are kept well enough fed to prevent “Unfortunate Incidents” involving sheep or chocolate.

A delectably sly howler. (Animal fantasy 9-12)

Follow along as a squirrel gathers and hides food for the winter, finds and shares it during the wintry weather, and “plants” food for future winters.

The changing leaves and the narrator’s thickening coat prompt the squirrel to start caching food. Acorns, maple seeds, hazelnuts, tulip bulbs, some berries, and just a pinch of birdseed (“Birds need food for winter too”) get gathered and buried in many different hiding spots for the narrator and the other squirrels to later “seek and find.” When the snow covers the ground, the squirrels sniff out each hoard and return to their hole in a tree to feast. In the spring, caches that weren’t buried in many different hiding spots for the narrator and the other squirrels to later “seek and find.” When the snow covers the ground, the squirrels sniff out each hoard and return to their hole in a tree to feast. In the spring, caches that weren’t found can sprout and grow, sometimes producing another food source for the next winter, in this case, some pumpkins. The meter is bouncy, but the verses were clearly written with rhyme rather than meaning or reading ease in mind: “Eeek! A dog! I dash away / He barks as up I flee. / ‘You can’t catch me from down there,’ / I chirp at him with glee.” Leschnikoff’s colorful digital mixed media illustrations highlight the cartoon narrator’s larger-than-life personality, the squirrel’s every facial expression and posed paw speaking volumes. Backmatter fills out the spare facts given in the text about squirrels’ caching behavior, their sharing and stealing food, and nine

“A delectably sly howler.”
BORIS IN SWITZERLAND
Gifford, Lucinda
Kane Miller (224 pp.)
$8.99 paper / Aug. 1, 2023
9781684647194
Series: The Wolves of Greycoat Hall, 1

Driven out of Scotland generations ago, a refined family of wolves returns to reclaim its heritage.

Inspired perhaps by recent calls to rewild Scotland, Gifford kits out young Boris Fennir Wolfgang Mc Lupus Greycoat and his equally hairy parents, Randall and Leonora, in fashionable tweeds and sends them from a comfy manor on the continent to visit their ancestral land. There, along with discovering the pleasures of Scottish food and country rambles, they fall in love with a decrepit castle near the village of Portlessie that is about to be sold and leveled to make way for posh villas. Although, as the author explains in one of several humorous sidebar comments on wolfsish behavior, hunger will occasionally drive wolves to “Undignified Situations and Embarrassing Incidents,” in fact they generally have faultless manners and indeed soon win over all the understandably apprehensive locals except for a choleric real estate developer who serves as the villain of the piece. The castle is saved, of course, and prior to the closing map and recipe for bannocks, comes from other schoolmates, notably wheelchair-using Chinese German Lotta Chan. As it turns out, there is chicanery afoot, involving the school’s priceless collection of paintings. The way Gifford prepares readers for the exciting denouement is nothing short of artful as Boris reads up on the history of forgery and renowned associates of artiste and fellow wolf Ludwig Vulpinard (whose Munch-inspired The Howl becomes a particular favorite). Along with lots of spot art interspersed with larger snowy Swiss scenes, the author also tucks encounters with lebkuchen (defined in a footnote as “Love cakes—unbelievably delicious spongy gingerbread and jam cookies”) and other delectable desserts into her tongue-in-cheek tale, not to mention multiple reassurances that wolves are amiable company so long as they are kept well enough fed to prevent “Unfortunate Incidents” involving sheep or chocolate.

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A delectably sly howler. (Animal fantasy 9-12)
A red panda notices that media is dominated by giant pandas. One day, Red (an adorable red panda) and her friend Gee (an equally cute black-and-white giant panda) find a book about pandas. Red’s initial excitement turns to disappointment when she sees that the entire book is about giant pandas, with nary a red panda in sight. “Who wrote this anyway?!” she fumes. “Ohhhhh!” says Gee as they spot a giant panda’s author photo on the back flap. Red decides to write her own book about red pandas, but as the pair walk through the town, readers will notice all the giant panda merchandise (even red panda children have black-and-white dolls), including the bookstore display. “No one wants to read about red pandas,” Red concludes and tosses her half-finished book away. Later, the friends find a group of pandas crowded around her unfinished book. “That one looks just like me!” one red panda points out. They tell Red that they want and need this book, which inspires her to persevere. Greamias illustrates perfectly, in a way that children will intuitively understand, why it’s so crucial for everyone to see themselves depicted in media; Iwai’s lovable panda characters, rendered in colorful watercolor, pencil, and digital tools, are irresistible. A poignant tale of loss overshadowed by missteps. (Picture book. 4-7)

WHAT IS THE POINT OF READING A BOOK ALOUD?

Greenfield and Lowery’s latest work of metafiction—after I Don’t Want To Read This Book (2021) and This Book Is Not a Present (2022)—features an agitated unseen narrator objecting to the idea of reading a book aloud: “It’s dopey words like aloud that make me want to remain aslant.” The rambling and occasionally digressive complaint provides an excellent canvas for Lowery’s energetic, hand-drawn typography and whimsical, charmingly silly drawings. Nearly every word is in capitals and gets its own color, size, or blocky 3-D rendering, resulting in a set of stage directions for a reader’s voice, graphically indicating pacing and emphasis. The detours from the cranky harangue are amusing. The narrator literally addresses “the elephant in the room”—“Hello, Elephant!”—and a few pages later focuses on the possibility that a word like aplomb could show up. The elephant offers a helpful definition of aplomb with, well, aplomb. Concerns about the pitfalls of performance are at the heart of this monologue. At one point the narrator’s worries (“I mean, what if I lose my place?...What am I supposed to do then? START OVER?”) are itemized on the verso and repeated on the recto. The audience will possibly find this hilarious. The sly paradox, of course, is that the reading aloud of this metatextual discourse contradicts the narrator’s avowed aversion to doing so and does it with panache. (This book was reviewed digitally.) Appealing for entertainers and those who would rather just listen. (Picture book. 6-9)
A WALK IN THE WOODS
Grimes, Nikki
Illus. by Jerry Pinkney & Brian Pinkney
Neal Porter/Holiday House (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780399547867

A multilayered tale of loss. A Black boy opens an envelope from his recently deceased father and finds a treasure map marked with a red X. Disappointed his dad hasn’t left him a letter, the boy puts on his hiking boots and reluctantly enters the woods. As he walks along the Hudson, he sees animals and notices reminders of the Mohicans, the original inhabitants of this land. Entering the ruins of a house, he finds a metal box in the brick fireplace and opens it with a key that has mysteriously appeared in his pocket. Inside, he finds a treasure trove of drawings of the natural world and an invitation to honor his father’s artistic legacy. Grimes’ quiet yet potent verse captures not only the boy’s loss, but also the memories his father has left behind. In a moving author’s note, she discusses her decadeslong friendship with Jerry Pinkney, who completed sketches for the book before he died in 2021; in an illustrator’s note, Brian Pinkney describes how he completed the artwork and explains that this story mirrors his own experience of grappling with his father’s death. Brian’s stunning, opalescent watercolors closely resemble Jerry’s but include the circular patterns and movement characteristic of his own illustrations. Together, Grimes and the Pinkneys have produced a profoundly stirring and thought-provoking musing on how the ones we love never really leave us. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Joy and hope walk alongside sadness and grief in this unforgettable work. (Picture book. 4-10)

MAZIE’S AMAZING MACHINES
Haft, Seryl
Illus. by Jeremy Holmes
Nancy Paulsen Books (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780399547867

A child who loves engineering builds machines to help others with their problems.

Using pulleys, levers, ramps, and more, Mazie McGear makes lifting heavy objects and even feeding the dog, Doodle, easier for the rest of the family, who are all light-skinned and red-haired. Mazie’s brother, Jake, finds the constant engineering irritating, but when Doodle gets stuck on the roof, it’s up to Mazie to get him down. Though Mazie’s whimsical Rube Goldberg-esque contraptions demonstrate that engineering can be both useful and fun, many readers will find Jake’s frustrations with his overbearing sibling reasonable. Mazie’s “waker-upper rocket machine,” designed to prevent him from sleeping in, is downright “engi-noying,” as Jake puts it. His suddenly enthusiastic reaction to Mazie’s commandeering his basketball and using a “teeter-lever” to help him sink baskets is unrealistic, and the definitions of engineering-related terms interspersed throughout make the story feel contrived and purposeful. The limited palette, dominated by orange, gray, turquoise, and sepia, and lack of backgrounds in many of the illustrations give the tale a hollow and flat impression even as busy and crowded layouts interrupt the flow and result in the randomly inserted rhymes getting lost in the action. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An accessible but bland and clunky exploration of basic engineering concepts. (glossary of simple machines) (Picture book. 4-8)

THE BOOK FROM FAR AWAY
Handy, Bruce
Illus. by Julie Benbassat
Minerva (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781662651335

Children are alike all over. Ensconced in a treehouse, a child removes a book from a frog-shaped backpack and begins to read. Noticing something odd in the distance, the child shelter behind a tree and witnesses a spaceship landing. Two older
extraterrestrials and a youngster step out. After enjoying an elaborate picnic and games, the visitors fly off in their spaceship but leave an object: an intricately decorated golden disk with transparent, turnable overlays: pages? Suddenly, the young extraterrestrial, who’s apparently been left behind, reappears; the kids communicate nonverbally. The Earth child returns the disk to its owner and, retrieving the book from the backpack, gifts it to the visitor. The spaceship returns, the kids hug farewell, and the space kid departs. Later, the earthling describes the incident to the rest of the family; the pet cat gazes skyward. Elsewhere in the universe, the outer-space youngster and family share the Earth volume. Finally, the Earth kid draws pictures of the disk, the space youngster savors the prized earthly souvenir… and the cat makes an astounding discovery in the backpack. This wordless offering emphasizes that kids understand kids, no matter their origin, and that books have universal appeal—literally. Readers will love poring over the clearly composed artwork’s luminous, wondrously imaginative, interplanetary details. The dark-haired earthling and one parent are light-skinned; the other parent is brown-skinned. The orange-faced space child’s hair resembles the sun’s rays. The extraterrestrial adults appear to be seniors; one uses a stylized wheelchair. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

This wordless tale speaks volumes. (Picture book. 5-8)  

HOW DO SCIENTISTS ASK QUESTIONS?  
A Book About the Scientific Method  
Hayes, Madeline J.  
Illus. by Srimalie Bassani  
Flowerpot Press (32 pp.)  
$9.99 | Sept. 5, 2023  
9781486727742  
Series: How Do?  

Think like a scientist: Ask questions!  
This latest title in the publisher’s How Do? series describes the scientific method, introduces some famous scientists, and encourages readers to perform scientific demonstrations. Its strength is in its clear depiction of the scientific method—laid out step by step in the text and summed up in a diagram: observe and come up with a question, research, formulate a hypothesis, experiment, analyze the results, and come to a conclusion. Lively cartoon drawings feature a diverse range of young people doing science-related things, while scientific symbols and objects fill the pages. The author uses child-friendly questions as examples during her explanation of the method and discusses the importance of sharing results. The scientists introduced are diverse in gender, race, time, and fields of interest. Hayes wraps up by presenting three “experiments” that connect to particular scientists and their discoveries: Galileo and gravity, Charles Darwin and natural selection, and Rosalind Franklin and DNA. These are activities and demonstrations, not experiments. Making fossils will not help readers understand Darwin’s theories, while creating a model of DNA out of candy will help cement the image of DNA’s structure but reveals nothing about what it does. Though the information on the scientific method is sound, the concluding activities are lacking. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Science-y but not science. (glossary) (Informational picture book. 7-10)  

WRECKER  
Hiassen, Carl  
Knopf (336 pp.)  
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Sept. 26, 2023  
9780593376287  
9780593376294 PLB  

During the pandemic, a teen inadvertently gets caught up in a crime ring in his touristy hometown of Key West. Fifteen-year-old Valdez Jones VIII calls himself Wrecker, after his ancestors who made a living salvaging shipwrecks. He is thriving thanks to the online schooling during lockdown that allows him the flexibility to be out on his boat. The flexibility also helps with his odd job, one that has him working graveyard shifts in an actual graveyard: A British man pays him $50 per week to clean one particular headstone of the accumulated iguana excrement that follows a day of reptilian sunbathing. One night, while he’s at work in the cemetery, Wrecker is approached by a silver-mustachioed man who wants to hire him to keep an eye on a brand-new crypt, but there is something fishy about the situation and intimidating about the man, and soon Wrecker is coerced into doing things that he is certain are tied to illegal activity. This thrilling story featuring wry, witty writing also explores the history of racism in Key West, the environmental impacts of cruise tourism, and the effects of Covid-19 on both people’s lives and criminal activities. Wrecker is a sympathetic character whose intelligence, savvy, and strong moral compass lead to a satisfying finish. Wrecker is biracial, with Black and white ancestry; most main characters read white.  

A batten-down-the-hatches thriller anchored by critical real-life themes. (Thriller. 10-14)  

THE PROMISE  
Hodder, Bridget & Fawzia Gilani-Williams  
Illus. by Cinzia Battistel  
Kar-Ben (24 pp.)  
$19.99 | Sept. 5, 2023  
9781728460246  

Two children find enduring friendship in a small village in Morocco.  
Hassan, who is Muslim, attends school in the mosque, while Jacob, who is Jewish and whose family moved here from Spain years ago, learns from the rabbi in the synagogue. The boys love to spend time in Jacob’s family’s garden, splashing in the pool and dashing among the lush plants, and the two families
“Hudson pays tribute to the brave African American foremothers and -fathers who led the way.”

INVINCIBLE

Fathers and Mothers of Black America
Hudson, Wade
Illus. by E.B. Lewis
Calkins Creek/Astra Books for Young Readers (40 pp.)
$16.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781635925098

Hudson pays tribute to the brave African American foremothers and -fathers who led the way.

With admiration and unflinching detail, the author explores the early years of Black America. Captured from their homes in Africa, shipped as human cargo, “sold like goods,” and enslaved in fields and homes, these people from different backgrounds fought back in various ways against brutal treatment. When freedom “rang” for the new nation, it didn’t ring for Black people, enslaved or free. But Black people organized, “overcame and withstood,” ultimately creating Black America, “a place for them to be!” Three spreads of dates from 1738 to 1831 list accomplishments that mark the beginning of Black America before the final pages relate those early efforts to today’s experiences. Hudson’s text is lyrical and lively, and the unique focus on the early years of creating what is now known as Black America results in a welcome addition to children’s bookshelves. The unconventional format, with a timeline in the middle, makes this best suited for independent readers. Extensive backmatter will further satisfy curious readers. Lewis’ watercolor and gouache illustrations combine portraits, scenes, and spot art; a hazy effect obscures details. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A solid offering affirming Black American identity. (author’s and artist’s notes, historical context, sources) (Informational picture book. 6-10)

CONE DOG
Howden, Sarah
Illus. by Carmen Mok
Owlkids Books (32 pp.)
$18.95 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781771475143

Will Emma survive the dreaded cone?

When Emma, a fluffy poodle, leaves the vet with her human, there’s a funny, clear lampshade around her neck. At first, she assumes she’s just caught in something (like that unfortunate incident with the lawn chair). But this time she can’t get the offending object off. Emma tries “to wreck it (she was the best at wrecking).” But the cone stays on. Her human tells her that the cone is “for her own good”…but it gets in the way when she tries to walk or dig. Emma sulks. Then she realizes that playing catch is far easier this way—the cone can hold all the balls her owner tosses. She finds a new way to dig, and the cone acts as a helmet when she tumbles down the stairs. The cone isn’t so bad…but she still has one problem: Keith, a cheeky squirrel who loves to tease her. Emma wishes she could give him a good scare. Turns out with a little patience, some snow, and, of course, her cone, she can do just that! Howden and Mok team up for a companion to their Cone Cat (2020) to show how a canine companion might deal with a cone. Emma’s personality comes through in Howden’s simple, tongue-in-cheek text and in Mok’s hilarious cartoon illustrations. Emma’s pale-skinned human is never named, but the two obviously care for each other. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Doggy devotees will enjoy this tale of a pooch finding the silver lining in a seemingly dire situation. (Picture book. 2-6)

GIGI AND OJIJI FOOD FOR THOUGHT
Iwai, Melissa
Harper/HarperCollins (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780063208124
Series: I Can Read!

Gigi and Ojiji are back and trying new foods.

One morning, Gigi, a biracial child whose mother is Japanese and whose father presents white, makes breakfast for her family. She prepares her favorite breakfast—peanut butter, berries, and bananas on toast—but Ojiji, her Japanese grandfather, doesn’t eat it all. Mom says that Ojiji doesn’t like peanut butter, so Gigi asks her to make something people from Japan eat. The following day, they have a traditional Japanese breakfast, which includes salmon, rice, and miso soup. Ojiji and Mom have an additional bowl, which contains natto, fermented soybeans;
Gigi thinks that the natto is sticky and slimy and that it smells a bit odd. But when she takes a bite, she lies, saying it tastes good. When her mom includes natto again at dinner, Gigi attempts to hide her food, but Roscoe, her dog, exposes the truth. High-lighting a sweet intergenerational relationship, this is a won-derful addition to the early reader series. Iwai advises readers not to force themselves to like everything even if others love it—what’s important is trying new things. The cartoon art highlights emotions and culture, adding context to help decipher vocabulary. A glossary contains the Japanese words used in the story but no pronunciation guide.

Encouragement to try new things even if we end up dislik-ing them. (Early reader 5-8)

With nurturing from Mama, a young child gradually learns to love swimming. Strapped to Mama’s chest, an infant is initially frightened by the water. “When I first saw the big blue sea / I was scared and confused. / It crashed so loud and spread so wide. / It made me feel small inside.” Subsequent trips to other bodies of water as the child grows older are conveyed through simple rhythmic text. The young narrator considers the attributes of a deep, “quiet lake” and a river with “water rushing by” and mulls venturing into the water, each time opting to go in...next time. Encouraging words, plenty of patience, and an imaginative journey through “watery worlds,” experienced from the comfort of Mama’s arms, lay the foundation for the protagonist’s eventual decision to dive into a swimming pool. Illustrations hand drawn in ink and painted using watercolors contribute to the nurturing feel of the text. Both the mother and child, whose gender is not identified, are depicted with dark brown skin and tightly curled black hair. Translated from Swedish, the story offers a model for parents looking to quell children’s fears, support their dreams, and allow them room to grow. Given that many swimming pools identified, are depicted with dark brown skin and tightly curled black hair. Translated from Swedish, the story offers a model for parents looking to quell children’s fears, support their dreams, and allow them room to grow. Given that many swimming pools historically excluded African American communities and that Black children face an elevated risk of drowning, a narrative that spotlights a Black family reveling in the water is especially welcome. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Gentle, inspiring, and important. (Picture book 3-5)

Tato, a young Armenian child, eagerly awaits rug-washing day. As Tato gathers with siblings and neighbors outside under the watchful eye of Bábo (grandma), the space transforms into a lively playground where the children wash rugs. The book captures the essence of childhood, depicting the sheer thrill of jumping, scrubbing, and playing with bubbles and water. With compelling descriptions and inspired metaphors, young Tato paints a vivid picture of textures, smells, and sights. “Bounce clouds!” “Snowflakes!” squeals Tato as a sudsy foam forms. Tato is bigger and more mature since the last rug-washing day and gets to prove it by helping out when the chickens get loose. Cultural elements are seamlessly woven throughout the book, from
the significance of a wedding gift rug to the apricot pie that delights the hardworking children at the end of the day. The intricate, vibrant rugs pop in the beautiful, earth-toned illustrations. Filled with action and dramatic angles, the art brings this tale to life and adds whimsy to the text. Armenian words in the Artsakh dialect are interspersed and explained in a glossary. In an author’s note, Kamalyan discusses how her own grandmother and her experiences growing up in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, inspired this story. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An enchanting celebration of heritage and childhood joy. (about Armenian carpet-weaving tradition) (Picture book. 5-10)

Ruby and Lonely
Karst, Patrice
Illus. by Kayla Harren
Two Lions (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781662508042

A child learns to embrace her inner strength and transform loneliness into something new.

Ruby, a youngster with long red locks and pale skin, feels very much alone—both at school and at home. Everyone around her is so busy; no one really notices Ruby at all. Tan-skinned Mr. Garcia, her teacher, tells Ruby’s diverse class that sometimes it is helpful to give a name to your problems, to help solve them. Ruby decides to name her problem “Lonely.” Lonely first begins as a reflection of Ruby in a storefront window and, later, a mirror, reflecting Ruby’s frown and slumped posture. However, as Ruby shares things that she enjoys with her new friend, Lonely comes to sit beside her, gradually absorbing color and strength. Lonely is Ruby’s own inner self, gaining confidence and joy—which others start to notice. As Ruby makes friends at school, Lonely doesn’t need to be present as much but is always there in the mirror, just in case. Harren’s soft palette adds a nostalgic twinge to this sensitively told narrative, letting Ruby tiptoe through sorrow and then also shine brightly. An author’s note explains that the story was inspired by Karst’s own loneliness as a child; the author also discusses the importance of having an “inner friend” and ends with discussion questions. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A warm, genuine journey that promotes self-reliance. (Picture book. 4-7)

Wheels of Legend
Kent, Gabrielle
Illus. by Rex Crowle & Luke Newell
Sourcebooks Young Readers (240 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Sept. 1, 2023
9781728237343
Series: Knights and Bikes, 3

The Penfurzy Rebel Bicycle Club saves not only the island, but maybe the whole world in this third video game–inspired episode following Rebel Bicycle Club (2023). The club—which includes friends Demelza and Nessa, Captain Honkers the goose, and Mr. Calenick, a pickled medieval knight with a detachable head—gains a new member when Jack arrives on the island (established in previous entries as being in Cornwall) with his white dad and Haitian mom as part of a traveling carnival with several secrets and a rusty old bicycle in serious need of proper tricking out. One of the secrets, it turns out, is that Jack is a descendant of a certain legendary Jack from folklore, and another is that there are giants in caverns below Penfurzy, rendered harmless (for now) by a sleeping spell that is in desperate need of being renewed if they are not to rise and wreak havoc. Can the club members, wielding foam swords and riding wheeled steeds with names like Neon Justice II and Rogue Avenger, find a way into the giants’ cavern before they wake up? Created in conjunction with the Knights and Bikes video game, this volume features both blocky illustrations that reflect the game’s distinctive graphics and a pacey plotline festooned with obstacles, sudden reversals of fortune, magical helpers, daring exploits, and comical banter.

Brisk, bold, and buoyant. (map) (Fantasy adventure. 8-10)

Building a Dream
How the Boys of Koh Panyee Became Champions
Khiani, Darshana
Illus. by Dow Phumiruk
Eerdmans (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780802855473

Kids make their dreams come true.

A group of boys who live in Koh Panyee, a small Thai village raised above the water on stilts, are obsessed with football (what Americans would refer to as soccer). They “dribble...on the way to school” and even shoot “goals during evening chores.” On Saturday afternoons, they go to Uncle Hemmin’s cafe to watch football, cheering for every goal. Inspired, the friends want to practice so they can eventually challenge the boys who live on the mainland, but they don’t have anywhere to play. The evenly paced narrative reveals that every alleyway, pier, and walkway is already filled with busy adults with little patience for their ball playing. Even Uncle Hemmin tells them to “Stick to boat racing. It’s tradition.” A secret beach during low tide becomes their makeshift field until it is used for new homes. Frustrated,
the boys decide to build their own floating pitch, hauling wood scraps and collecting nails and ignoring the laughter from villagers. Phumiruk creates dreamy scenes with soft hues of color to depict the boys slipping and falling into the water as they gradually improve their balance with their new and constantly “swaying pitch.” Their hard work pays off, as the team performs well at a mainland football tournament, in the process winning over the hearts of their village—and readers. An author’s note describes the real events that inspired this tale. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A stirring story of perseverance. (Illustrator’s note) (Picture book. 5-9)

WE GATHER TOGETHER
(YOUNG READERS EDITION)
Stories of Thanksgiving From Then to Now
Kiernan, Denise
Philomel (304 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780593404386

Kiernan’s 2020 book for adults of the same name is adapted for middle graders. Like its source, this edition is largely a biography of Sarah Josepha Hale, who, as editor of the influential 19th-century magazine Godey’s Lady’s Book, waged a decades-long campaign for the establishment of an annual national day of Thanksgiving. Hale filled the magazine with mentions of Thanksgiving, and she wrote to presidents imploring them to make the necessary proclamation, starting with Zachary Taylor after he took office in 1849. Young readers won’t learn that date, though, as the information is omitted. They will, however, read through 12 full stanzas of “Over the River, and Through the Wood,” which occupies 2 1/2 pages—just two of many questionable editorial choices. Hale and her contemporaries are frequently quoted at some length (often in fussy, difficult-to-read display type), with little apparent concern for children’s reading abilities; in contrast, much of the surrounding narrative feels dumbed down. One sentence on Queen Victoria’s wedding dress in the original is expanded into an exceptionally fatuous six-sentence passage that ends with an exclamation mark, one of far too many. There is worthwhile information, such as an account of how the 1621 gathering of Wampanoags and Pilgrims became fixed in the national mythos, but readers will likely become exhausted before they reach it.

A turkey. (index) (Nonfiction. 8-12)

EMPANADAS FOR EVERYONE
Kramer, Jackie Azúa
Illus. by Lenny Wen
Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781665914581

When Tía Mimi is gone for the day, it’s up to little Carina to make delicious empanadas. Saturdays bring fun times and the pumping beats of salsa on the radio when Carina visits Tía Mimi to knead and fry empanadas and sing, “I like empanadas! I like you!” But then Tía Mimi goes to volunteer at the Community Meal Center one day. Oh no! Can Carina make empanadas on her own? Accompanied by her mom, Carina explores Tía Mimi’s barrio and gathers the ingredients she needs: coriander at Aamir’s Market (useful for samosas, too), achiote from Lila’s Jamaican patties street cart, “garlic from the market selling mandu, and onions from the deli selling pierogies.” Ah, and beef, which Carina gets from Mrs. Chang, who’s making dumplings. All set, Carina stirs up the food, but Tía Mimi still isn’t home when the sun slips down. To feed a busy Tía Mimi, Carina rallies the barrio and heads over to the Meal Center, each neighbor with food reminiscent of empanadas from their own culture. An ode to diverse communities, Kramer and Wen’s joint effort exudes compassion and generosity. Kramer overstuffs the narrative with lovely turns of phrases, although the story gets lost amid the lengthy vivid language at times. Full of warm colors like soft yellows and oranges, the artwork complements Carina’s adventure; Tía Mimi and Carina are Latine and brown-skinned, while the neighborhood is a diverse one. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A yum for the tum and heart. (Author’s note, recipe for beef or chicken Puerto Rican empanadas) (Picture book. 4-8)

FLAT CAT
Lazar, Tara
Illus. by Pete Oswald
Flamingo Books (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780593404577

“Flat Cat was born flat.” He wasn’t the victim of a horrible accident involving an ice cream truck or waffle iron, and he likes being flat. He can slide under doors or drift high like a kite or even blend into the background. And after all those smooth moves, he can nap anywhere…on bookshelves or towel racks. “Here...and there. Even under the underwear.” That turns out to be disastrous. Asleep in a big pile of laundry, Flat Cat ends up in the washing machine and then the dryer…from which he emerges FLUFFY! All of a sudden, he’s so round and fuzzy that everyone wants to snuggle with him—but cute and cuddly aren’t his thing. He even gets stuck in the cat flap now. All of the hugging and squeezing are making him
Aunt Harriet sits on him. Flat again, he can do all his old tricks, but he gets no smooches. Luckily he knows how to fluff again! Lazar’s wryly humorous tale won't leave young audiences flat, flatter again. However, Flat Cat realizes he kind of likes feeling comfy and cozy instead of blending in—then light-skinned Aunt Harriet sits on him. Flat again, he can do all his old tricks, while Oswald’s purple-tinged cartoon depictions of this Flat Stanley–style feline add their share of giggles (as usual). Humans depicted are diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A hilarious reminder that versatility will have you feline fine. (Picture book; 3-7)

**QUEST KIDS AND THE DARK PROPHECY OF DOUG**

Leiknes, Mark
Union Square Kids (368 pp.)
$16.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781454946281
Series: Quest Kids, 2

Dueling prophecies and monsters of various sorts keep would-be leader and hero Ned and his friends on their toes as their quest continues.

Battling, or at least escaping, foes ranging from a giant demon baby to a frustrated rock-and-roll minstrel with a madcap plan to lava surf his way to stardom, plus any number of more conventional toothy horrors, the Quest Kids edge closer to finding out what happened to Ned's vanished parents in this second episode—which is, like the first, cast as a journal that switches in roughly equal measure between block-lettered passages and dialogue-infused ink-and-wash drawings. Forging on through multiple shipwrecks, falls into holes, and digressions such as those for fire-breathing dragon and, using her brush like Harold's purple crayon, draws her way to safety with the Chinese characters she needs. Much of the story is told in appealing vignettes and speech bubbles, and at the top of every page, readers will find pictures of the characters used in the illustration along with their English details and backgrounds—characters for grass are drawn clumped together in a green field, and the character for child bows to greet Lulu. The climax occurs when Lulu meets a calligraphic fire-breathing dragon and, using her brush like Harold’s purple crayon, draws her way to safety with the Chinese characters she needs. Much of the story is told in appealing vignettes and speech bubbles, and at the top of every page, readers will find pictures of the characters used in the illustration along with their English meanings, allowing kids to match the characters with their roles in the scene. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A fun and clever introduction to an ancient art form. (author’s note) (Picture book; 4-8)

**CHINESE MENU**

The History, Myths, and Legends Behind Your Favorite Foods
Lin, Grace
Little, Brown (288 pp.)
$24.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780316486002

The hidden histories, fantastical folklore, and tastiest tidbits of American Chinese cuisine. Organized like a meal, from appetizers and soups to chef’s specials and desserts, Lin uncovers the secrets behind the most famous dishes of American Chinese restaurant menus. Each section contains a brief introduction, with first-person narration offering context through personal anecdotes and historical facts. Then it’s off to the banquet: a bounty of wondrous, romantic, and sometimes grotesque tales that trace the origins of rice, wontons, Peking duck, and more. As with much folklore, the stories sometimes contain references to dark or mature topics (poverty, suicide, concubines), but thoughtful, age-appropriate commentary strikes an effective balance. The volume is liberally illustrated—contemporary images are rendered in full color, while illustrations of the stories appear in limited palettes, drawing a clear distinction between the past and the present. Many tales take place in dynastic China, but stories like “General Ts’s Chicken” and “Chop Suey” underscore the truly American natures of these dishes. Although the vast ground covered here could, in less skilled hands, overwhelm the uninitiated—the dishes chronicled extend as far back as 7000 BCE and up to the 1950s—Lin’s conversational asides and the book’s meticulous supporting materials, including a timeline and extensive endnotes, ensure that readers never lose their way. The illustrations and tone indicate a young readership, but...
there’s much here for readers and eaters of all ages.

An utterly delectable feast of history and storytelling. (map, author’s note, recipe, bibliography, index) (Nonfiction. 8-13)

**A BIRD DAY**

Lindström, Eva

Trans. by Julia Marshall

Gecko Press (32 pp.)

$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023

9781776575275


In this gently quirky Swedish import, readers get a glimpse into the mind of young Lena as the little bird spends a day with baby brother Bo and their parents. Together, Lena and Bo play chicken: standing in the path of an oncoming car and flying off at the last minute, a dangerous game that meets with their parents’ disapproval when they come home for lunch. After washing their beaks, they nosh on flies—much to Papa’s chagrin. When he complains, Mama says, “You cook then.” The “bird day” progresses without big dramas but with plenty of small moments to inspire laughter and reflection. Watercolor illustrations do much of the narrative heavy lifting, zooming in and out to provide visual interest. Most spreads offer a close-up perspective of the birds’ world, but these scenes are punctuated by others depicting the sibling chicks as barely more than specks against the page. For example, when Lena and Bo play at fainting, they deliberately fall from a branch, and the accompanying art is dominated by two large trees, with two miniscule figures falling against the white of the page. Lena narrates, “Just as we’re about to hit the ground, we fly up again. We do it over and over.” (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A quiet story to read over and over. (Picture book. 3-6)

**WHAT IS HOPE?**

Lucianovic, Stephanie V.W.

Illus. by Kelsey Buzzell

Nancy Paulsen Books (32 pp.)

$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023

9780593326558

An attempt at exploring the concept of hope in a child-friendly way.

In this rhyming narrative, a group of kids are shown engaging in various summer activities: flying a kite, riding a bicycle, playing in a treehouse, selling lemonade, and visiting the beach. On each two-page spread, a short verse tries to relate the activity to hope. Some of the rhymes seem to have a slight, if tenuous, connection: “Hope is two wheels / and staying upright. / Hope is pumping fast / with all of your might.” But the majority are cryptic, to say the least: “Hope is being thoughtful / choosing to care. / Hope is discovering / you have so much to share.” This last one seems at odds with the accepted definition of the noun form of hope: wanting and expecting a particular thing to happen. The words joy or happiness would seem a better fit. The illustrations, mirroring the narrative, give no further illumination to readers, although they are colorful, if presented a bit too uniformly in their perspective. The conclusion, which sees a large, loving family sitting down to a meal (“Hope is a tail wag / at the screen door. / Hope is a family / together once more”), brings the tale to a warm conclusion. Characters depicted are diverse, although light-skinned, red-haired kids dominate. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Sweet but puzzling. (Picture book. 4-6)

**GHOST ORCHID**

Lumbers, Fiona

Andersen Press USA (32 pp.)

$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023

9788765608319

A family of explorers goes on a hunt for the rare ghost orchid.

Ava must hurry and pack because Mom and Dad are anxious to set off on their trip—“The ghost orchids will soon be in bloom!” Scarcely viewed or photographed, these flowers bloom for only about a week and grow in “special, secret places where the sunlight and the water are just right.” Using the map on the endpapers, readers can trace the family’s journey from Great Britain, through North America, down to Mexico and South America and up to Florida. The parents rush, focused on their goal, but the real explorer is Ava, who observes everything as they pass through different natural environments. Inspiring watercolor-and-ink paintings highlight Ava’s discoveries, from bears and owls in the woods to butterflies in the desert and friendly monkeys and flamingos in a rainforest, while bouncy, rhyming text conveys the child’s enchantment: “The lights and stars, the rocks that kiss, the animals, treasures and new friends they miss.” But Mom and Dad are disappointed when they finally spot their long-searched-for orchid: “Oh no, it’s withered and gone.” Ava, though, is delighted, having accumulated pictures chronicling the journey. On the reverse trip, all will “explore the Ava way,” culminating with a wonderful final surprise. Mom presents Asian; Dad and Ava are light-skinned. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A notable story about taking the time to appreciate all the wonders around us. (Picture book. 5-8)
“A melodramatic dust-up, with ghosts aplenty and a Dickensian flavor.”

NIGHTSPARK

Mann, Michael
Peachtree (336 pp.)
$17.99 | Oct. 10, 2023
9781682636602

Ominous signs that murderous Battersea Power Station owner Tabatha Margate is staging a comeback lead to a rematch with former child worker and part-time ghost Luke Smith-Sharma.

Actually, Londoner Luke has multiple foes to face in this sequel to Ghostcloud (2022)—notably the corrupt and treacherous mayor of London and the hostile Ghost Council, which wants him permanently dead instead of only sometimes. But Tabatha is by far the scariest threat, and eerie glimpses of her shadow lead through noxious, bone-strewn sewers to a smugglers’ haven, followed by a nighttime Channel crossing into enemy territory and a dismaying revelation about her nefarious schemes to exploit Luke’s ghostly skills. Fortunately, he not only still has several sturdy allies from the opener, but also new ones in his friend Ravi’s horror family and is where Maya Beatriz Montenegro Calderón spends most of her time when she’s not busy being a star soccer player. Maya and her lively Puerto Rican family do their best to keep the cafe running despite the rapid gentrification of their neighborhood. Maya’s eighth grade year brings new developments—her friendship with teammate Kayla grows, a soccer rivalry intensifies, and she has strangely vivid dreams involving water and an unknown woman that evoke feelings of déjà vu. As if she’s been summoned, the mystery woman—her estranged great-aunt Titi Yaya—suddenly appears, dredging up a decades-old feud with Maya’s abuela. Maya determinedly seeks to understand why her family became so divided and why she feels a connection to Titi Yaya and the water. Defying Abuela’s command to never speak to her great-aunt, Maya starts sneaking around, trying to learn about her Yoruba heritage and the destiny that awaits her. The energetic, bilingual dialogue is welcoming, textured, and accessible; combined with the story’s fast pace, it will keep readers engaged through an expertly written exploration of an Afro-Latine family’s history and the pantheon of West African gods. Marrero’s debut beautifully weaves together themes of family trauma, first crushes, spirituality, and history as Maya embarks on her journey of self-discovery.

A 13-year-old experiences upheaval within herself and her family. At Café Taza in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, is owned by the close-knit Calderón family and is where Maya Beatriz Montenegro Calderón spends most of her time when she’s not busy being a star soccer player. Maya and her lively Puerto Rican family do their best to keep the cafe running despite the rapid gentrification of their neighborhood. Maya’s eighth grade year brings new developments—her friendship with teammate Kayla grows, a soccer rivalry intensifies, and she has strangely vivid dreams involving water and an unknown woman that evoke feelings of déjà vu. As if she’s been summoned, the mystery woman—her estranged great-aunt Titi Yaya—suddenly appears, dredging up a decades-old feud with Maya’s abuela. Maya determinedly seeks to understand why her family became so divided and why she feels a connection to Titi Yaya and the water. Defying Abuela’s command to never speak to her great-aunt, Maya starts sneaking around, trying to learn about her Yoruba heritage and the destiny that awaits her. The energetic, bilingual dialogue is welcoming, textured, and accessible; combined with the story’s fast pace, it will keep readers engaged through an expertly written exploration of an Afro-Latine family’s history and the pantheon of West African gods. Marrero’s debut beautifully weaves together themes of family trauma, first crushes, spirituality, and history as Maya embarks on her journey of self-discovery. 

An uplifting, beautifully rendered story of family bonds and embracing the unknown. (Fiction. 8-12)
WHERE ARE THE ALIENS?
The Search for Life Beyond Earth
McAnulty, Stacy
Illus. by Nicole Miles
Little, Brown (240 pp.)
$16.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780759553996

If we aren’t alone in the universe, then where is everybody?

McAnulty gives a shoutout to Fermi’s classic question, going on to examine the science and math that suggest—or refute—the possibility of life beyond Earth. With a brief roundup of facts as examples (the Earth is round, Earth is round, vaccines save lives), she is careful to demonstrate what is scientific consensus vs. speculation. The result is a compact but comprehensive overview of the history and current status of extraterrestrial exploration, whether via telescope, space probe, calculation, or imagination. McAnulty acknowledges the viewpoints of those (including astronomer Stephen Webb) who might be regarded as “Only Earth-ers” as well as those, whom she calls “Life Beyond Earth-ers,” who believe that life could be found elsewhere in the universe. She points out that a definitive answer is not currently available to us. The overviews of the history of astronomy (including the work of Copernicus, Galileo, and John Herschel) and space science and flight, focusing particularly on the later 19th century to the present, are clear and fascinating. Looks at Roswell, Area 51, and other unexplained encounters are included, contextualized with factual explanations and offered with a big grain of salt. The list of resources is very good, as are the meticulous source notes that offer ways for readers to further pursue the discussion. McAnulty’s informal, conversational style keeps the delivery of information entertaining and nicely paced.

Terrific science for skeptics and hopeful sky watchers. (timeline, acronyms, glossary, index) (Nonfiction. 9-14)

THE MOSSHEART’S PROMISE
Mix, Rebecca
Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins (432 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780063254053

Canary “Ary” Mossheart’s no hero, but if adults won’t save Mama from the mold that’s killing her, she’ll have to try anyway.

Ary, a 12-year-old mold-scraper, lives in Terra—a terrarium world designed by the gardener to be a haven for fairies. She should get her wings any day now; they’ll be ground into magic dust to beat back the mold that is rotting Terra’s food, poisoning the water, and sickening and starving everyone except the privileged. Everyone expects Ary to be a hero like her legendary Gran, who journeyed to the Underground to bring back the cure for a plague, but all she wants is to help Mama. Ary braves the Gloom beyond the fence, where she makes unexpected friends and learns that Terra is built on multiple lies. If, before week’s end, a Mossheart doesn’t give their life to release the fairies from Terra, their world will die. Mix’s straightforward, magic-laced writing doesn’t shy away from hard but age-appropriately addressed truths of poverty, privilege, and natural disasters. Through tears and laughter, readers will easily follow this exciting, honest, and hopeful tale that speaks gently and clearly to kids’ fears and needs. It urges them to value their own experiences, reassures them that it’s OK to be angry when they’re left to pay for the mistakes of adults, and reminds them that kindness must guide us, even when we’re afraid.

A wonderful story for all the scared people doing the right thing because nobody else will. (Fantasy. 9-13)

WHEN DAD’S HAIR TOOK OFF
Mühle, Jörg
Trans. by Melody Shaw
Gecko Press (72 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781776575206

Get ready for a hair-raising—or should we say hair-racing?—chase and an abundance of absurdity and witty wordplay.

When light-skinned Dad’s hair tires of being brushed, it springs off Dad’s head and hurtles off to see the world. Of course, a horrified Dad tries to capture it, since it’s been with him since infancy. Dad scolds. He begs. He chases the hair outside and into town. In a circuitous romp through town, the hair attempts to “cut and run at the barber,” “[creeps] into a cage,” “duck[s]…into a pond,” and “[takes] a spin around the launderette.” Dad’s search at the zoo yields “nix at the desert fox,” “zilch at the zebras,” and “at the hippo, zippo.” When a zookeeper hoses the hair down the drain, the hair traverses the sewers to the sea, and a resigned and bald (but bearded) Dad heads home. “His former crowning glory” sends postcards from “Manhattan Island,” “Hairizona,” and “Buenos Haires.” But just as Dad is about to give up hope, things take a turn. This zany tale, translated from German and narrated by Dad’s unseen child, with colorful illustrations of various sizes, is perfect for an intimate lap-read. Younger listeners will enjoy the silly, complicated chase scenes, while slightly older kids and even adults will also appreciate the plentiful puns and amusing alliteration. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A hilarious homage to a hairless dad and his world-traveling hair. (Picture book. 5-8)
LOST TIME
Mukanik, Tar
Razorbill/Penguin (240 pp.)
$22.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780593327036

A child separated from their moms by more than 60 million years shares adventures with some Mesozoic companions.

Suddenly surrounded by lush greenery after getting trapped in a time machine, Evie—androgynous in appearance and drawn in the clean-lined, richly colored art with big, expressive eyes—is frantic to get a message back to Mom and Mama. Fortunately, an abandoned exploratory base nearby provides shelter and recordings of a previous research team's logs. Unfortunately, the nearest temporal communicator is at another base, far away. But some time later, having raised Ada, a towering Quetzalcoatlus northropi, from a hatchling to a full-grown, flying pterosaur, Evie has the means to get there, fashioning a saddle and setting out on a soaring journey over Cretaceous landscapes for encounters with a colorful, carefully detailed cast of dinosaurs and dino cousins (all identified in an appended portrait gallery) and narrow escapes from natural disasters and toothy predators alike. Along with being laudably resourceful, Evie has a real way with animals; not only is the relationship between small child and intelligent, airplane-sized buddy palpably affectionate, but an injured young T. rex that Evie nurses back to health peaceably sticks around long enough to chase off a gang of smaller raptors and startle Mom and Mama when they at last rush in for a joyful reunion. One parent shares Evie's coppery brown skin and glossy black hair; the other parent reads Black.

Delightfully improbable adventures plus dinosaurs galore!
(Graphic science fiction. 8-11)

MADELINE FINN AND THE BLESSING OF THE ANIMALS
Papp, Lisa
Peachtree (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781682634868

In her fourth outing, Madeline Finn learns to seek out the blessings inside everyone.

When the little white-presenting girl takes her dog, Star, and Star’s therapy dog mother, Bonnie, to the park for the Blessing of the Animals, she sees all kinds of pets, from rabbits and a goldfish in a bowl to ferrets, a goat, and a pig. She wonders how the Rev. Mary Alice, a light-skinned woman with brown hair and a robe resembling St. Francis’, knows what to say as she points out each animal’s special gift: Bonnie’s is “brining comfort,” while Star has “so much joy to share.” Miss Mary recognizes Madeline Finn’s care for the shelter animals she wants blessed, and she deputizes the young girl. At the shelter, Madeleine Finn slowly warms up to seeing the gifts inside each animal, and she tags each cage with a homemade sign shaped like a leaf that highlights it: “I like to hear stories.” “I have a lot of LOVE to give.” “We will make you smile.” Seeing her daughter’s project, Madeline Finn’s mother gives her a hug and a leaf of her own: “You’re my little blessing.” This sweet tale is sure to appeal to animal lovers, who may in turn seek out a local Blessing of the Animals. Papp’s pencil, watercolor, and digital illustrations show diverse people waiting in line with their pets. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Another solid series entry that will have readers looking for the gifts in others. (Picture book. 4-8)

BEE BAKSHI AND THE GINGERBREAD SISTERS
Pinto, Emi
Harper/HarperCollins (304 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780063275720

Bee assumed her family vacation would be boring; instead, she finds herself haunted and hunted by the Gingerbread Witch. Twelve-year-old Indian Canadian Binita “Bee” Bakshi is embarrassed by her family. Her father is loud, her mother is a cheapskate, and her beloved Granny incessantly hums show tunes. Most embarrassing of all, however, is Bee herself. Her frizzy hair, tan skin, and secondhand clothes mark her as different when all she wants is to fit in. Bee finds solace in horror books featuring the fearless Betsy Chiller taking on paranormal threats. When her family decides to spend a week without Wi-Fi at a cottage on Storm Lake, however, Bee finds that the lessons from her favorite series are far from hypothetical. Something in the forest is watching her, something in the water wants to hurt her, and she can’t shake the smell of gingerbread. As Bee works with new friends Lucas, who is coded white, and brown-skinned Alina to unravel the sinister mysteries of Storm Lake, she must confront ghosts both past and present. Full of twists, genuine scares, and satisfying reveals, this debut is sure to please readers in search of a thrill.

“Gingerbread is plentiful in this spooky ‘Hansel and Gretel’ retelling, but the lessons about friendship are sweeter still.”

Bee Bakshi and the Gingerbread sisters
“Sincere, accessible advice and inspiration.”

**DEAR REBEL**

**THE SPACES IN BETWEEN**

*Preller, James*  
*Illus. by Kevin Keele*  
*Scholastic (192 pp.)*  
*$7.99 paper | Aug. 1, 2023*  
*9781338810455*  
*Series: EXIT 13, 2*

New guests bring new adventures.  
In this second installment of the series, supernatural forces are still preventing siblings Willow and Ash McGinn and their parents from leaving the Exit 13 Motel. Despite their predicament, the mood lifts when a group of alien-loving convention-goers arrives. Soon the little inn is bustling, and Willow and Ash pitch in to help clerk Kristoff and handyman Mr. Do. Events take another turn when Kristoff goes missing, a creepy guest sends Willow on a harrowing chase, and Ash and the alien aficionados find themselves in an otherworldly forest. Preller’s latest has short chapters with brisk pacing; however, despite the narrative energy, more questions are raised than answered. The McGinns keep unearthing one new thing after another—possible monsters, a mysterious book, and more—but little is explained or resolved, making for an exasperating reading experience. Additionally, key worldbuilding points are stretched too thin to make sense, namely why some can come and go from the motel and others cannot. Black-and-white comic panels interspersed throughout begin to feel gimmicky, not adding depth to the shallow characterizations. The depiction of Mr. Do feels especially superficial and tokenizing; attempts to convey his Korean heritage are surface-level, and his clipped speech patterns—even in his internal monologues—seem othering. Willow and Ash are biracial; Kristoff is described as pale.  
Frustrating. (Graphic hybrid. 7-12)

**ALPHABEASTS**

*A Monstrously Fun Book*  
*Quintanilla, Hazel*  
*Flowerpot Press (48 pp.)*  
*$17.99 | Sept. 5, 2023*  
*9781486727810*

A worldwide, alphabetical presentation of cryptids from the files of Monsterlovers Headquarters.  
The “professional creature curators,” who are dedicated to researching and safeguarding mythical monsters, provide readers with access to their top-secret files, arranged from A to Z. From the North American Bigfoot to the Chinese Qilin to the Central African Olitdiau, a wide range of featured beasts is covered. Each write-up includes height, weight, a description, an interesting fact, and the creature’s “danger level.” Some creatures are labeled with superlatives (“hairiest monster” for the Agogwe and “smelliest” for the Sheepsquatch). Kids will find this a treasure trove of monsters from around the globe. The brightly colored, almost neon illustrations skew cute and approachable rather than spooky, which hits just right for younger elementary school children who aren’t ready for horror and gore. A full-page map at the end of the book shows each monster superimposed on its country of origin. There are few humans depicted here, but those at the Monsterlovers Headquarters are diverse. A blue-haired, tan-skinned child with ponytails is the spokesperson and primary narrator. (This book was reviewed digitally)  
A world of fun for budding cryptozoologists. (Informational picture book. 5-7)

**DEAR REBEL**

**125+ Women Share Their Secrets to Taking on the World**  
*Ed. by Rebel Girls*  
*Rebel Girls (420 pp.)*  
*$27.99 | Oct. 3, 2023*  
*9781953424471*

A collection of letters to the next generation.  
This anthology highlights an inclusive international community of women and girls, including those with disabilities and who are LGBTQ+. A one-to-three–page spread for each entry makes for quick reading. While most are traditional letters, a few take the form of poems. Each includes at least one color photograph of its writer. The contributors are varied in their backgrounds, passions, achievements, and advice; some are well-known names, like Melinda French Gates and Drew Barrymore, while others will be new to most readers. Tegan Vincent-Cooke, a Black British quadriplegic dressage rider, writes about facing discrimination and finding acceptance as a disabled woman. Pranjal Jain, the founder of journalism nonprofit Global Girlhood, shares her story of writing to President Barack Obama in seventh grade, asking him to change the Constitution so that she could run for president one day despite being an Indian immigrant and how that experience shaped her. Some letter writers are still teens themselves, like Japanese Canadian actor Momona Tamada, who discusses breaking stereotypes and gives advice to readers about trying new things and finding support. All the letters highlight women’s successes and struggles in both their personal and professional lives, allowing for points of connection with readers. Bright graphics and ample white space contribute to the attractiveness of the volume.  
Sincere, accessible advice and inspiration. (about Room to Read, Rebel Girls app, photo credits) (Nonfiction. 8-12)
That makes being their king rather difficult. Then Percival

A positively plucky look at government from a penguin’s perspective. (Picture book. 4-8)

BATS IN THE CASTLE
Roy, Ron & Kayla Whaley
Illus. by Chloe Burgett
Random House (96 pp.)
$6.99 paper / $12.99 PLB | Sept. 19, 2023
9780593489024
9780593489031 PLB
Series: A TO Z Animal Mysteries, 2

Another mystery—this one close to home!

Abbi Wallace habitually records animal noises, and her mother recently gave her a special microphone that can detect high-pitched bat noises and make them audible to humans. But one October evening, the old elevator at the Maine castle where they live is broken. Abbi, who now uses a wheelchair due to spinal muscular atrophy, can’t get up the stairs anymore, so she has to instruct her friends Lydia and Daniel Herrera on how to set up the equipment via walkie-talkies. Later, the sound app on Abbi’s phone makes a screeching noise even more shrill than a whistling teakettle! Abbi’s mother teases that it’s probably the ghost of the castle’s builder. Lydia becomes frightened at the possibility. To appease Lydia’s fears, Abbi uses a tablet with a camera to digitally supervise her friends through an auditory search of the house for the source of the noise. Abbi has a hunch, and the next day, they call a park ranger for help. This second series installment gets more personal, addressing Abbi’s needs and wants as a wheelchair user, and when Abbi voices her frustration about her lack of access to parts of the castle, her mom is quick to find solutions. The mystery itself is more straightforward but more immediately significant as it takes place in Abbi’s home, with great use of technology throughout as the kids—and readers—learn more about bats. Burgett’s illustrations continue to delight. Abbi and her mother present white, while Lydia and Daniel are cued Latine.

Pleasing entertainment laced with insightful lessons. (bat facts) (Mystery. 7-11)
**A DAY IN THE PARK**

_Salmieri, Robert_

*Enchanted Lion Books (40 pp.)*  
$18.95 | Aug. 22, 2023  
9781665935234

Take a tour through a lush and active park that sits in the middle of a busy metropolis.

There is an entire world alive here; the varied flora and fauna include gorgeous trees, vibrant flowers, joyful pups roaming off-leash, butterflies, chipmunks, swans, and more. Some of the attendees take in live music performed in the band shell, while others go for a run. The rhyming text is broken up across page turns (“Visiting the park any time of the day is a delight. // In the morning baby birds have a big appetite”), which keeps the story moving. The collagelike illustrations are the real draw, though. A layout of the plants and trees shows layered greens of various shades, the backdrop a wash of watercolor. Horizontal brush strokes across the legs and torsos of the runners give the impression of movement and speed. The detailed work on the faces of the racoons, frog, and rabbit gives readers a taste of the incredible wildlife nestled inside the city. An author’s note reveals Brooklyn’s Prospect Park as Salmieri’s inspiration. There are few humans in the book, but those depicted are diverse in terms of skin tone and hair color and texture. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

Rich illustrations immerse readers in an urban wonderland. *(Picture book 3-5)*

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**REBECCA REZNK REBOOTS THE UNIVERSE**

_Shanker, Samara_

*Athenaeum (256 pp.)*  
$17.99 | Sept. 5, 2023  
9781665935234

Series: Golems and Goblins, 1

Thirteen-year-old neuroatypical Becca is not haunted by Hanukkah goblins. Last year, bat mitzvah prep got weird when Becca’s best friend, Naomi, got a seemingly helpful golem as a surprise gift (as related in Naomi Teitelbaum Ends the World, 2022). Becca’s relieved the magic has quieted since then, because everything else is dreadful: Her parents are fighting, money’s short, and her brother’s getting scarily violent (once toward an animal). Meanwhile, the rabbi’s teaching that it’s time to be “spiritually grown-ups,” which includes “the ability to sense subtlety and nuance”—not so simple for Becca! So is it good or bad when her friends (all three teens are white Jews) realize that the awful things happening in her family might be because her house is haunted by Jewish demons? The “not-a-goblin-maybe-a-mazzik” is tiny, but if Becca’s friend Eitan hadn’t remembered a story from the Talmud, he wouldn’t have been able to defeat it with a surprisingly clever rhyming game. A “toilet demon,” despite being a demon that literally climbs out of toilets, isn’t comical at all; it almost kills Naomi. Avoiding tropes, Becca’s autism is not superpowered, but her ways of interpreting the world, which she believes make her unfit to fight demons, actually give her enormous power. Perhaps she doesn’t need subtlety or nuance to become a mature Jewish grown-up.

Clever, funny, and scary with an autistic hero and excellent use of obscure Jewish demonology. *(Fantasy 9-12)*

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**BIG BAD WOLF’S YOM KIPPUR**

_Sherrin, David_

*Apples & Honey Press (32 pp.)*  
$18.95 | Sept. 5, 2023  
9781915244482

It’s Yom Kippur, and the Big Bad Wolf is preparing to be bad. Things start changing at the synagogue, where he concedes a hug feels nice and *almost* sings along with the others. Hearing the rabbi’s sermon, Wolf wonders if he can become “better and brighter.” After services, Wolf encounters familiar story characters: a red-hooded girl and her grandmother, whom he treats kindly, and a porcine trio to whom he gives sensible home-building advice. What’s happened? Wolf’s worst instincts repeatedly try to surface, but they’re defeated by his much-improved nature, and it becomes clear that the formerly Big Bad Wolf has evolved into a much nicer lupine. That evening, after the holiday is over, the Big Good Wolf is rewarded by his grateful newfound friends. This sweet, humorous tale conveys the meaning of this important Jewish holiday in a way that’s understandable for children. Its premise proves it’s easy to err on the side of good; each of us has kindness within, and it’s satisfying to let it show. The fractured-fairy-tale motif will engage young readers and also makes familiar literary sense, as the Big Bad Wolf, naturally, is the antagonist of both “Little Red Riding Hood” and “The Three Little Pigs.” The illustrations are comical and dynamic; Wolf and all other animal characters are riotously expressive. Bespectacled Little Red and Granny are pale-skinned. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

A solemn holiday is given an appealing, entertaining treatment well suited to young kids. (author’s note about Yom Kippur) *(Picture book 4-8)*

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**LISTENING TO THE QUIET**

_Silva, Cassie_

*Lantana (32 pp.)*  
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023  
9781915244482

As Jacki’s mother begins to lose her hearing, the two of them learn sign language.
Afterward, Jonas starts finding notes in his locker—"I KNOW IT WAS YOU" and "WATCH YOUR BACK"—and he starts flashes. Fairy lights connected to a motion sensor twinkle to let different person with C. than he is with his boys, something that dia illustrations, which occasionally erupt in movement. This an actual incident in Silva's life, discussed in an author's note and asks her classmates to stomp or tap their feet. Her mom allows readers to travel down the journey of introspection about the events. His self-reflection is derailed when the notes all a secret. Concepción, Jonas' Chilean home-schooled friend arrived in fifth grade from Texas and is cued Indian American.

The space-suited duo—one brown-skinned, the other presenting Asian in Hsieh's cartoon illustrations—try Mars first but turn out to be picky sorts who demand a place with grass, trees, and a babbling brook. There's nothing for it, then, but to bid the planets of our solar system goodbye one by one ("Back
in a jiff, Jupiter”) and try out Stahl’s much more far-flung suggestions...all of which, he explains in an expansive afterword, are real places. Proxima Centauri b? “Um. Beautiful, in its own rugged way.” But not much atmosphere. Gigantic HR 8799 e? Plenty of atmosphere, but any core surface is probably a “super-hot mess.” Other possibilities turn out to have issues, too, like being so close to its star that you age a year in just four hours or lacking a star altogether. Stahl’s final idea may not have a woody setting, but readers might find it more feasible: Why not spread a blanket up on a roof? “Then all you need are stars,” he notes, as readers get a final view of the young voyagers sitting on a rooftop, admiring a sparkling nighttime vista overhead. The source list at the end is all technical reports, and if the depictions of exoplanets and attendant stars are speculative, all are based on current information. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

**Too far to go in a spaceship but just right for a flight of imagination.** *(Informational picture book. 6-9)*

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![Fitz and Cleo Put a Party On It](image1)

**Fitz and Cleo Put a Party On It**

**Stutzman, Jonathan**

Illus. by Heather Fox

Henry Holt (64 pp.)

$12.99 | Aug. 1, 2023

9781250830890

Series: Fitz and Cleo, 3

Ghost siblings find numerous causes for celebration.

Boredom drives Cleo to invite her brother, Fitz, to play games. But her unbeatable winning streak makes Fitz feel bad—and makes Cleo feel “really, really, really bored.” Craving “LOTS of pizzazz,” Cleo invents the “Party Squad.” The club (initially the two ghosts and their cat, Mr. Boo) has one rule and one rule only: “HAVE FUN!” Joy abounds in chapter after chapter as the group comes up with party ideas, inventions like the Wrap-O-Matic 400, and more. No matter the situation, the Party Squad can “PUT A PARTY ON IT!!” and let every and any day be the party it deserves. This third series entry maintains a jovial tone, with simple yet expressive black lines to connect speakers with dialogue (with occasional speech bubbles). The plot is primarily dialogue-driven, with short sentences and relatively few descriptive text boxes overall. Though the book has 13 chapters total, most are just a few pages long, which keeps the pace quick and the content accessible to emerging comics readers. As a trio, Fitz, Cleo, and Mr. Boo have an entertaining dynamic that caters to Cleo’s infectious enthusiasm. Scenes showing Mr. Boo’s reactions and kitty shenanigans are comedy gold. Additional paranormal characters briefly appear in a few group party scenes.

**Feel-good phantasmic fun.** *(Graphic fantasy. 6-10)*

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**JUST DON’T FALL**

**A Hilariously True Story of Childhood Cancer and Olympic Greatness**

**Sundquist, Josh**

**Viking (176 pp.)**

$17.99 | Sept. 5, 2023

9780593621998

In this adaptation of a memoir for adults, comedian and Paralympic skier Sundquist recounts how he learned to persevere after losing his leg to cancer.

Nine-year-old Josh is dismayed when Dad announces the whole family will be relocating from Virginia to Florida so Dad can attend seminary. But everything changes—including the move—when Josh is diagnosed with Ewing’s sarcoma, necessitating the amputation of his leg. An avid soccer player, Josh must now relearn to walk with crutches and a prosthesis. He wonders how he can play sports again; he keeps falling, even when he discovers a knack for skiing. But as he grows, he realizes that the most important thing is getting right back up. At 16, he sets his sights on making the 2006 Paralympic ski team, putting his determination to the test. Though his stream-of-consciousness narration is occasionally difficult to follow, pitch-perfect kid logic renders his discussions of such tough topics as hospitalization, chemotherapy, and death alternately humorous, poignant, and insightful. While Josh candidly expresses anger and frustration, his overall pragmatism is reassuring, especially for kids navigating similar circumstances. His Christianity also comforts him. His family’s support grounds the story as, in heartbreaking and heartwarming scenes, Josh details the impact of his cancer on his parents and younger brothers. However, he emphasizes, life goes on—a sentiment illustrated particularly vividly by his hilariously awkward transition from home schooling to public high school.

**Witty, encouraging, and perceptive.** *(Memoir. 8-13)*

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**WARRIOR GIRL**

**Tafolla, Carmen**

**Nancy Paulsen Books (224 pp.)**

$17.99 | Sept. 5, 2023

9780593354711

A 12-year-old girl claims her place in a turbulent world.

After years of being silenced at school, Mexican American Celina is ready for a clean start. It’s not easy starting middle school in a new town, and now her dad has been deported yet again. While she, her mother, and Gramma trust her papacito will find a way to return, as he has before, his absence is always painful. Still, Celita makes one friend, then two more, and the four middle schoolers quickly find refuge and strength in each other. The friendships become lifelines over the course of the year as they face ordinary middle
school challenges—homework, mean kids—and broader social turmoil with the emerging Covid-19 pandemic, the killings of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, increasing awareness of global warming, and more. Tafolla skilfully weaves these significant recent historic moments and the hopeful stories of leaders like Emma Tenayuca and César Chávez together with the more specific experiences of the four friends as Celina is racially profiled by a teacher and a Covid death hits close to home. The friends, who are Chicano, are distinct enough, but a few are more thinly drawn; protagonist Celi, an emerging poet, is consistently and vividly rendered, though, and her righteous, powerful, and joyful voice carries the day.

“An exuberant, rousing celebration of youth activism. (author’s note, land acknowledgement) (Verse fiction. 8-12)"

**PARTY ANIMALS**

Thompson, Dan

Random House Graphic (96 pp.)

$10.99 | $13.99 PLB | Sept. 19, 2023

9780593486313

9780593486320 PLB

Series: Tig and Lily, 2

Tig the cat wants to host a party; Lily the tiger has other ideas.

Tig, who in an earlier series installment moved into Lily’s enclosure at the zoo, is bored, while Lily enjoys the serenity of doing nothing. Tig decides to throw a party against Lily’s wishes, and they squabble over whether party animals and poopers alike will appreciate themes of social anxiety and acceptance. (Graphic fiction. 5-8)
even paint a mural of inspiring individuals. While the goals of this book—to help children focus on the positive and build strength—are admirable, the execution doesn’t quite work, as the text wanders too far into the abstract and ultimately provides substitutions for the difficult words rather than a true understanding of what they mean. Still, the idea that children can channel their frustration with the world into action is profoundly important, and this selection provides an opening to discuss big ideas like equity in a comforting context. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An ambitious foray into the world of words, labels, and social justice, sure to provoke conversation. (author’s note, information about the people depicted in the mural) (Picture book. 3-6)

**SOMETIMES I KAPLOOM**

Vail, Rachel

Illus. by Hyevon Yum

Orchard/Scholastic (40 pp.)

$18.99 | Aug. 1, 2023

9781338840308

It’s hard to stay brave when it’s time to say goodbye.

Katie Honors, whom readers may remember from *Sometimes I Grumblesquinch* (2022), is back. This time, she explains that she is a “really brave kid.” She stands proudly “like a superhero,” climbs high on the playground, and needs to be checked on at night only once—or twice. She can even hold in her tears when it’s time to say goodbye at what looks like preschool...at first. Yum’s familiar and comforting colored pencil drawings portray the inner emotions that belie Katie’s brave front as she says, “Bye, I love you. See you soon,” her face radiating pure misery.

Yum’s familiar and comforting colored pencil drawings portray the inner emotions that belie Katie’s brave front as she says, “Bye, I love you. See you soon,” her face radiating pure misery. With her eyes squeezed shut, she grabs her mother, lets out a roar, and radiates lightning and sparks. She becomes unable to hear the voices around her. Her mother initially asks her to say goodbye. Her mother initially asks her to say goodbye. However, she can’t contain those feelings and she KAPLOOMS. With her eyes squeezed shut, she grabs her mother, lets out a roar, and radiates lightning and sparks. She becomes unable to hear the voices around her. Her mother initially asks her to be brave but then changes tactics, simply holding Katie and acknowledging that bravery and sadness, tears, and fear are not exclusive—that you can be “brave and KAPLOOMING” at the same time. Her loving actions model a healthy response for adults and also validate children’s feelings during this rite of passage. Katie and her mother have straight dark hair, light skin, and dark dots for eyes. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**COMFORT FOR BOTH CHILDREN AND PARENTS IN AN ALL-TOO-FAMILIAR SITUATION. (AUTHOR’S AND ILLUSTRATOR’S NOTES) (PICTURE BOOK. 3-7)**

**THE POWER OF YETI**

Van Slyke, Rebecca

Illus. by G. Brian Karas

Nancy Paulsen Books (32 pp.)

$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023

9780399169588

A child builds confidence and skills alongside a Yeti. “Look at those feet! Those muscles! I wish I was like that!” A light-skinned child excitedly observes Yeti, Bigfoot, Sasquatch, and Abominable Snow Monster as they romp in a grassy field. The legendary and dark dots for eyes. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**LETTERS IN CHARCOAL**

Vasco, Irene

Illus. by Juan Palomino

Trans. by Lawrence Schimel

Lantana (32 pp.)

$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023

9781915244512

Almost nobody in Palenque, Colombia, knows how to read or write.

Gina, the young narrator’s older sister, has been receiving letters from a young doctor who spent time with them in the pueblo but has since moved on. The girls can only guess at the content of his letters and dream that they are professions of love. Motivated by curiosity, the younger sister begins to learn the alphabet from a kind local shopkeeper. She then, in turn, passes the newly acquired knowledge along to her sister, writing the letters of the alphabet on the ground in charcoal, and slowly they both begin to read. They learn that the young doctor, discouraged by the lack of response to his letters, plans to stop writing. The sting of this loss is tempered by the joy of their new education, and the narrator commits herself to a life of reading and helping others learn to read. Palomino’s warm, flat, textured illustrations depict a bustling Afro-Latine community. Based on stories told to the author by many Colombian
women, this tenderly matter-of-fact tale, translated from Spanish, celebrates the freedom to read in an area where it was once forbidden by colonizers; an author’s note offers context about the descendants of enslaved Africans in the Americas. Vasco’s narrative reminds readers that even in the face of lost connections, the joy of reading can light the way to a brighter future.

(This book was reviewed digitally.)

A heartfelt tale that captures the transformative power of education. (Picture book: 5-9)

GOTTA GO!
Toon Level 2
Viva, Frank
TOON Books/Astra Books for Young Readers (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781662665073

In this graphic easy reader, Owen learns techniques for forestalling the inevitable need to pee. Absorbed with a game in the car, Owen realizes 10 minutes from Grandpa’s house that “I gotta go!” Mom helps the child think of something else (steering Owen away from such counterproductive images as a waterfall, running faucet, and water pistol). As the child rushes into the bathroom of Grandpa’s third-floor walk-up just in time, Viva fills a double-page spread with Owen’s relieved face. At the park with Grandpa and Whizzer the dog, Owen learns that older folks get up early because they need to pee. Grandpa wryly introduces the child to several dances that help him stem the urge. After learning the “Tinkle Twist” and the “Wee-Wee Walk,” Owen collaborates with Grandpa on the “Pee-pee Hop,” the “Piddle Patter,” and the “Leaky Shake.” (Unbeknownst to the pair, an ever growing line has formed for the public restrooms behind them.) When Mom arrives to pick Owen up, she’s introduced to the dances as the line of waiting-to-go people, practicing their own set of urge diversions, begin to adopt some of the intergenerational duo’s moves. Viva’s crisply stylized graphics employ a palette of flat black, white, and gray, accented with a certain yellow in a watercolorlike texture. The family’s skin tone is light brown; other characters are diverse. Comics conventions like silhouettes and exaggerated perspective round out the package.

Funny—and comically instructive. (Graphic easy reader: 4-7)

MASCOT
Waters, Charles & Traci Sorell
Charlesbridge (256 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781623543808

Waters and Sorell (Cherokee Nation) join forces to write about the power of being true to oneself.

In a middle school in Rye, a fictional town near Washington, D.C., a racist mural and offensive pep rally chants shock new student Callie Crossland, who is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation and African American. Callie shares a heartfelt poem with her seventh grade honors English class, reminding everyone that the “stupid tomahawk-chop chant” and the “cheap chicken-feather headdress” are nothing less than symbols of “white supremacy.” Afterward, Ms. Williams, her teacher, assigns a persuasive writing and oration project entitled “Pros and Cons of Indigenous Peoples as Mascots.” The small, broadly diverse group of students is assigned to work in pairs; Callie is matched with Franklin, who is Black and a proud fan of the Rye Braves football team. Franklin insists, “I wish we could Lysol racism away. / It’s a bad odor,” but he feels conflicted: “I still don’t think our mascot is racist though. It brings so much joy. / ...what’s the big deal?” This clever novel unfolds in poems told in multiple voices showing the wide range of students’, families’, and community responses to the controversy; for some, initial feelings of opposition, hesitation, or indifference change and friendships are tested. The compelling, highly relevant subject matter and accessible text invite readers to understand different perspectives and witness individual growth.

A brilliant story not to be missed; deeply engaging from the first page. (glossary, additional information and resources) (Verse fiction: 10-14)

EVERY DREAMING CREATURE
Wenzel, Brendan
Little, Brown (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780316512534

What if you could dream yourself into another animal? A bright eye peeks from under a tree. Orange-on-blue shapes, first seen on the front endpapers, become a salamander’s patterned skin. An unseen narrator begins, “I had a dream I was a sleeping salamander... // until you came...and woke me from that dream.” The salamander becomes an octopus: “Bursts of wonder tingling down the minds of my arms /...until you came... and woke me from that dream.” Octopus becomes elephant becomes falcon becomes tiger. Wenzel’s creatures are full of personality and spirited energy—they telegraph their natures: secretive, undulating, fearsome, massive, tiny. Light and shadow, camouflage and plumage, bright colors and bold lines pop from the pages, the illustrations combining with the spare text to

“Dazzling.”

EVERY DREAMING CREATURE

F I C T I O N
N O N F I C T I O N
C H I L D R E N ’ S
Y O U N G A D U L T
I N D I E

K I R K U S . C O M
C H I L D R E N ’ S
1 5 J U L Y 2 0 2 3
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create a melodic pacing. The dreamer becomes other animals in an accelerating montage: “Then there I was. / And was, / and was / and was again.” Finally, there is a tan-skinned child “full of funny thoughts and comfort and family.” Here a snowy day of play gives way to striped pajamas, a warm blanket, and a dream. Caldecott winner Wenzel cultivates senses of empathy and imagination in this appreciation of the ways other creatures experience the world, resulting in a buoyantly reverent celebration of the myriad wonders and complexity of life on Earth. The simple poetry of the narrative creates a glorious conversation starter: Who is the dreamer? (This book was reviewed digitally.) Dazzling. (Picture book. 3-7)

THE OTHERWOODS
Winans, Justine Pucella
Bloomsbury (288 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 12, 2023 9781547612543

Monsters lure a human and their cat on a spirit realm rescue mission. Born with the “freaking terrifying” ability to see spirits—and monsters—nonbinary 12-year-old River Rydell is cursed. Nobody believes them, least of all about the giant bug monster living under their bed. Enter Avery, the popular girl who gives River “strange butterflies in their stomach” and just might be their first real friend. Getting closer to someone unfortunately confirms River’s worst fears when a monster abducts Avery and takes her to The Otherwoods. River follows, with cat Mr. Fluffy Pancakes in tow. Uncountable dangers lurk in the realm of “monsters and never-quite-alive beings.” But can River brave it all with the help of a teenage ghost named Xavier—including facing their own self-doubt—to get the girl? Winans’ middle-grade debut is an otherworldly, atmospheric tale of self-actualization despite a doomed destiny. Gigantic animal-hybrid monsters and cryptic messages consistently up the ante. River and Xavier are both white; Avery is described as having a Mexican mom and American dad. Multiple characters are queer. The ending hints at a sequel while also keeping the story arc neatly contained.

Spooky, funny, and queer—what’s not to love? (Horror. 8-12)

UPS AND DOWNS
A Book of Emotions
Wohmoutha, Mike
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 19, 2023 9781536227376

How are you feeling? Kids are frequently willing to discuss their emotions, though they can’t always explain why they feel and behave as they do. The “ups and downs” included in this book cover a range of common emotions that can be readily identified by children; illustrated pages depict easily understandable situations that might trigger those feelings. Each page usually mentions one emotion (or, as in the case of descriptors such as “sleepy” or “AWAKE,” a state of being). Through facial expressions, occasional spoken comments, or body language, a group of sweet-faced, racially diverse young kids demonstrate emotions aroused by realistic situations—on their own or with family members or peers at home, at play, at school, and in the neighborhood. Among the recognizable sentiments on display are “scared,” “lonely,” “worried,” “surprised,”

116 | 15 July 2023 | Children’s | Kirkus.com |
“cheerful,” and “excited.” Some words that may be unfamiliar to many youngsters (although they will certainly be familiar with the sentiments) include embarrassed, disgusted, stressed, regretful, apologetic, flattered, and awkward, making this volume a nifty vocabulary developer. Children will feel reassured to have their own emotions validated, perhaps under circumstances they’ve experienced, and to note that the book ends happily. The soft gouache illustrations are comforting; occasional onomatopoetic words add dramatic interest to scenes. Adults sharing the book should encourage volunteers to discuss when they felt some of these emotions and what brought them on. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Young readers will feel good about this book that mirrors everyday experiences. (Picture book 3-6)

**THE DARK LORD’S DAUGHTER**
Wrede, Patricia C.
Random House (368 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Sept. 5, 2023
9780553536201
9780553536218 PLB

A teen wrestles with magical powers and moral dilemmas when she learns she’s a Dark Lord’s daughter.

Four years after her adoptive father died of cancer, 14-year-old Kayla Jones still has to be careful; mentioning him sends her mom, Riki, into dark moods. But her 10-year-old brother, Del, who has fewer memories of his biological father, can’t help asking about him. Luckily, their traditional family trip to the Minnesota State Fair provides a distraction. When an armor-clad man called Waylan invites Kayla to assume her father’s throne and “rebuild the armies of Darkness,” she assumes he’s acting—until she, Del, and Riki are abruptly teleported to the kingdom of Zaradwin and its cursed, dilapidated castle. Waylan reveals that Kayla, daughter of the late Dark Lord Xavriel, is next in line to be the Dark Lady—provided she’s not defeated by challengers. But Kayla just can’t grasp Dark magic, and upholding such traditions as exile, kidnapping, and execution feels horrifying. Maybe she should just focus on getting home? A disturbing revelation, however, compels her to break the curse before it dooms every castle inhabitant. The plot and worldbuilding rely heavily on lengthy expository dialogue, and intriguing but unexplored plot elements will leave action-oriented readers awaiting a sequel. However, quirky secondary characters, including Macavinch, Kayla’s tablet computer—turned-familiar, interject wry wit, and Kayla’s relationships with Del and Riki are humorous and poignant. Most characters read white.

A promising setup for gripping future developments. (Fantasy 8-13)

**PENGUIN AND OLLIE**
Yoon, Salina
Bloomsbury (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781681193502

Geisel Honor-winning Yoon’s picture-book favorite Penguin meets Ollie the octopus while on an underwater treasure hunt.

Penguin takes an undersea dive to explore the ocean floor, looking for riches. After spotting Penguin, Ollie the octopus quietly tails him until the two meet in a cloud of black ink. Eventually, Penguin tracks down the treasure chest and realizes that his friendship with Ollie is the real prize. Yoon’s darling little Penguin and signature illustrations rank high in kid appeal. Thick black outlines set each character off from the background. The book offers a playful mashup of realistic details (like Ollie’s ink) and more whimsical ones; readers expecting a realistic marine story should look elsewhere. Penguin once again wears his familiar orange scarf, a shark and several jellyfish end up bejeweled (the shark even sports a gold tooth!) after the valuables are discovered, and Ollie puts found knitting needles to good use in an effort to coordinate accessories with Penguin. The final pages include a seek-and-find guide. The moral of the story is familiar and predictable one, but in this absolutely adorable package, it’s sweet and sure to be a hit for fans of the series. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Well-trod territory but a gem nevertheless. (Picture book 3-5)
Eighteen-year-old Isabel Wolfe roams the world in search of superheroes. When a depressed Isabel discovered Actually Super, an online community devoted to the theory that people with superhuman abilities exist, her mind was eased. Believing superheroes were out there fighting evil made her feel better about the world. Isabel plans to leave Dearborn, Michigan, behind and find them. Before she goes, she makes a pact with best friends Sam and Chío to meet in Mexico during their last spring break before heading to college. One year later, they're waiting at the agreed-upon spot as planned, but Isabel is unreachable. After a body is found on the beach, they grow more concerned. Where is their friend? The novel alternates between following Sam and Chío, who are searching for Isabel in Mexico, and Isabel, from the start of her international adventure until the two storylines converge. Isabel's first destination is Tokyo, where a rumored superhero has been seen saving people at subway stations. Making stops—including Taiwan, the Philippines, Australia, Argentina, and Peru—along the way, she revels in the warmth and kindness of strangers while her friends offer their love and support from afar. She finds a deeper understanding of heroism and humanity in this satisfying novel featuring powerful character development and richly detailed locales that are a joy to experience. Isabel is white and Jewish; Chío is Argentine, and Sam has light brown skin.

Envyable travels, strong characterization, and an original premise that works. (Speculative fiction. 13-18)
Alsberg uses in a refreshing manner. All main characters are Lisa starts training with Sister Firehair, a human with supernat-
tural powers who is cued as being of Chinese descent, to man-
tend toward someone she thought she’d left behind and myriad secrets that threaten to upend it all. It’s difficult not to root for Klara, though her quippiness can occasionally be a bit over-the-
top and some contemporary references can feel jarring. The Scottish setting is sumptuous and well realized, making it easy to become fully immersed in Klara’s journey. With a quick-moving plot that will keep readers guessing, the storyline is neatly woven across centuries, and the inclusion of mythological gods like Arianrhod and Cernunnos add a nod to age-old stories that Alsberg uses in a refreshing manner. All main characters are cued white. A sparkling conclusion to a story that spans centuries. (Fantasy romance. 13-18)

LISA CHEESE AND GHOST GUITAR Attack of the Snack
Alvin, Kevin
Top Shelf Productions (164 pp.)
$19.99 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
9781603095280
Series: Lisa Cheese and Ghost Guitar, 1

A unicorn becomes entangled in a burger chain’s evil plot to take over Earth City.

Lisa Cheese, a light-blue unicorn with a cyborg arm, jour-
neyed away from her parents and her dimension to pursue her dream of becoming a folk singer in Earth City, which is inhabited by ghouls, demons, aliens, and humans. Her first open mic had disastrous results, though, and she now has rage issues and is working an office job alongside a demon-possessed co-worker. Lisa starts training with Sister Firehair, a human with supernatural powers who is cued as being of Chinese descent, to manage her anger and strength and help protect the Burning Bakery, Sister Firehair’s family restaurant, which is being targeted by neighboring joint Beef Is Burger. The burger minions’ scheme is darker than Lisa knows. Luckily, she’s not the only one on to them, because she’ll need help from others—including her new crush, rock musician GiGi, aka Ghost Guitar, a human spirit with tan skin and silvery blue hair—to defeat the Ne’er-do-wells and save her new home. Combining a vintage comics aesthetic with vibrant, saturated colors and hand-lettering, this fun and chaotic comic evokes underground punk zines through its blend of anger, heart, and anti-corporate themes (Lisa: “I hate capitalism”). Lisa’s self-doubt and journey to find her place and purpose will resonate, particularly with older teens and new adults, while the absurd hilarity and exciting action sequences will keep readers captivated.

Offbeat and charmingly weird. (Graphic fiction. 14-adult)

SAY YES AND KEEP SMILING
Beaudoin-Masse, Laurence
Trans. by Shelley Tanaka
Groundwood (368 pp.)
$17.99 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9781773069685

Influencer Ellie searches for her real self amid a livestreamed proposal, her father’s declining health, and her disor-
dered eating habits.

In this sequel to Suck It in and Smile (2022) translated from French and set in Quebec, 25-year-old Ellie seems headed for peak influencer success with her account, Quinoa Forever. She’s about to release a book, is engaged to her musician boyfriend, and her collaboration with fellow influ-
encer Mila is getting them both thousands of views. Just like that, when she’s at the top of the world, Ellie begins to unravel. Her father’s cancer forces her to face her childhood and how it affected her relationship with food and her body. Her despera-
tion for perfection pushes her toward inauthenticity online. Her relationship with her fiancé suffers a blow. Beaudoin-Masse skillfully makes readers a part of Ellie’s inner world and online life. Some chapters include tidbits about influencers and celeb-
rities interspersed with YouTube rankings, text messages, Instagram comments, and snippets of Ellie’s social media feed. Other chapters read like small essays, powerful as almost stand-alone pieces that are insightful and effective glimpses into Ellie’s life. Ellie’s friendship with Opale, her sister’s girlfriend, builds slowly, believably, and beautifully. Though Ellie’s life is aspirational in many respects, her struggles, fears, trauma, and resilience are familiar. The cast reads white.

A realistically flawed character worth rooting for in a story worth reading. (Fiction. 16-adult)

MESSENGER
The Legend of Muhammad Ali
Bernardin, Marc
Illus. by Ron Salas
First Second (240 pp.)
$17.99 paper | Aug. 15, 2023
9781250881632

A rousing graphic biography tracing the evolution of a storied boxing cham-
pion and humanitarian.

How did Cassius Clay become “The Greatest”? Born in Louisville, Kentucky, the future heavyweight champion stumbled into the sport after a thief stole his bicycle. Clay reported the crime to police officer Joe Martin, who trained boxers at a local gym. Martin advised Clay to “learn to fight before you start fighting.” Later, 18-year-old Clay earned a gold medal at the 1960 Olympics. Becoming an Olympic medalist, however, didn’t protect him from the widespread terror of white suprem-
acy. A chance meeting with Malcolm X in Miami opened Clay’s
While there may still be a few holdouts yet to succumb to the joys of graphic literature, the growth in its popularity year upon year and the tremendous talents working in this format prove that the battle is over. Graphic novels for young readers have been awarded the Newbery Medal and the Kirkus Prize, two prestigious awards in which they were up against traditional prose titles. More importantly, countless readers of all ages devote their precious reading hours to enjoying them. The following works demonstrate the versatility of graphic literature, spanning multiple genres, a range of subjects, and a variety of artistic and literary styles.

*In Limbo: A Graphic Memoir* written and illustrated by Deb JJ Lee (First Second, March 7): This gut-wrenching, unflinchingly honest memoir by a professional artist delves into their experiences as a Korean immigrant grappling with cultural alienation, mental health struggles, and parent-child conflict—but also finding a path to healing.

*Insomniacs After School, Vol. 1* written and illustrated by Makoto Ojiro, translated by Andria Cheng (VIZ Media, March 21): Manga fans will adore this charming read translated from Japanese about two high schoolers who discover the same hidden corner of their school; perfect for sneaking in naps, it becomes a cozy shared retreat.

*Codex Black: A Fire Among Clouds* written and illustrated by Camilo Moncada Lozano, colors by Angel De Santiago (IDW Publishing, April 4): This boldly colorful series opener with delightful manga-style illustrations by a Mexican artist has a Mesoamerican setting in which two teens—a Zapotec girl and a Mexica warrior—embark on a danger-filled quest.

*Lost in Taiwan* written and illustrated by Mark Crilley (Little, Brown, May 23): Taiwan forms the backdrop for this story of cultural immersion in which a sullen American teen traveler blossoms after being forced outside his comfort zone. The well-realized setting and sympathetic characterization give this story real heart.

*Knee Deep, Book 1* written and illustrated by Joe Flood (Oni Press, May 30): This dystopian adventure is strong on atmosphere, and the gripping storyline will keep pages turning as readers follow a teen girl seeking her missing scientist parents in an underground maze of tunnels populated by odd characters.

*Northranger* written by Rey Terciero and illustrated by Bre Indigo (Harper-Alley, June 6): This emotional, beautifully rendered queer love story reimagines Northanger Abbey in a Texas ranch setting: City boy Cade is out of his element, and country boy Henry’s family is plagued by rumors of murder.

*Monstrous: A Transracial Adoption Story* written and illustrated by Sarah Myer (First Second, June 27): Myer’s intense memoir viscerally and memorably shows readers the internalized pain of a childhood as an adoptee from Korea growing up in a rural white community where rigid gender roles and entrenched racism prevail.

*Frontera* written by Julio Anta and illustrated by Jacoby Salcedo (Harper-Alley, July 18): This gut-wrenching, visually captivating story combines the real plight of undocumented deportees with supernatural elements as a teen is helped across the Sonoran Desert toward Arizona by the ghost of someone who perished there decades earlier.

*The Bodyguard Unit: Edith Garrud, Women’s Suffrage, and Jujitsu* written by Clément Xavier, translated by Edward Gauvin, illustrated by Lisa Lugrin, colors by Albertine Ralenti (Graphic Universe, Aug. 1): British suffragettes’ use of jujitsu is explored in this intriguing and informative historical work translated from French. As women’s demand for suffrage was met by violence, Edith Garrud trained a group of women at her London dojo.

*Stars in Their Eyes* written by Jessica Walton and illustrated by Aśka (Graphix/Scholastic, Aug. 1): This layered, inclusive, and expressive Australian import is a sweet love letter to fandom: Fourteen-year-old Maisie, a cancer survivor and amputee, road trips with her mum to a convention where Maisie falls for nonbinary Ollie.

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
eyes to the importance of Black pride and claiming his own identity. Later, he converted to Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali. Denouncing the Vietnam War as a conscientious objector made headlines; the U.S. Supreme Court found him guilty of draft evasion but later overturned his conviction. Parkinson’s disease may have slowed Ali down, but he remained steadfast in his beliefs. Bernardin’s prose effectively captures Ali’s larger-than-life aura, seamlessly incorporating the boxer’s poetic catchphrases and electrifying speeches. Salas’ emotive grayscale illustrations complement the narrative, evoking the unspoken fears, worries, and doubts hiding beneath Ali’s bravado. This work does a stellar job of presenting Ali’s life in an accessible way without minimizing the impact of his legacy and the expansiveness of his life.

A moving ode to a mighty icon whose cultural contributions are as powerful as his victories in the ring. (bibliography) (Graphic biography. 14-18)

**CHAMPION OF FATE**
Blake, Kendare
Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins
(480 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780062977205
Series: Heromaker, 1

The epic journey of a foundling girl in pursuit of glory and immortality.

After the population of her entire village is killed when she is a child, Reed is rescued by two members of the legendary Order of the Aristene. Creatures of legend, the Aristene are female warriors in service to the goddess of glory, tasked to guide heroes to victory, whatever it takes. Brought up in their Citadel and expected to become one of them, Reed, now 16, and her initiate friends are about to start their Hero’s Trials. Should they succeed, they will become fully fledged Aristene, immortal and nearly impossible to defeat in battle. But if she fails to guide her first hero—Hestion, a prince from a country on the cusp of a world-changing war—to glory, Reed will have to leave the community. As Reed grows closer to Hestion, she comes to fully grasp the sacrifices required to achieve what she always thought she wanted. The novel features enthralling worldbuilding and a nail-biting character arc that genuinely surprises with its twists and turns. Its highlights are the strength of the female friendships, the bonds between the Aristene, and the ties formed between the Aristene and their heroes. Explorations of tragedy, myth, and the power of agency versus fate enrich the story. Reed has dark hair and tan skin; in this fantasy world there is a diverse range of skin tones.

A fabulous series opener combining true thrills and deep relationships. (map) (Fantasy. 14-18)
Thoughtfully recounts the challenges of growing up with an incarcerated parent. (Verse memoir. 12-18)

An ill-fated move into an inherited house may present an opportunity for a dark history to repeat itself.

The home has been in her family for around half a century, but Evie Archer's first time seeing Hobbie House is the day she, her brother, and their mother arrive in search of a place to start fresh. After her parents' divorce, life in New York City has become too expensive. But strange events and bad omens begin to appear almost immediately after they get to Ravenglass, a small Berkshires town, and the disappearance of Holly, Evie's mom's and aunt's cousin, from the house 40 years prior doesn't seem to have faded from local lore as much as the Archers had hoped. Before
she realizes what’s happening, the shadow that suddenly starts following Evie everywhere begins to drag her deeper into a dark world where everyone she cares about stands in the way and the line between what Evie wants and what the shadow wants starts to blur. Sibling friction—between Evie and her brother and between Evie’s mom and maternal aunt—complements elements like an utterly creepy talking doll and dreams of a girl in a bonnet. Evie makes some decisions that will have readers yelling “don’t do that!” in excellent horror-movie fashion. Plenty of backstory is given to fill in the story of the disappearance of 15-year-old Holly Hobbie. Evie’s family is cued as white.

Energetic and colorfully descriptive. (Horror . 12-18)

FOR GIRLS WHO WALK THROUGH FIRE
DeRose, Kim
Union Square & Co. (320 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781454948872

A contemporary debut that deals with real-life issues head-on.

Elliott D’Angelo-Brandt is making a list. Every week, as she sits in the Santa Barbara, California, kindergarten classroom where her sexual assault support group meets, she observes the other teens and considers who should join her coven. Eventually she settles on prim and proper Madeline, bubbly rich girl Chloe, and introspective and athletic Bea. With the help of Elliott’s late mother’s spell book, the quartet set out to get what society won’t provide: revenge on their attackers. The spells and their repercussions astonish and begin to scare the young witches as their power—and its consequences—begins to grow. DeRose unflinchingly examines the impact of sexual assault on teens and the various paths there are toward healing. Each having experienced different types of assault, the girls relive their personal histories via shifting perspectives, providing nuance and complexity. Their healing journeys are both hopeful and realistic, as DeRose presents a clear-eyed assessment of the subject, including society’s dismissal of victims’ stories and the difficult path to judicial justice. Their growing friendships are compelling and well depicted. Elliott and Madeline are cued white; Chloe is a transracial adoptee from Korea, and Bea is Black. The book explores the impact of race on the girls’ experiences.

A searing examination of sexual assault centering teen witches who fight back. (Paranormal . 14-18)

A SONG OF SALVATION
Dow, Alechia
Inkyard Press (320 pp.)
$19.99 | July 11, 2023
9781335453723

A young woman must save the universe and fulfill her destiny.

In an effort to maintain balance in the universe, creator god Indigo existed in opposition to god of Destruction Ozvios. But Indigo died and was reborn in the body of teenager Zaira Citlali, who lives on Mal Ares, a planet colonized by the Ilior Empire, which is allied with Ozvios. Zaira is the last nightweaver, someone who can harness the power of music. Indigo used songs to create life, and harmonious song can defeat Ozvios—if all the planets can come together. But Zaira must learn to awaken Indigo’s power within herself before the Ilior can sacrifice her to Ozvios. Narrowly escaping death, Zaira seeks pilot Wesley Daniels, the Andarran...
In the mostly wordless five-part graphic novel *Mage and the Endless Unknown* (Iron Circus Comics, June 20), the title character, a wand-wielding innocent in a conical hat, ventures into a pastoral landscape that becomes increasingly horrific, losing an arm and an eye over the course of their adventures. Readers eventually learn that Mage has been charged with the task of healing a "cursed land" and that they are one of many who will undertake it. The absorbing, unsettling tale is executed in teeming black-and-white panels by debut graphic novelist SJ Miller, who lives and works in Las Vegas. They spoke with Kirkus via Zoom; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

How did you come to your story?
It’s a bit weird because I didn’t create it as a whole from the start. The first part was just a one-shot that I made online for the internet trend Inktober, where you would do an ink drawing every single day in October.

Is that like a NaNoWriMo for artists?
Kind of. It’s a thing on Twitter and Instagram. It was infamously because nobody ended up finishing it, because it was a lot of work. I wanted to finish it at least once. The way I got myself to do it was to make it a narrative. That’s why the first part [of the book] is just single illustrations, because that’s all I was going to be able to do for 30 days.

I liked doing it so much that I continued to do it every single year, starting in 2018 and ending in 2021. I would have a bit of an idea of where I wanted the next part to go, but I didn’t really conceptualize it until a couple weeks before the month that I would work on it.

I mostly felt my way through where the story was going as I was doing it. I didn’t really have any plans to try to get it professionally published. Then when Iron Circus approached me about publishing it, I had to sit down and actually plan it out: OK, where is this going? How is it going to end? How am I going to make it feel cohesive?

At what point in its development did Iron Circus come to you?
Right before I started Part 4. I did Part 4 as I would normally do it, and then I had to plan for Part 5 right after that.

How did they find you?
I was trying out this niche social media site called Pillowfort, and Spike Trotman, who runs Iron Circus, ran into my work there. A couple months [after I posted *Mage* there] I got an email from Iron Circus. I was completely baffled [laughs].

Did you imagine it as a physical artifact before Iron Circus approached you?
Not as a complete volume. My intention was to make hand-stapled zines and bring them to conventions. That was the extent of my ambitions with it. I did print out the first two parts, so there should be some out there in some hands.

Your professional work is mostly as a colorist of other people’s work. What’s it like moving from that mode to your own work?
It’s funny, I actually prefer black-and-white comics despite being a colorist. I’m quite picky when it comes to color. Being a colorist was something I fell into after college. I en-
joyed it, so I just kept doing it. But when it comes to my own work, I find coloring it a struggle for some reason. With *Mage*, a large part of [the reason for its being black and white] was the time constraints, but if I had the choice, I probably would still keep it [that way].

There’s something about black and white that I find very evocative, and I like the clarity of just the grays and the black and the white versus color. [There’s a lot] you can do with texture and shading in black and white.

Did you find yourself surprised at where you were going when you picked up your pen and returned to *Mage* after 11 months off?

Oh, always. I would always [try to keep] what I originally thought at the end of the previous fall, but by the time I started the new part, I would always have new ideas or completely different ideas. A lot of it was shaped by what was something interesting that I wanted to draw; and that would keep me motivated through the month of drawing these full-page illustrations every single day.

I was really interested in how you chose that page design, with just one panel with rounded corners.

It’s hard to remember, because it was so long ago. I think I just made that choice [arbitrarily] when I was doing Part 1, you know, without any intention. But then when I wanted to continue the story, I had to keep it.

It sounds like that frustrated you a little bit.

A little bit. It got to the point where I wanted to break away from the single illustration and add panels, but I had to make everything fit within those rounded corners. I think right now I like it, but when I was doing it, I struggled with it.

At what point did you know that *Mage* has this commission, if you will, to heal the world a little bit at a time?

I kind of found that as I was making it. I think I ended up concretely deciding that’s what was happening around the middle of when I was working on Part 4, because I was actively thinking about how I wanted to wrap up the story at that point. I had to look through the previous chapters and find what felt true and right from what decisions I had already made.

Do you ever feel a little guilty at pitching poor Mage into this world?

Oh, no, never [laughs]. I am primarily a horror fan, so I always find that startling turn very fun. It’s not for everybody.

I felt very protective of Mage.

That was my goal—I wanted that kind of immediate connection.

Are there any favorite artists you were in conversation with in your head as you worked on it?

I drew a lot from video games, actually. There’s a very popular type of indie game where you’ll have a familiar scenario and very lighthearted character designs. And then at some point there’s a horror turn. I was actively thinking of that when making Mage. There’s one called Eversion. It’s pretty old. The further you get into it, the more it [shifts] into horror. I thought that same kind of turn.

What were some of your favorite creatures that you created?

Oh, I love the weird gooey guys in Part 2. I was looking at a lot of sea creatures when trying to create their forms. I wanted something where it feels human, but corrupted somehow. They were very fun to draw. I also like drawing all the really gnarly human faces.

What are you hoping readers will take away from *Mage*?

I’d like people to see that difficulties and struggles won’t last forever, and then you can move beyond them. I wanted to make sure whatever struggles Mage goes through, whatever injuries they feel, whatever they lose, they still move on. They still find joy in the world afterward.

Vicky Smith is access services director at Portland Public Library in Maine. Mage and the Endless Unknown received a starred review in the April 15, 2023, issue.
empath her grandmother insists she must find, for help defeating Ozvios and the Ilori emperor in an intergalactic war. This novel interweaves first-person narratives from Zaira and Wesley with podcast transcripts, song lyrics, and other interludes. The result is a rock-solid story filled with introspection, humor, suspenseful twists, and fully developed characters and in which intricate worldbuilding details and plot elements are seamlessly and cleverly interwoven. Wesley falls for charismatic podcaster Rubin Rima, whose characterization evokes hilarity and compassion. The novel speaks to real-life experiences of colonization and trauma through its Black protagonists whose experiences propel them toward restored faith in humanity. “Thick, strong, and sturdy” Zaira is a wonderfully body-positive lead.

An uplifting read about love and acceptance in a chaotic universe. (Science fiction. 13-18)

HOUSE OF MARIONNE
Elle, J.
Razorbill/Penguin (432 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9780593527702

A desperate teen with deadly magical secrets turns to her family legacy.
Without much explanation from her mother, high school senior Raquell Janae Marianne only understands that they can’t stay in one place long because of the toushana that grows inside her like a curse. The Draguns are assassins tasked with hunting anyone suspected of possessing this magic, and a slip-up has left Quell alone, seeking refuge with her only remaining family—her grandmother who is headmistress of House Marianne of the Order of Highest Mysteries. Quell and readers benefit significantly from the crash course in Latin terms and old European courtship traditions are woven into a magical finishing school tucked away in an alternative New Orleans with a population cued as racially diverse. Quell and her family face the next threat to their heritage, and its coveted aurium, a dangerously powerful metal given to humans by the Fallen Saint. She joined a gang of robbers and its coveted aurium, a dangerously powerful metal given to humans by the Fallen Saint.

A strong atmosphere marks this series opener that will draw in genre fans. (House of Marianne specialties, map, house histories) (Fantasy. 13-18)

THOSE PINK MOUNTAIN NIGHTS
Ferguson, Jen
Heartdrum (352 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780063086210

Berlin Chambers, a Métis 17-year-old, is stunned when she sees her missing classmate near the popular pizza parlor where she works.

Kiki Cheyanne Sound, who is Black and Cree, disappeared five months ago. Exhausted from her evening shift at Pink Mountain Pizza, Berlin is unsure if she can trust her eyes. Nonetheless, she alerts Cameron Sound, her co-worker and childhood nemesis, who’s deeply affected by his cousin’s disappearance but hides his anxiety beneath a relaxed persona. Rule-following, perfectionist Berlin has always been at odds with Cam, but their shared hope that Kiki is alive, renewed by the sighting, forms a fragile bond between them. Unfortunately, bad news soon follows when it’s announced that the pizza parlor will be sold and franchised. Queer, white Jessie Hampton, the newest teen employee, is upset but unsurprised since the restaurant’s purchase is being conducted by her domineering, sexist father whose expectations she defies by working there. When Berlin, who views the loss of this local, Black-owned business as a betrayal of their community, decides to convince the owner to reverse his decision, Jessie and Cam agree to lend their support. Set in Alberta, this introspective, character-driven story examines heavy topics, including Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, depression, and anti-Blackness, with sensitivity and compassion. This sophomore outing by Michif/Métis and white author Ferguson features lyrical prose that softens the emotionally fraught narrative without sacrificing suspense, resulting in a mystery that subtly builds to a shocking reveal.

Intimate and impactful. (content warning, author’s note) (Fiction. 13-18)

FACE THE NIGHT
Forbes, Lani
Blackstone (335 pp.)
$20.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9798212030915

In this posthumously published novel, a teenage girl in the Ordonian Empire is a fugitive feared for her Blessing powers and her twin six-shooters.

Since the murders of her parents nine years ago, 17-year-old Catriona Macgregor has been on the run from Baron William Caldwell, who killed them to gain access to their land and its coveted aurium, a dangerously powerful metal given to humans by the Fallen Saint. She joined a gang of robbers and took the alias Black Cat Whitfield, but she has at last been
caught by the sheriff and will be brought back home to Saint’s Landing—just in time to claim her family’s land before it is considered forfeit and can be claimed by Caldwell. Cat goes undercover as a governess to his young daughter, enlisting Adrian, his son and her former friend, to help her stop his corrupt rule. The worldbuilding evokes the history of missionary and settler expansion into the American West, the pacing is steady, the characters are entertaining, and the plot is enjoyable. The novel explores themes such as greed and vengeance, but at its heart, it’s a story about faith—in one’s gifts, beliefs, and self-worth and in other people. Cat’s impulses to run or ignore her fate are understandable, but she faces her greatest fears with grace and grit. Main characters are cued white; there is racial diversity in the supporting cast.

A fast-paced and imaginative read. (foreword by Forbes’ husband, patron saints of the Ordonian Empire) (Fantasy. 12-17)

REZ BALL

Graves, Byron
Heartdrum (368 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780063160378

Tre wants to play basketball—for his brother, for his reservation, and for his future.

Ojibwe sophomore Tre Brun from Red Lake Nation Reservation in Minnesota recently lost Jaxon, his high school basketball star brother, in a car accident. All Tre wants to do these days is read graphic novels, hang out with his friends, get new girl Khiana to like him back, and play basketball. With dreams of making it in the NBA and one day becoming the subject of best friend Wes’ first documentary, Tre hopes to make varsity this school year and help his brother’s old team, the Warriors, finally make it to states. Basketball is taken seriously on the reservation, and Tre must learn to have faith in himself.
despite his father’s lack of belief in him while also navigating racism, the resentment of those who think he falls short of his brother’s legacy, and the pitfalls of partying and trying too hard to fit in. Debut author Graves (Ojibwe) presents a deeply personal look at grief, the weight of expectations, and the ways we find connections with those we have lost. While the start feels a bit forced, the novel quickly settles into its coming-of-age sports-underdog story, giving readers tense, fast-paced descriptions of high-stakes basketball games interspersed with textured descriptions of life on the reservation.

This one shoots and scores. (glossary, note from Cynthia Leitich Smith) (Fiction. 13-18)

ALL THAT SHINES
Hagan, Ellen
Bloomsbury (304 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781547610211

“What Money Can Do / Make you feel invincible. // What No Money Can Do / Make you feel invisible.”

As the daughter of one of Lexington, Kentucky’s wealthy families, Chloe Brooks leads a privileged life. As she readies for a summer including a trip to Europe and music camp in Los Angeles, she parties the night away alongside her boyfriend and best friend at an event celebrating her father’s success. The next morning, Chloe’s life is upended as she watches her father’s arrest on fraud charges. She and her mother retreat to Limestone Apartments, a complex on the racially integrated working-class side of town where Chloe’s mother grew up. Long neglected and in disrepair, the complex is their only asset that the state can’t seize since it’s in her mom’s name alone. Chloe’s culture shock is soothed by the camaraderie of the complex’s teen residents, especially the charming optimist Clint Jackson, who teaches Chloe that kindness and love don’t cost a thing. Highlighting Chloe’s insecurity, shame, and increasing self-awareness, the book elicits readers’ empathy as she struggles, learns, and develops a newfound sense of self. However, the story sometimes glosses over the harsh realities of poverty and racism, risking making the Limestone community feel like props for Chloe’s growth. The mother-daughter relationship shines brightest, while Clint’s buoyant attitude keeps the tone afloat. Primary characters are cued white; secondary characters are identified as Black, Latine, and queer.

A bitter start leads to a sweet conclusion. (Verse fiction. 12-18)

DISCOVERING LIFE’S STORY
Biology’s Beginnings
Hakim, Joy
MIT Press/Candlewick (192 pp.)
$22.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781536222937
Series: Discovering Life’s Story, 1

In this well-researched, well-designed, and informatively written book, the fascinating story of life science as it was discovered throughout the ages is explored. Written for teens, this book delivers an engaging and accessible history of life science focusing on the Western world but touching on discoveries from other regions as well. Each of the 12 chapters features two or more scientists from a particular era and weaves together the stories of what they discovered, how they made those discoveries, and their impacts on human society, then and now. Perhaps most notably, the narrative for each chapter makes a point of linking seemingly disparate events—for example, connecting the invention of the printing press to the rise of literacy, which then leads to a flourishing of curiosity about the world’s life forms—encouraging readers to develop their own critical thinking skills. Written in the present tense, the text draws readers into the story rather than keeping them at a distance. While most of the scientists featured are white men who had the privilege and wealth to pursue higher education, Hakim does highlight some women and Onesimus, an African man enslaved by Cotton Mather, for their contributions and further highlights their achievements by setting them in design-rich sidebars. Many photos, contemporaneous drawings, and portraits enhance the sparkling narrative.

Thoroughly engrossing and highly recommended. (Further reading, source notes, bibliography, image credits, index) (Nonfiction. 13-18)

SUMMER PEOPLE
Hosey, Sara
CamCat Books (288 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9780744302509

A young woman must uncover dark secrets and confront those she loves most to find the truth hidden in her community. Christmas Miller, from the town of Sweet Lake, New York, has just graduated high school and is looking forward to seeing her best friend, regular summer visitor Lexi. Their happy reunion is short-lived however, as they attend a heated town hall meeting on Sweet Lake’s invasive algae problem where hostile, narrow-minded attitudes expressed by locals contribute to an uncomfortable misunderstanding between the friends. They go outside to talk things out and find Lemy, Christmas’ gay friend, unconscious in the lake; he survives but ends up in a coma. Determined to solve
the algae problem, discover what happened to Lemy, repair her relationship with Lexi, and explore a budding romance with Brooklynite Rory. As the story progresses, many difficult topics are explored with sensitivity. Christmas has ADHD, and her portrayal gives readers insight into the challenges that can stem from others' lack of awareness of neurodivergence while highlighting the positives of embracing your identity. The characters are written with a comfortable familiarity that allows readers to relate to what they endure and root for their happy outcomes. Most characters are white; Lexi is described as “half Dominican” (her remaining ancestry is not named), and Lemy’s husband is Chinese American.

A timely mystery exploring multiple complex themes with coming-of-age elements. (author’s note) (Mystery. 14-18)

ZHARA
Jae-Jones, S.
Wednesday Books (416 pp.)
$20.00 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781250191427
Series: Guardians of Dawn, 1

Sixteen-year-old Zhara has been hiding her magic from the peacekeepers of Zanhei, the magic-fearing kingdom she lives in, only to find that her powers may offer the only way to save the world.

Ever since her father was taken by the Kestrels, the Warlord’s peacekeepers, Jin Zhara has lived to serve her cruel stepmother and help care for her sister, who is blind. When her stepmother tells her that abominations have resurfaced and that the Kestrels have started hunting down magicians, Zhara fears for her safety. She tries to keep a low profile, but an unexpected run-in with a handsome stranger who is hiding a secret identity sets off a chain of events that lead her to join the Guardians of Dawn, an underground society working to protect magicians. Through her connections with this resistance group, Zhara comes to realize the extent of both her magical abilities and the dangers she and the Guardians are up against. Over the course of this book, the diverse and interesting characters grow and learn about themselves, their histories, and their relationships to each other. With strong East Asian influences and themes in the worldbuilding, this magic-filled story will hook readers with its endearing lead; they will finish this volume and beg for the sequel.

An engaging fantasy set in an original magical world. (language note) (Fantasy. 13-18)
Man of Sap. Along the way, she finds friendship, terrifying creatures, whispers of magic, and the key to believing that love is not always lost. Surrounded by poetry, both that of de la Cruz and her own personal writing that she cannot finish, Catalina sets off to find her brother and destroy the monster—and whether monsters can be redeemed.

Highly imaginative and powerfully affecting. (author's note) (Speculative fiction. 14-18)
spending the summer as an executive trainee in the New York office. When they land, the name confusion continues, with Jessica being whisked off to a luxurious townhouse, while Elijah is taken to a cramped, shared apartment. By the time the two figure out what happened, Elijah, tantalized by this glimpse of a life utterly different from his own, proposes they continue as they are, and Jessica agrees. She proves to be an excellent leader, and Elijah makes real friends and real choices for the first time. The teens' navigation of their precarious arrangement and their budding romantic feelings are well depicted and entertaining even as social class and misogyny are thoughtfully explored. Some dialogue contains heavy exposition, sounding unnatural, but the alternating first-person narrative structure works.

An amusing and romantic exploration, grounded by serious themes, of living life for yourself. (Fiction. 13-18)

BLACKWARD

Lindell, Lawrence

Drawn & Quarterly (88 pp.)

$22.95 paper | Sept. 26, 2023

9781770466784

Four friends refuse to give up on creating a space of joy and celebration for Black, queer weirdness in Lindell's latest graphic novel.

Lika, Amor, Tony, and LaLa are four friends in search of community. Not as easy as it sounds when you’re somehow always too Black, too queer, too gender-DGAF, or just too weird. That’s why Lika started The Section for all Black folks (emphasis on the “all”), but mouthy trolls, micro- and macroaggressions at every turn, and now a ban from their community center have the quartet at a serious low. But a show of support, of meaningful connection in the midst of struggle, is the core of community, and when The Section’s latest genius idea—Blackward: The Black Zine Fest—is threatened with a queerphobic protest, the Blackward (“Black + awkward”) community truly shows up and shows out. Vibrant is the word, and it hardly does this lively, animated, panel-breaking art justice. The realities of anxiety, discrimination, dating, haters, friendship, and building a collective of belonging are awash in exuberant Technicolor with the whimsy dialed up to 11. For many readers, this is the Blackest, queerest, and sweetest thing they’ll see since looking in the mirror.

A paean to the radical joy of being every part of yourself.

(Graphic fiction. 14-adult)

THE FALL OF WHIT RIVERA

Maldonado, Crystal

Holiday House (320 pp.)

$19.99 | Oct. 10, 2023

9780823452361

A meaningful exploration of self-love and a cozy ode to autumn.

Whit Rivera, a bisexual Puerto Rican teenager living in a quaint Massachusetts town with her abuela and younger sister, Lily, is ready for the perfect summer and senior year. But then her boyfriend moves away and she is diagnosed with polycystic ovarian syndrome, a chronic illness that keeps her in doctors’ offices most of the summer when she would rather be lying by the pool with best friends Marisol, who is gay and Latina, and Sophie, who is Vietnamese American and has diabetes. To achieve the perfect senior year, Whit will help Lily, who is autistic, settle into life as a high schooler while planning Fall
Fest, her school’s annual celebration where her grandparents met and fell in love decades before. But Whit’s plans become even more complicated when she finds out her co-organizer for Fall Fest is Afro-Latino Isaiah Ortiz, the ex who broke her heart in sixth grade. Rich, multidimensional character development showing the intersections of identity within each individual will lead readers to feel like they know Whit and her friends in real life. Authentic, naturally integrated representation of marginalized identities makes this novel, which never becomes didactic, an important addition to YA literature; the characters are memorable not because of their identities, but as fully developed individuals.

A sentimental story about friendship, family, and love as sweet as a pumpkin spice latte. (author’s note with content warning) (Fiction. 14-18)

STRAIGHT EXPECTATIONS
McSwiggan, Calum
Union Square & Co. (272 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781454951650

A heat-of-the-moment wish comes true and causes a gay British teen to wake up straight.

Out and proud Max Baker is hoping to get through his last year of high school by serving as fashion consultant for his school’s theater department and managing his incurable crush on soccer player Oliver Cheng. Max’s best friends, Dean and Alicia, seem to have their futures figured out. Max, on the other hand, is uncertain about what comes next, and he dreams of having the high school romance that many queer kids miss out on. Dean and Alicia are more than happy to help set Max up with Oliver, even if it means embarrassing Max in the process. But when they push too far, and the matchmaking plan fails, the ensuing argument culminates in Max’s wishing to be “normal.”

He wakes up the next day to find that it’s more than his sexuality that’s changed: He has different friends, his parents are no longer divorced, and, worst of all, Dean has vanished. The story hinges on Max’s being upset enough to wish away his current circumstances, but the catalyzing event feels exaggerated and unbelievable, making it hard to buy into the premise.

A clever concept that misses the mark in its execution. (Fiction. 14-18)

YAQUI DELGADO WANTS TO KICK YOUR ASS: THE GRAPHIC NOVEL
Medina, Meg
Adapt. by Mel Valentine Vargas
Illus. by the adapter
Colors by Mary Lee Fenner
Candlewick (288 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781536224771

Vargas adapts Medina’s Pura Belpré Award winner into graphic-novel form.

Piedad Maria Sanchez, Piddy for short, is starting sophomore year at a new school in Queens while her best friend, Mitzi, is off to school in Long Island. Piddy is Cuban and Dominican, but she struggles to find a place with her Latine peers in her new school. In fact, Yaqui Delgado wants to kick her ass; as Piddy says, “I don’t fit her idea of a Latina at all.” Though Piddy tries to keep her head down and avoid confrontation, the bullying at school continues to escalate from threats and misogynistic name-calling to being jumped by a group of girls on her way home. Living with constant anxiety takes its toll on Piddy: She pushes away her mom and Mitzi and even ponders dropping out of school altogether to escape her tormentors. Readers will find themselves in turns rooting for Piddy and frustrated by her choices. In each of her relationships, Piddy learns how secrets can fester and that intimacy and trust are built through transparency. This graphic adaptation is a fast-paced page-turner. Vargas keeps the text to a minimum and communicates much of Piddy’s inner turmoil wordlessly, proving the effectiveness of this format. The panels, illustrated in blue, gray, black, and white, have clean, minimalist backgrounds, putting the people and their emotions front and center.

A decade on, as relevant as ever and likely to capture the hearts of even more readers. (Graphic fiction. 14-18)

THE LIBRARY OF SHADOWS
Moore, Rachel
HarperTeen (368 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780063284630

A haunted library holds the key to Este’s late father’s secrets—if she lives long enough to uncover them.

On learning she’s receiving a legacy scholarship to her father’s school, Radcliffe Prep, 16-year-old Este doesn’t care that it’s purportedly haunted. That’s before she tours its spectacular library and meets the gorgeous and enigmatic Mateo, who is not quite what he seems. After casing her into a restricted area to find an ancient tome about soul-harvesting Fades and (hopefully) how to eliminate them, Mateo vanishes with it, nearly getting Este expelled. Working night shifts as reparation, Este and the irritatingly irresistible Mateo follow
A compelling, ghostly tale interweaving romance and mystery with a thread of horror. (Supernatural. 13-18)

THE MEADOWS
Oakes, Stephanie
Dial Books (368 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780593111482

In a pristine, unchanging meadow-land, a select group of young people learn to be perfect wives and mothers in a post-climate-disaster society on the rebuild.

Eleanor long dreamed of attending one of the handful of idyllic state-run schools for the best and brightest. When she arrived at the Meadows as a young teen, leaving behind her (maybe more than) best friend, June, she quickly began to suspect that she’d been sent there for reasons other than her academic record. Classes taught ladylike comportment and homemaking rather than science or literature, and students were encouraged to scrub themselves of any impulses that might lead them away from the heteronormative roles “nature intended.” Now 18, Eleanor is an adjudicator, responsible for monitoring former classmates. Oakes crafts the book with strong cues from adult speculative fiction classics: Both Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go and Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale are evident inspirations. The cast represents a variety of racial, gender, and sexual identities. The timeline hops between past and present, the tension at a constant simmer and a new revelation always around the corner. The book is cogent and incisive in its remarks on our present world: Surveillance culture, reproductive coercion, and anti-queer bigotry are all heightened to their very possible conclusions. Eleanor reads white; June is biracial with a white father and a late mother who had “amber” skin and came from an island that succumbed to climate change.

Timely and gripping. (author’s note, resources) (Dystopian. 13-18)

EVERYONE’S THINKING IT
Omotoni, Aleema
Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins (368 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780063255871

Nigerian cousins reckon in very different ways with life at their predominantly white English private school.

Iyanu Da Silva is a budding photographer and day student at Wodebury Hall. While her cousin Kitan Ladipo is a boeder there, the two Black girls occupy different social strata. Kitan is best friends with two popular white girls, but this acceptance comes at a personal price. Iyanu recently traveled to London for the Black Girls Winter Fair, where she met her favorite writer, and she hopes to write about the experience in her application for a photojournalist position at an online magazine founded by queer women of color. Despite her outsider status, Iyanu is chosen to photograph a school matchmaking event. But her photos and negatives from the winter fair and the evening social disappear from the school darkroom—and reappear with nasty rumors and comments attached that disrupt the social order at Wodebury and land Iyanu in the hot seat. Now Iyanu and Quincy, her longtime friend and crush, are trying to discover who is behind the theft and sabotage. Through chapters alternating between the cousins’ first-person perspectives, the book insightfully explores Blackfishing, racism and micro-aggressions, and biases Black girls face in beauty standards and dating. The central relationship arcs are handled well and will resonate with readers. Teens of many different backgrounds will find elements of their lives reflected in this narrative.

A thought-provoking novel about the high cost of fitting in. (author’s note with content warning) (Fiction. 14-18)

NIGHT OF THE LIVING QUEERS
13 Tales of Terror & Delight
Ed. by Page, Shelly & Alex Brown
Wednesday Books (320 pp.)
$24.00 | $12.00 paper | Aug. 29, 2023
9781250892980
9781250892966 paper

Queer, racially diverse teens face the uncanny and macabre in this Halloween-themed anthology.

The introduction by editors Page and Brown points out the harm done by the lack of positive representation of queer people and people of color in the horror genre, something these narratives hope to help change. Each tale shares a common setting—Halloween during a blue moon—but beyond that there is considerable variety in subject matter and focus, including grief, romance in the face of imminent peril, and Halloween’s relationship to queerness. Writing styles and tones vary from modern gothic (in Vanessa Montalban’s “Welcome to the Hotel Paranoia”) to campy (in Sara Farizan’s “A
Brief Intermission”) to melancholy (in Kosoko Jackson’s “Rocky Road With Caramel Drizzle”). Though the subtitle promises “terror,” most of the stories are milder takes on the genre, welcoming more sensitive readers but not likely to keep die-hard horror fans up at night. Some spine-chilling standouts include “Guested” by Rebecca Kim Wells, written in the second person, and “Nine Stops” by Trang Thanh Tran, which follows a Vietnamese American girl who finds herself captivated by an unnerving viral video. The most successful entries are those that deeply explore the human experiences of conquering fear and facing darkness in both the wider world and oneself.

A spooky and inclusive Halloween grab bag. (contributor bios) (Horror anthology. 13-18)

A PRETTY IMPLAUSIBLE PREMISE
Rivers, Karen
Algonquin (384 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781616208165

Two teens navigating recent tragedies feel an instant connection when they meet on their first day of senior year, but the guilt they each carry threatens their burgeoning relationship.

Hattie’s mother took off 11 years ago. Since then, Hattie and her dad have fantasized about how the three will be reunited when Hattie swims on the U.S. team at the Olympics. But since 7-year-old Elijah drowned while Hattie was lifeguarding, Hattie has been unable to fathom a future that involves swimming. Presley has relocated from Victoria, British Columbia, to Southern California with his mum and her wife. He and his twin brother, Mac, were ice-skating phenoms until Mac was killed in an auto accident that left Presley with injuries that made him half Chinese due to a one-night fling his mother had, and he knows nothing about his biological father except that he was a recluse sculptor named Bo. In her Chinese community of Flushing, Queens, ambitious, queer 15-year-old Ali Tan stands out too. With her honey-blond hair and light eyes, she can pass as white even though she speaks Mandarin and lives with her widowed Chinese immigrant grandmother. When the two teens meet at a five-week summer art institute in Manhattan, they’re initially unimpressed with each other—until an assignment throws them together and they uncover the truth about their shared father, a reclusive sculptor who isn’t in either of their lives. While Niko looks more Chinese (and deals with frequent microaggressions, like being compared to K-pop stars or asked where he’s from), Ali feels she’s white. The authors organically weave in issues of cultural and artistic identity as well as the expected humor and romantic drama of residential programs, and the character development is refreshingly deep. Niko and Ali both mature, grow, and share tender and brutal truths.

This engaging story sensitively explores biracial experiences, family, and self-expression. (Fiction. 12-18)

LOOK NO FURTHER
Robinson, Rioghnach & Siofra Robinson
Amulet/Abrams (336 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781419757574

Two teens meet at an elite art program only to discover they’re half siblings.

Laid-back California surfer Niko Castadi, 17, stands out in his predominately white community and family. Unlike his two younger siblings, Niko’s half Chinese due to a one-night fling his mother had, and he knows nothing about his biological father except that he was a sculptor named Bo. In her Chinese community of Flushing, Queens, ambitious, queer 15-year-old Ali Tan stands out too. With her honey-blond hair and light eyes, she can pass as white even though she speaks Mandarin and lives with her widowed Chinese immigrant grandmother. When the two teens meet at a five-week summer art institute in Manhattan, they’re initially unimpressed with each other—until an assignment throws them together and they uncover the truth about their shared father, a reclusive sculptor who isn’t in either of their lives. While Niko looks more Chinese (and deals with frequent microaggressions, like being compared to K-pop stars or asked where he’s from), Ali feels more Chinese (even though she occasionally lets people think she’s white). The authors organically weave in issues of cultural and artistic identity as well as the expected humor and romantic drama of residential programs, and the character development is refreshingly deep. Niko and Ali both mature, grow, and share tender and brutal truths.

This engaging story sensitively explores biracial experiences, family, and self-expression. (Fiction. 12-18)

SEA SERPENT’S HEIR
Black Wave
Scott, Mairghread
Illus. by Pablo Tunica
Image Comics (160 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
9781534399938
Series: Sea Serpent’s Heir, 2

Aella has discovered that she is the reincarnation of the Black Wave, a world-devouring sea serpent called Xir—and with Xir’s power, she plans to take revenge on the Church of the First Light.

Two weeks after the conclusion of the first book, the story begins with Aella recovering from not only a battle, but from betrayal, the discovery of her connection to Xir, and the loss of her mother. When assassins attacked her ship, Aella decided to embrace her destiny as Xir, taking up the captain’s mantle left by her mother and vowing to avenge her death by destroying the Church of the First Light. Following her recovery, Aella and her crew set off to amass an army of pirates and mercenaries to

Implausible? Maybe, but also smart and infused with enough heart to make suspending disbelief a pleasure. (Fiction. 12-18)
take on their foe; their plan is to strike down the church's monasteries and priests before they can send more killers after Aella. Whether this plan of revenge is more Aella’s or Xir’s remains to be seen, however. This story has a lightning-fast pace and doesn’t leave readers wanting. Each character has a unique voice, which translates gorgeously through facial expressions and body language. The original, sketchy art style; vibrant colors; and panel-breaking effects create an engaging visual experience. Human and humanoid characters are diverse in appearance.

This exciting sequel will engage both trilogy fans and newcomers alike. (summary of Book 1, maps) (Graphic fantasy. 12-16)

AN IMPOSSIBLE THING TO SAY
Shahi, Arya
Alinda/HarperCollins (416 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780063248359

A tender coming-of-age story about an Iranian American boy getting to know his grandparents, learning more about Persian culture, facing prejudice, and growing in self-knowledge.

It’s July 2001, and Omid is a rising high school sophomore in Tucson, Arizona, when Baba Joon and Maman Joon, the maternal grandparents he’s never met before, move to the U.S. from Iran. Baba Joon gives Omid a journal in which he begins to document his daily life: his crush on the new girl at his private prep school and the Shakespeare play he auditions for so he can be close to her, his experiences navigating two cultures, and the bigotry he hears about and faces in the aftermath of 9/11. Omid, whose father’s family is Muslim and mother’s family is Baha’i, tries on Shakespearean dialogue for size and reaches for words in Farsi as ways to better comprehend and express himself and his heritage, but what finally resonates most is the rap music his best friend introduces him to. Through rap, his self-awareness and confidence grow. Although slow to start, this novel in verse quickly becomes more engaging, and the first-person narration becomes more refined as the story progresses. This is a heartfelt and nuanced depiction of what it’s like to straddle different cultures and the critical need to understand oneself.

A love letter to words and their ability to not only define us, but shape who we are. (Verse fiction. 13-18)

WHAT NOW? A TEEN GUIDE TO LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL
Sheen, Barbara
ReferencePoint Press (64 pp.)
$32.95 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781616906060

A practical survey of post-high school options including, but not limited to, higher education.

Sheen offers a straightforward and readable discussion of life after high school, warmly encouraging personal exploration in the introduction: “It is normal to be uncertain about the future....No decision is irrevocable....Even those individuals who seem to know exactly what they want frequently wind up veering onto a different path.” Five chapters outline a range of possible next steps, their pros and cons, multiple anecdotes, and suggestions for further research. “Preparing and Exploring” offers advice for decision-making, with tips for understanding personal strengths and weaknesses and concrete ideas on resources and timelines. “Going to College” discusses continuing education in both four-year and two-year settings, with practical tips for finding a good fit and introductory information on the application process and financial aid. “Opting for Technical and Vocational Training” discusses program basics in technical and creative fields. “Joining the Workforce” surveys the pros and cons of going straight to work and the opportunities teens can expect, including entrepreneurship and joining the military. “Taking a Gap Year” defines this option for an American audience and lists possibilities such as traveling, learning new skills, and volunteering. Stock photography depicting racially diverse individuals matches the text throughout. Pull quotes highlight important points in each section and enhance readability.

A slim volume of serviceable suggestions to shape a teen’s next steps. (source notes, organizations and websites, further research, index, picture credits) (Nonfiction. 14-18)

HOUSE OF ASH AND BONE
Sutherland, Joel A.
Tundra Books (336 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781774880968

Something wicked this way comes in acclaimed horror writer Sutherland’s YA debut.

When 11th grader Josephine and her family head off on a winter vacation to their newly inherited mansion in Vermont, they are each dreaming of a place to relax and recharge for a week. Josephine is especially eager to escape the burgeoning powers that allow her to hear and enter other people’s thoughts but leave her with debilitating headaches. As they settle in, the house seems perfectly tailored to their family of seven. The family’s dreams, however, soon turn into nightmares,
as Josephine begins seeing apparitions, while her parents and siblings start suffering from short-term memory loss. As events grow stranger and more dangerous, Josephine starts to suspect that there is an evil lurking behind their closed doors. When a ghost named Dorcas appears to her, Josephine is unable to determine whether this specter is friend or foe. But when she finds out the truth about the house's history and Dorcas' past, Josephine realizes that her family's lives are in grave danger, and she's the only person who may be able to save them. Major characters are coded white; after experiencing attraction to a local girl, Josephine questions her inkling that she might be asexual. Grimm's fairy-tale references are sprinkled throughout, adding a macabre veil to an equally creepy story. This moody, atmospheric novel ramps up to a spine-tingling surprise twist after a slow-burn first half.

A thoroughly enjoyable, suspenseful supernatural tale. (author's note) (Supernatural. 12-18)

**PHOEBE'S DIARY**

Waibl, Phoebe

Little, Brown (464 pp.)

$19.99 | Sept. 5, 2023

9780316363563

In this work adapted from the popular artist's own high school diaries, lonely Phoebe joins a play and finds friendship and first love.

It is 2006 in Bellingham, Washington, and 15-year-old Phoebe is in love with three different boys. She is chubby with an “elfin pig nose,” obsessed with vintage fashion and indie rock, and desperately wants skinny jeans and a boyfriend. After spending freshman year on the sidelines (she’s a homeschooer taking “only the fun classes” at her local high school), Phoebe works up the courage to audition for the summer play. From there, her life opens up. There is a rainy ride home with Owen, rehearsals with David, and kisses on the cheek from unattainable Lukas (part of the script but still thrilling). As summer wanes, her crushes fade. There’s always another production, though, and when Phoebe makes the cast of the fall play, she finds herself dreaming about smart, serious “sex god” Sam and his chiseled jaw. Phoebe’s crushes dominate the narrative, but watching her friendships develop during gossipy sleepovers, cozy snowy days, and rowdy Passover seders is no less meaningful. The story, illustrated throughout, captures the anguish of wanting to belong, to feel at home in your body, and to give and receive pleasure. Waibl’s distinctive, instantly recognizable art adds humor and heart to each page. Most characters appear white; Phoebe and Sam are Jewish.

An earnest, relatable, and affecting celebration of teenage yearning. (author’s note) (Fiction. 14-adult)

**WHERE YOU LEFT US**

Wilde, Rhiannon

Charlesbridge Teen (368 pp.)

$18.99 | Sept. 12, 2023

9781623544232

Two sisters grapple with their father’s depression and their own mental health struggles in this Australian novel.

Cinnamon and Scarlett Prince are well known in their seaside town—their father’s fame from a 1990s band plus their family’s rambling home atop Princes Beach being the site of a tragedy from the 1960s that’s infamous in local lore. Mean there is no hiding. Older sister Cinnamon guards her feelings; younger sister Scarlett hoped to leave her anxiety attacks behind when she went to boarding school. Their reunion over the summer following Scarlett’s graduation is not a happy one for the estranged sisters. It’s made worse by the appearance of their divorced mother, who shows up after Scarlett contacts her...
once she sees how poorly their dad is doing. Weaving in family secrets, complicated love interests, and realistic depictions of the sisters’ feelings and internal musings, this novel flavored with gothic romance and mixed with the often funny, self-effacing narrative voices of the girls packs a lot in. The tender awkwardness of both of their burgeoning relationships—Cinnamon’s with her co-worker Daisy and Scarlett’s with Will, Cinnamon’s ex-boyfriend—is sweet and swoonworthy. The family mystery that runs as an undercurrent throughout feels a little tacked on in places but wraps up nicely in the auspicious ending. The sisters are white; Cinnamon is bisexual, as is biracial Daisy, who is Chinese and white.

A poignant, engaging coming-of-age story. (Fiction. 14-18)
A family feud encumbers young love in Alexander’s historical novel, the final installment in a trilogy.

Jack Caddell first meets Ginny Bell in the summer of 1939. The two are immediately smitten; “That is the boy I’m gonna marry,” proclaims Ginny. Unfortunately, Ginny’s father, Clayton, adamantly forbids their burgeoning courtship. Jack thinks it’s because of his partly Indigenous lineage, but it’s more likely the fault of his uncle, Zingle, whose perpetual carelessness has already precipitated at least one tragic death. Unbeknownst to Jack, Zingle assaulted Jessie, Clayton’s wife and Ginny’s mom, some years earlier. Despite the objection, the young couple secretly dates and envisions a future of wedded bliss. But will the two be able to maintain a household and possibly raise children? Meanwhile, Ginny’s older sister, Vivian, who works at a newspaper, gradually uncovers a local mayor’s “lawless schemes.” Exposing this corruption may incite the wrong people, including her sheriff brother-in-law, Joel Hammond. The author’s follow-up to Tapestry (2022) spotlights characters returning from earlier books and introduces some new faces. This large cast helps to propel the narrative, which moves through the decades at a steady pace. Alexander aptly establishes the backdrop of the Great Depression and revels in the South Carolina vernacular, in which words ending in -ing forgone the G and learn sometimes means teach. The novel is also a convincing family portrait filled with ups and downs. There are startling deaths throughout the years and bursts of violence but also lighter turns, as when a newly married couple realizes that finding time to consummate their union is an unexpectedly and frustratingly difficult endeavor.

An enjoyably melodramatic slice of American history and worthwhile series finale.
THE WINTER QUEEN CONTINGENCY

Ashe, Patrick
Self (289 pp.)
$12.99 paper | $2.99 e-book
March 14, 2023
9781734847789

Ashe presents an action-packed zombie tale told in two parts.

Set in a dystopian alternate reality, the novel introduces a world crumbling from a virus that started turning humans into bloodthirsty members of the undead three years ago. Cassandra Riven, a trans woman who's gone AWOL from the National Guard, and her friend Mike Ballard have given up their civilian lives to help quell the persistent population of infected, who only get more intelligent as time goes by. The pair set out across the ravaged territory of Quarantine Zone Oscar Lima in northern Pennsylvania with only their wits, their weapons, and Mike's cat, Chloe. Unfortunately, they don't get very far before government troops detain them and explain the terms of their release: They must deliver data to a research base before enemy nations intercept the technology and use it to weaponize the infected for their own ends. Cassandra and Mike reluctantly accept the mission in exchange for a promise that their families will be well cared for. During a short but precarious journey, the heroes prove their skills and fight for their lives. The book's second portion jumps ahead 30 years and follows Angelina Jordan, the elected leader of a community of survivors. Decades after the initial outbreak, the infected are no longer the main enemy; now, brutal and powerful beings called the Infinite threaten to destroy what peace remains. A lot of new information is laid out in a small number of pages in Ashe's novel, and as a result, readers may find that some logistical details and characters become difficult to track. This is further complicated by the fact that the second half of the novel slightly deviates from its initial zombie-ridden premise to focus more on how sociopolitical conflicts inevitably flourish under precarious living conditions. However, despite the complexity of the narrative, two opposing characters unquestionably stand out: Angelina, whose fierce prowess guides the divided group of Remnants, and the frightening Infinite named Sarmat, who feasts on human flesh.

An ambitious but dense dystopian novel that tackles issues of power, humanity, and the lack of both.

KISMET

Bell, Reina
Self (294 pp.)
9798985418453

In Bell's romance, an NFL player and his unlikely best friend fall in love.

Sawyer Jackson, a 25-year-old Miami Mavericks tight end—a position likely chosen for its double-entendre—is convinced that beautiful, hilarious, 21-year-old Kennedy Quinn, a student at the Berklee College of Music, has "gifted [him] a FastPass to the friend zone." Kennedy reciprocates Sawyer's attraction, but an ex-boyfriend, Boston College's star quarterback Hunter Sterling, recently cheated on her. She isn't ready to move on, so she and her "Hottest Friend," Sawyer, maintain a flirty but platonic connection. The narrative then shifts abruptly to three years and four months later, when Sawyer is about to join the big-league New York Cougars—for which Hunter is the quarterback—and still nursing his crush on close friend Kennedy. She's moved to New York City with musical-theater aspirations and a powerful agent, William Abreu, to match. Sawyer wants to get out of "Kennedy's friend zone and into her heart's end zone," but a number of factors could jeopardize their romance: Sawyer's playboy history; Kennedy's sexy new roommate, Andrew; a "morality and ethics clause" in Sawyer's Cougars contract that could keep the couple apart; and neither party's wanting to ruin their current relationship. As Sawyer and Kennedy's attractions heats up, the author heightens the internal and external stakes for the characters, making for a page-turning read. Sawyer’s voice is full of "colorful verbiage," as Kennedy puts it in one of her point-of-view sections, and often funny metaphors: Kennedy's laugh is described by Sawyer as a "cock-hardening ballad" in narration; he also calls his teammate Declan Walsh an "anti-wingman" and opines that calling men's boxers "panties" is "basically verbal castration." However, italicized asides sometimes distract from the narrative: After a heartfelt confession, for instance, Kennedy breaks out of the moment to think, "Whoa. That's a lot to unpack." Both Sawyer’s and Kennedy's perspectives are laugh-out-loud funny, but the author occasionally dips into cliche: “She didn't wear a drop of makeup; she didn't need it.” That said, the leads each gain depth as their relationship progresses.

A steamy love story with memorable characters despite occasional distracting asides.
DIAMOND CITY
Boncek, Marianna
Atmosphere Press (416 pp.)
$17.99 paper | $8.99 e-book | April 24, 2023
9781639887880

Boncek offers an introspective novel about the murder of a teenager in an isolated religious community. In 1955, Art Moran, the sole police officer in the small, upstate town of Fosterdale, New York, is in way over his head when he's called to investigate the killing of a teenage girl in a religious settlement on the outskirts of town. The murdered girl, Keziah Diamond, is the younger sister of his former high school girlfriend, Becky, who secretly had his child. Fast-spreading word of the murder stirs up long-held prejudices the townspeople have for the people of Diamond City. Art struggles to get justice for Keziah's family and community, putting himself at odds with not only local townspeople, but also members of his own family. When the mayor asks the county government to remove all of Diamond City's children from their homes, due to alleged neglect, the remaining community members resort to an act of desperation that leaves Art traumatized and the murder unsolved. Nearly four decades later, in 1992, Tirzah Carter, Becky's daughter and Keziah's niece, returns to Fosterdale to learn more about her past and realizes who the real killer is. The reopening of this cold case challenges the townspeople to confront their prejudices, and Art, now an aging loner, returns to face his own past. This story is, in many ways, about small communities, showing that the smaller and more close-knit they are, the more they shun people who don't fit in. Boncek effectively contrasts the remote, cultlike community of Diamond City with that of Fosterdale, a quintessential American small town, and the latter comes off as much worse. The murder isn't a mystery for very long, and it eventually becomes a poorly kept secret that the town sits on for nearly 40 years. One might expect the gruesome opening scene in a thriller, but the story unfurls more as a thoughtful exploration of the way people's lives are shaped (or misshapen) by expectations and prejudices. Overall, the novel nimbly presents a crime story with fully realized characters and resonant themes.

A well-crafted tale of isolation, redemption, and love amid societal constraints.

INDIE | Karen Schechner

DRAWING FIRE

Roberto Saviano's graphic memoir I'm Still Alive, translated by Jamie Richards, traces Saviano's life in hiding after publishing his wildly popular Gomorrah (2007), which revealed the inner workings of Neapolitan crime syndicates. Explosions of gunfire and slashes of color stand out against the primarily black-and-white art, expertly drawn by Asaf Hanuka. “A powerful tale of moral corruption and the cost of one's resistance to it,” notes our reviewer.

In Head Wounds: Sparrow, written by Brian Buccellato and illustrated by Christian Ward, dirty New Orleans cop Leo Guidry wants to come clean, but otherworldly events upend his efforts. The head wounds he witnesses become his own, although no one else can see them. Our reviewer says, “Ward's richly hued artwork complements this somber detective story with blue-gray nights and glaringly bright lights. But the most striking visual is Guidry's head wound, as its mesmerizing blood floats in the air and sometimes even covers the panels with spatter.”

We Promised Utopia, written by Adrian Morales, Robert Holman, and Charles J. Martin and illustrated by multiple artists, is a twist on the cli-fi novel. Ecological catastrophe is averted thanks to a carbon-credit system invented by a conservationist, but the planet faces other perils in two future time periods. The authors "deftly introduce three radically different eras early on" in this "timely, engrossing SF tale with an environmental theme and striking art."

Karen Schechner is the president of Kirkus Indie.
“An auto-centric spacefaring franchise motors on with its curious sense of humor intact.”

**SAABRINA: FIREBIRD**

Cohen, Seth
Pengriffin Press (318 pp.)
9780998976433

In Cohen’s SF series installment, a New Jersey widower, who’s partnered with a powerful talking spaceship to protect Earth, faces major life changes that include an alien invasion.

This series began with Saabrina (2015), and it offers a straight-faced approach to a way-out premise: Bob Foxen, a middle-aged Everyman, has taken a sharp turn in his life by becoming a “Sentinel”; he’s charged with secretly guarding the security of an unsuspecting planet Earth and other worlds under the aegis of the mighty United Star System. Bob tackles this task with his extraordinary artificial intelligence partner, Saabrina—a transdimensional robotic spaceship that looks like a sporty but modest Saab automobile but can defeat an entire space fleet. Saabrina can also create a humanlike holographic projection of herself in various guises and has access to a vast knowledge base. Eight years into their partnership, the duo have survived perils and assignments on Earth and on other USS protectorates. Now Bob’s daughter, Rebecca, is about to get married to a man who has a high command post in the USS, and Saabrina is happily taking part in preparations. Soon, however, a crisis arises involving a powerful group of car-shaped alien robots called Firebirds that resemble the familiar Pontiac vehicles of the same name. When the avaricious Empire of the Greater Noble Houses moves to conquer a disputed border planet, Bob and Saabrina undertake its defense, but the heroes are blindsided by a hostile Firebird on the enemy side. Saabrina is seriously wounded, and Bob requires emergency USS medical treatment. Even if they recuperate, how can they defeat such a formidable foe? And what about Rebecca’s wedding ceremony?

Cohen’s offbeat narrative is seriocomic (or perhaps serio-cosmic) in tone, alternating between upper-middle-class domestic dramedy and surprisingly sparse space-battle intrigues. A lengthy and vitally important aside may broaden the reader in the middle act, in which a traumatized, offline Saabrina dreams vividly of a human life in surreal, 1980s-ish “Neo York” as a graduate student at Columbia University trying to defend her dissertation on graphic novels amid a whirl of dates, vampires, werewolves, and anime clichés. AIs aren’t even supposed to be able to dream of electric sheep, to paraphrase Philip K. Dick, let alone attend a magic college, so readers may wonder just what’s going on; a few other key points remain unresolved in this installment as well. Other than the car-robots, the novel’s alien characters often feel like escapees from a low-budget SF TV show, including Graustarkian counts and European-type decadent royals. Other pop-culture ingredients and shoutouts reference the comic strip “Peanuts,” the graphic novel *Maus*, Arthur C. Clarke, *Doctor Who*, Russian literature, columnist Russell Baker, and *Star Trek*: “She looks again, farther out, letting the stars stream by. She hears Kirk speak the words: ‘Space, the final frontier.’ She has lived them.” Even with the unanswered questions, this entry remains a comfortable ride for genre fans who’ve settled into the bucket seats of Cohen’s peculiar universe.

An auto-centric spacefaring franchise motors on with its curious sense of humor intact.

**NICHOLAS ETERNAL**

Conrey, Kim
Soul Source Press (316 pp.)
$14.99 paper | $4.99 e-book | June 1, 2023
9781960562005

In the first installment in Conrey’s Wayward Saviors contemporary fantasy saga, an immortal, after centuries of existence, struggles to find meaning in his life.

Although Nicholas Theodoulos is considered a heroic figure by any standard—having saved countless children from bad situations over the last 16 centuries—he’s also a deeply flawed alcoholic who pushes those who love him away: “Time had slowly entombed his heart, layer after layer, century after century; until a sepulcher stood where a man should be.” However, when he meets Noory Abramson, a manager of an Atlanta shelter for the houseless whose life’s mission is to change the lives of children in seemingly hopeless situations, he finds a kindred spirit. Together with his friend John—who’s Noory’s adoptive father—the group uncovers a conspiracy involving an ancient device that could either bring about a new utopia or create a hell on Earth. All three characters, it turns out, are iconic Christian figures: Theodoulos is St. Nicholas, John is Jesus’ beloved disciple, and Noory is the grandniece of Jesus. Although the storyline contains a few improbable plot turns, there are many impressive narrative features at play in this highly palatable blend of urban fantasy, paranormal romance, and Christian mythology. First and foremost is the courageous and audacious way in which the author reimagines the St. Nicholas myth. The diverse cast of characters—which includes a demon named Damascus and Father Roy, the spirit of a priest whose work on Earth is unfinished—will impress fans of paranormal fantasy sagas such as Kim Harrison’s Hollows series, as the potential for future storylines seems virtually limitless. Serious issues are explored with insight and sensitivity, including alcoholism, houselessness, and child advocacy. Still, the overall tone of the story maintains a welcome witty and lighthearted edge; at one point, for instance, Noory describes the plot as “antichrist crazy shit!”

An absorbing, character-driven paranormal tale that holds promise for future series entries.
Cooley’s picture book depicts the great variety of birds that stop in a suburban backyard.

The titular bird feeder in Cooley’s book is at the center of all-day avian traffic. In the morning, it plays host to a goldfinch, which soon gives way to a nuthatch that eats upside down. A sparrow, robin, chickadee, and so on follow the goldfinch throughout the day. Readers get to observe the habits and behaviors of the different types of birds that might appear in their yards. Each bird is identified in a rhyming couplet that includes a fact about its species, although some couplets are more felicitous than others. For example, “There’s a nuthatch at my feeder. It’s eating upside down. It gets its fill of suet and stop in a suburban backyard.

That is, unless you were a witch”). Returning to Silverlake dredges up memories she would rather not revisit—particularly those surrounding Vance, her ex-boyfriend. It turns out that her manipulative aunt isn’t gravely ill at all—her hotel is struggling to stay afloat, as are most of the businesses in Silverlake, and she needs her niece’s expertise to help save the magical place. As Angelica plans a fall festival to kick-start the town’s economy, her aunt becomes entangled in a murder mystery, and the young witch—who hasn’t used her powers since she left home—is forced to work with Vance, now a lawyer, to clear Thelma’s name.

Witchy Reservations is a sequel to Angelica’s first novel, Witchy Reservations. The story picks up with Angelica, a non-practicing witch who has returned to her hometown after 13 years away. She has inherited her Aunt Thelma’s hotel, Silverlake, which is in financial trouble. Angelica, with the help of her aunt’s niece, Lainey, sets out to save the town from collapse.

In Earth’s historical novel, a young English barrister finds himself at the center of religious, social, political, and legal turmoil in mid-19th-century England. Judge Edmund Hornby, charged with establishing and managing Britain’s Consular Court in Constantinople, needs a junior clerk. The government powers that be have selected James Bingham, an unseasoned junior barrister who has toiled away for years to get to the Consular Court. His mission is to help Hornby create a unified code by which the diverse factions in the “uncivilized” Ottoman Empire could work together with the British Empire on legal issues: “I need such a code. One that does more than copy French law. A code that applies the most fundamental principles of justice with Ottoman conditions in mind,” the Turkish foreign minister, Fuad Pasha, tells Hornby.”So, let’s create it together.” Kazim Hasan, the teacher of a Turkish legal study group, selects Osman Mehmed, an angry young man who resents the British, to work with Hornby’s team. James discovers, upon his arrival in Constantinople, that the establishment of codes is constantly delayed by trials that require immediate attention—one of which involves the sexual assault of a young child. Earth soon adds the tempestuous Rosamund Colborne, the scandal-prone daughter of a successful merchant, to the diverse cast; she provides romantic and legal drama to a story overflowing with culture clashes. Working from historical records, the author imaginatively builds upon actual cases handled by Hornby,
Ancient Rome boils with sordid power plays, constant intrigue, full moon rituals, and eruptions of bloodshed in Eckert’s sprawling historical novel. The author paints a panorama of the Roman Empire in the year 193, starting with the murder of the vile Emperor Commodus by Laetus, commander of the Praetorian Guard, after the leader attempts to rape Laetus’ betrothed. Pertinax is promptly elected emperor by the Senate, and he proves modest and competent but also impolitic and stingy; after he fails to pay the city watchmen their customary bribes, he’s unceremoniously stabbed to death. The Praetorians then massacre the city watch, sell the emperorship to one Didius Julianus for 25 gold pieces per Guardsman, and force the Senate to vote him in at spearpoint. The loathed and inept Julianus tries everything to keep his shaky hold on power, including drinking the blood of a rabbit sacrificed to the goddess Hecate. But powerful rivals—the governors of Britannia and Egypt; the rough-hewn general Septimius Severus—soon try to overthrow him with their legions. Throughout the upheavals, Eckert’s narrative focuses on the household of Sen. Marcus Tullius, his daughter Tullia, and those they’ve enslaved as they navigate a time when a careless comment could get one branded an emperor’s enemy. As it portrays real events from wedding ceremonies to military drills to Rome’s traffic jams—and ably dissects a society structured around complex hierarchies and in which survival requires currying favor with the powerful; even casual conversations and actions are calculated for advantage. The author’s vivid, nuanced prose conveys the subtle tensions that besiege his characters as well as the brutality that awaits those who incorrectly parse them: “I order that his lying tongue be torn out by the roots, and that he be hung by his hands from a bar and flogged until death,” declares a judge of the loser in a lawsuit. The result is a captivating page-turner. 

An entertaining sword-and-politics saga full of engrossing period detail and sharp drama.

**THE YEAR OF FIVE EMPERORS**

*Eckert, Robert*

BookBaby (801 pp.)


9781667873176

The creation of the star-studded Broadway musical *Camelot* takes center stage in Eisenberg’s historical novel.

In 1960, Jane Conroy works for a literary agent in New York but aspires to work behind the scenes on Broadway stage shows. When her uncle Max Conroy manages to get her a job as the girl Friday for Brock Remsen, who works for producer Alan Jay Lerner, she’s whisked into the exciting world of big-time musicals. Lerner and producer Frederick Loewe are working through the creation of a new show, *Camelot*, based on T.H. White’s 1958 novel *The Once and Future King*, about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Eisenberg does a masterful job of blending the stories of the fictional Jane and those of the musical’s real-life stars: charming Julie Andrews and lovable rogue Richard Burton. At the heart of the novel is Jane’s commitment to making a career for herself in the world of theater production, which is challenged by her romance with actor Bryce Christmas, a budding musical star. The book alternates between Jane’s first-person and Bryce’s third-person points of view, offering multiple angles on the subject matter. Although the novel offers an engaging and entertaining romp through the tribulations of testing out a new show—from auditions to rehearsals to refining the musical’s book—it’s also an exploration of sexism in the workplace in the early 1960s, as when Eisenberg alludes to the difficulties of reconciling a career in show business with having and raising children (“the minute we say, ‘I do,’ our folks will expect us to start a family”). The author’s research is impeccable. It’s easy to imagine Jane and Bryce as real members of the show’s initial production, and although the novel feels a bit lengthy at more than 350 pages, their chemistry remains compelling throughout.

An appealing fictionalization for readers with a love for the stage.

**ONE MORE SEAT AT THE ROUND TABLE**

*Eisenberg, Susan Dormady*

Atmosphere Press (358 pp.)

$17.99 paper | $7.99 e-book | April 4, 2023

9781639888023

Young Sophie Washington seeks treasure in Corpus Christi with her best friend and her little brother in Ellis’ middle-grade novel.

**SOPHIE WASHINGTON**

*Ellis, Tonya Duncan*

Page Turner Publishing (155 pp.)


May 16, 2022

9781735338941 paper

9781735338965 e-book

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Sophie Washington is on vacation during the summer before seventh grade, visiting her grandmother in Corpus Christi, Texas, and spending time at the beach with her little brother, Cole, and best friend, Chloe. Cole is playing with their grandmother’s metal detector when he begins beeping, indicating something in the sand underneath a sand castle Sophie and Chloe just built. That something is a bottle with pennies and a note in it, initiating a mystery-solving adventure that involves following clues to find a treasure. The clues lead the trio (with Granny in tow) to various spots in the city, including a turtle release site; a boat named The Dolphin (captained by the wheelchair-using Mr. Williams) that takes them to a cove to snorkel; the USS Lexington, a World War II aircraft carrier; and, finally, the Ocean Life Center. The group stops at an ice cream shop run by Homer Thomas, whom the children first met on Mr. Williams’ boat. He gives the children their “treasure,” hundreds of pieces of chocolate wrapped in gold foil. This often delightful tale weaves fun facts into the adventure, making the book both educational and entertaining, as when Cole notes, “I read in my animal book that male turtles have long tails, and this one’s tail is short. Also, male sea turtles live mostly in the water, while female turtles come to the beach to nest.” Young readers will come away with a better understanding of sea turtles and their plight, awareness of accessibility issues, and a bit of United States Navy history. They’ll also learn about friendship and family, with Ellis doing a fine job of weaving her lessons naturally into the storyline. The book serves as a bit of a travelogue for Corpus Christi, as it features real locations in the city. This is one of a number of Sophie Washington books, and fans of this entry will certainly want to read others in the series.

A fun read for youngsters that will teach them something along the way.

**REQUIEM FOR BETRAYAL**

Epbram
River Grove Books (350 pp.)
20.95 paper | $9.99 e-book
June 1, 2023 | paper
9781632990671

In 1970s Paris, an American part-time spy finds himself caught between two revenge plots.

Brad James is aware enough of his own shortcomings to avoid stupid mistakes and confident enough in his skills to be successful both as a working musician in the Paris nightclub scene and as an undercover asset for the CIA. In that second vocation, he appears to be a magnet for violence. After the heir to the powerful Pomero family, a Honduran crime syndicate, is kidnapped, tortured, and killed, the family’s patriarch wastes no time taking vengeance on all those connected to the murder of his son. Pomero and his small army travel to Paris in search of the two remaining conspirators, known only as Carito and Amy. Meanwhile, Brad’s enlisted to solve the murder of an American intelligence agent who was investigating a terrorist plot aiming to murder millions. Inside this geopolitical strike against capitalism lies a strand of personal vengeance that, when tugged, pulls in Pomero, his estranged daughter, and Brad as well. By the time the terrorists’ aims are understood, it’s apparent that an insider is trying to guide Brad and his Vietnam vet mentor Chuck to stop the catastrophe. The bodies pile up where these plots converge, and Brad thinks he’s in the middle of “two different movies coincidentally using some of the same actors.” He’s not too far off. When can an enemy be trusted, and when is a friend a friend in name only? Here the story knots up, holds tight, and slips loose in some ingenious twists. On the other side of those plot twists, the story takes on a new shape that becomes as much about personal identity and how it’s formed as it is about revenge—an intriguing mix that concludes with a satisfying conflagration.

Vengeance and plot surprises culminate in a masterful finale.

**THERE IS NO DEATH IN FINDING NEMO**

Feingold, Jeffrey M.
Impspired Press (124 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Sept. 3, 2023
9781991581922

Seemingly simple lives are full of surprises in Feingold’s collection of short stories.

Music student Dakota, in the opening title story, ignores her sister’s warning about her too-fast relationship. She moves in with Zayden, a real estate developer who certainly seems like an ambitious, responsible older man, after just a few dates. Things change drastically after Dakota uneartns what’s hiding in her boyfriend’s home office. Similarly, in “Avram’s Miracle,” hopeful new business partners tour the world’s biggest matzah bakery, which is in Cincinnati. They’re gunning for “worldwide matzah domination” but are unexpectedly taken aback by apprentice baker Avram’s invention. This impressive device may be able to feed masses for free, but is that really what these food industrialists want? Many readers will relate to the lives of those in the seven tales herein: an aging man pining for youth in “The Loneliest Number.” Still, surreal moments intermittently crop up. In “The Box,” for example, a stranger hands the titular item to art professor Francine, who’s sitting alone at a restaurant. “For happiness,” the nameless woman tells her before quickly departing. The wooden box’s glass top periodically glows with pictures of people with whom Francine has recently conversed, but she’s not immediately clear why it does so. This story, like the others, showcases the effects of unpredictable happenings on everyday lives.

Feingold develops a series of sublime characters in these tales. Irina in “The Loneliest Number,” for instance, regularly sees a therapist but, for at least a couple of years, preferred that her doctor never mention her diagnosed bipolar disorder; Irina is also a classical pianist who sees colors in music and calms herself down by running through names of dead celebrity women.
who also suffered from bipolar disorder. Religion, especially Judaism, is a common theme that further grounds the stories in real life; in “Rich Girl,” accountant David, for example, belongs to a Jewish family that’s becoming less devout with each passing generation. A few characters pop up in more than one tale, including zany wife and husband Mary and Phil. As a supporting character, Mary offers telephonic advice to one of her sisters while simultaneously dominating an argument with her mostly ineffectual spouse. They lead their own story in the collection’s last and shortest offering, “There Is No Death in Finding Nemo,” which finds them in their weirdest squabble yet. Feingold’s concise prose generates succinct narratives and vivid images; Francine even sees memorable sights on a dating app, such as a “grizzled man in a plaid flannel shirt, sitting on the hood of his red pickup truck, flashing a yellow smile.” Other narrative details are often clever or playful, as when David goes to see his grandfather, who has dementia, in a Boston nursing home; their dialogue is intercut with a movie playing on TV—effectively fostering the impression that Rock Hudson and Doris Day are part of the conversation.

Sometimes-profound tales featuring colorful imagery and accessible characters.

**TROLL**

Fitzgerald, Dave
Whiskey Tit (590 pp.)
$24.00 paper | Feb. 23, 2023
9781912600326

A fiction debut in which an anonymous internet troll has a kind of quarter-life crisis.

In this sprawling, rambunctious novel, Fitzgerald places his unnamed main character—an aimless, dissolute, perpetually horny online troll—on the cusp of a deep-seated personal dilemma. When he graduated from college (it was years ago, but he still has infinite student loans to pay off), his remaining friends warned him, “You have to get out of this town the second you graduate, or else you’ll never leave.” And the warning has come true: “No matter what route you take home,” the narrator tells himself, “you’re guaranteed to see a University bus whiz by or glimpse one of the crumbling dormitories you used to call home—teeming, iniquitous high-rises after J. G. Ballard’s own heart.” The entire novel is set in the second person—a bit of a workout, especially over 500 pages, but the author pulls it off with impressive skill. The narrative follows its hapless main character through his largely aimless days, varying from online porn to large amounts of alcohol and marijuana. These misadventures are punctuated with long excerpts from the protagonist’s writings on pop culture and the nature of the perpetually online modern world. “Thanks to vertically integrated marketing strategies and the commodification of ‘cool,’ true originality has almost ceased to exist,” he muses in typically caustic terms. “Individually, we may all be snowflakes, but together, we’re a fucking whiteout.” As this tour through the protagonist’s tortured psyche reaches a crisis point, it is obvious something has to give, and soon.

In addition to successfully employing a seldom-used narrative point of view, Fitzgerald also accomplishes several other daring feats. The novel’s narrative manages to be crude without being stupid and eloquent without having anything remotely pleasant to say. The author’s sheer exuberance in describing everything from a mood shift to a bar fight is unflagging: “Wild-pitched shot- and pint-glasses shell the
liquor display behind the bar like a knock-em-over carnival game, sending a waterfall of spirits crashing from the top shelf down," goes one such moment. “The staff retreat to the back offices soaked in their own wares—their cuts and scrapes pre-sterilized by the downpour—and opportunistic alkies start absconding with whatever merchandise is still intact while the rest of the crowd makes for the door.” Our troll-ish main character grouses about the artificiality of online culture. There are many scenes driven by grotesque Pynchon-esque humor: After a particularly nasty incident, a bathroom is described as “a GG Allin-themed sanguinarium.” And the main character’s Angela, has serious health issues and is trying to keep the family hotel running so that it remains a viable tourist option. All the rest of the crowd makes for the door. “Our troll-ish main character to one final epic feat of trolling, readers will be rooting for him despite his despicable ways.

A cynical, misanthropic, foulmouthed novel that no curious reader will be able to put down.

THE GREAT QUIET

Frisch, Bekkah
Bomkus Books (310 pp.)
$18.00 paper | $2.99 e-book | Aug. 29, 2023
979-897742105

Frisch offers a debut novel about best friends growing up on an island near Tahiti who experience tragedies connected to local radioactivity.

Teenage friends Ari and Natu’s beautiful South Pacific homeland in French Polynesia was used as a nuclear testing site by the French government from the 1960s to the ’90s. Natu’s single mother, Angela, has serious health issues and is trying to keep the family hotel running so that it remains a viable tourist option. All their lives become more complicated when Ari is diagnosed with myeloma, which may be related to fallout from the nuclear testing years before. Her activist father, Manu, is trying to force France to declassify documents that would support his efforts to have the radioactive waste safely cleaned up. Manu runs into many political obstacles but fights on, although his greatest concern is his daughter’s health. Everyone is haunted by their pasts: Ari and Manu are both racked by grief over Ari’s brother Henri’s death in a plane accident; Natu wants to meet his biological father; and that father and Natu’s mother have secrets that will affect the futures of all the characters. The over course of this novel, Frisch delivers a braided story of family and family that features complex and evolving but navigable relationships.

The story moves through time with ease—Ari and Natu start the story as 14-year-olds and later reach young adulthood, island hopping to find medical care and the answers to family secrets. The major players, who include Angela, are lovingly and authentically realized as the narrative goes on, and Frisch integrates ideas of caretaking—watching out for one’s friends, one’s family, one’s home, and the planet in general—with serious, emotionally resonant life-and-death subject matter.

An ambitious, moving saga that connects the personal and the global, illustrating how a youthful friendship can have tender, lasting effects.

HEART OF THE CASTLE

A Ghost Story
Fullman, R.
Self (234 pp.)
978-0988643437

In Fullman’s YA follow-up to Faces in the Flames (2018), a group of teens investigates a haunted castle.

Fifteen-year-old Katie (described as “a good person to have as a friend, always there for whoever needed her”) and her friends Cam Lund (the main character of the previous novel), John, and Ruth are spending the summer studying abroad in Eastern Europe. They find themselves in Romania at Bran Castle, which at one point in its history imprisoned the infamous Vlad the Impaler and later housed the country’s king and queen. The teens’ adventures involve enigmatic state operatives, strange ancient objects, and a tall pale gentleman who bears a strong resemblance to a certain supernatural count. Most of this pleasingly complex plot revolves around the fact that, for years, the preserved heart of Queen Marie of Romania was kept in the castle: “It still sounds kind of gross,” Cam deadpans, “but I guess if you love a place so much...” As the plot accelerates, the teenage heroes find themselves caught between mystical and real-world forces. Fullman is a spirited writer who carefully pitches his narrative at a teen audience. The straightforward text feels undorned, and his descriptions are clean and minimalist. Even during dramatic high points, the prose is simple and staccato, as when Katie confronts a mysterious stranger who tries to grab a strange pendant she’s found: “The man made one quick step backwards. His face twisted. He looked down at the pendant and then dropped it as though it was on fire. A burning pain stung his fingers. Loudly, he said, ‘Vrajitoare!’” Apart from Katie, Fullman’s characters feel largely interchangeable, but each gets some snappy dialogue, and the pace never flags.

A fast-paced and delightfully readable teen adventure set in vampire territory.

THE THINGS WE’LL NEVER HAVE

Hauck, Hilary
Olive Rose Press (415 pp.)
$6.99 e-book | July 6, 2023

In Hauck’s historical novel set in 1960s Europe, a British woman’s fiancé goes missing, and she goes on a journey to Italy that reveals shocking truths.

In 1964, Everleigh is a 26-year-old woman living in London—a self-described
"A poetic, nuanced tribute to the power of music and family."

*THE CELLO STILL SINGS*

“plain Jane” who works as a typist. Her betrothed, Gualtiero, is anything but plain, and he regales her with tales of his small hometown, Vigevano, and his vivacious, loving family that enjoys “enormous feasts that last for hours.” However, a month before their wedding, Gualtiero vanishes without a word of warning and takes with him half of the money they had saved for an upcoming trip to Italy. Both hurt and bewildered, Everleigh makes the bold decision—one uncharacteristic of this timid, unworlrdly woman—to travel to Italy in search of her fiancé. When she arrives at his family’s home, though, she quickly realizes they’ve never heard of her—and even worse, the only Gualtiero among their ranks is not the one to whom she was engaged. Overall, this is a moving novel that’s one part mystery and one part gripping psychological drama, and Hauck’s writing style has a straightforward simplicity that makes the story’s revelations feel all the more powerful. With remarkable subtlety and suspense, the author chronicles Everleigh’s attempt to figure out not only where Gualtiero is, but *who* he is, with no clues other than letters that his cousin wrote to him. She befriends local young women Marta and Olivia; their lives are connected by despair—Olivia’s brother, Bernardo, was presumed dead in an accident, although his body was never found; he left Marta, his wife, a widow and single mother. As the search for Gualtiero intensifies, all three women are forced to confront the extraordinary truth about their sadly interconnected lives. The author also shows how Everleigh is pushed into an emotional confrontation with her mother over the death of her father during the war—a trauma that is never discussed forthrightly and provides drama that is poignantly depicted by the author.

An arresting and unpredictable tale of family.

In this memoir, a cellist explores her immigrant parents’ past as Holocaust survivors. Growing up in a Jewish family in her birthplace of Toronto, Canada, Janet Horvath was told she was given her first name because it was “intentionally English, not Hungarian, and not Jewish.” Though her parents always welcomed her friends with warm hospitality, they largely kept to themselves and were reluctant to discuss what they endured during World War II. After Janet married, she had a son and moved to the United States to work as a professional cellist like her father. She frequently visited her elderly parents, especially after her mother suffered a stroke, and made a major discovery: In 1948, her dad played in an orchestra of Holocaust survivors in Landsberg, Germany, conducted by Leonard Bernstein. Janet began a deep dive into her parents’ journey from their native Hungary, where they met while studying music at Budapest’s Liszt Academy; the night before Janet’s father was sent to a Nazi labor camp in 1944, her parents married young so her mother wouldn’t be deported. Meanwhile, Janet reckoned with a mysterious ear injury that threatened to end her relationship with the cello—her father’s legacy. Horvath’s memoir thoroughly explores the complicated aftermath of the Holocaust, when those who survived Nazi occupation and concentration camps were displaced persons, reliant on the kindness of friends, relatives, and strangers—and many, like Janet’s worker, recalling Ginger years later. “She looked broken down, like an old hollow-eyed woman in a faded cotton print dress. I could see she was frightened to death.” The author notes that the family lived remotely, like pioneers or survivalists; “He chose this way of life for us,” McNeil explains. In Helderman’s telling, McNeil’s fraught exit from her marriage (a scene in which her husband shows up at a court hearing and hands her a picture of their dead son, a suicide victim, is chilling) feels like a hard-won triumph. The author does give Mike—now deceased—the opportunity to tell his side (“It wasn’t all bad. Ginger and me”). Though those encounters thrum with the tension of possible threats to her own safety, she does an admirable job of presenting his perspective without resorting to “gotcha” questions. But the narrative is rooted in McNeil’s bravery and her determination to tell her story as repayment to the women’s shelter workers who aided her. This is an updated version of Helderman’s award-winning 2010 book.

At times a difficult read, but the humanity and McNeil’s indomitable spirit shine through.

**AS THE SycAMORE Grows**

Helderman, Jennie Miller
Lucid House Publishing (380 pp.)
$19.99 paper | May 2, 2023
9781950495337

Helderman chronicles a woman’s journey from battered wife to advocate for victims of spousal abuse in this non-fiction work.

Two quotes set the stage for this well-researched narrative that puts a human face on an all-too-common issue. The first comes from Ginger McNeil, who tells the author, “I lived in a cabin in the woods, too poor to afford electricity, and too afraid to travel to Italy in search of her fiance. When she arrives at...” The second comes from Ginger’s husband, Mike, who, matter-of-factly and without remorse, comments: “One time I hauled off and slapped the fool out of her....”

Men will understand.... I wouldn’t change a thing if I could go back.” Hearing these words, the author, then on assignment to write a magazine piece about poverty in Alabama, switched her focus to McNeil and her story. In this book, she reports with a journalist’s keen eye and ear for the telling detail and quote: “I noticed her when she came in the door,” says a county clerk.
parents, were forced to temporarily relocate to Germany. Horvath’s prose is lyrical (“Consider a time when hell was on earth, when hands accustomed to a musician’s bow, a writer’s pen, a doctor’s scalpel, a painter’s brush, a tailor’s needle, wielded shovelfuls of rocks, limestone, or human remains”) and brutally honest as she explores how trauma leads to complex dynamics; Janet’s father and brother were often estranged, and Janet frequently found herself torn between her life in Minnesota and her parents, who were slowly but surely fading away. In a world in which antisemitism is on the rise, Horvath’s story—equal parts disturbing and inspiring—is necessary and timely reading.

A poetic, nuanced tribute to the power of music and family.

A poetic, nuanced tribute to the power of music and family.

THE DISCERNING INVESTOR
Personal Portfolio Management in Retirement for Lawyers (and Their Clients)
Jason, Julie
American Bar Association (228 pp.)
$59.95 paper | April 28, 2022
9781639050628

Attorney and investment counsel Jason presents a thorough guide to investment with a specific view toward retirement.

The author astutely observes that retirement has only become more challenging as life spans have increased, and consequently, “your retirement planning will encompass a much longer period of time than you might first envision.” Moreover, she asserts, one can’t procrastinate and expect to prepare for retirement properly; the author notes more than once: “This is not the time to learn through trial and error.” Although these are universal truths, “retirement security” is largely about personal customization. Jason points out, as not everyone will have the same goals to achieve or the same hurdles to clear. Her aim is to help readers retire “on [their] own terms,” and to that end, she provides both a general conceptual framework to understand retirement investment and specific, practical counsel regarding the formulation and execution of a retirement plan. She covers a wide swath of analytical territory—volatility and risk, diversification, the ways one should choose a financial resource. Jason’s presentation is intellectually rigorous—and thereby refreshing to read: “But now the void, familiar and unwelcome, had come home. His thoughts returned to the empty wallet, and the lead singer of Quiet Catastrophe, back when they’d been as close as brothers) and love found (Daphne’s assistance may serve as the prelude to a real romance). Jayce’s elegant prose is a joy to read: “But now the void, familiar and unwelcome, had come home. His thoughts returned to the empty wallet, and to the ousted presidents that once held office there.” Readers won’t want the novel to end.

An enormously fun and addictively readable story of redemption in the seedy world of stadium rock music.

In Jayce’s fiction debut, a washed-up music producer will do anything to find a lost album—or die trying.

Jensen Bennett is separated from his wife, on the wrong side of 30, the lap dog of his employer at Wicked Records, and facing an enormous bouncer who won’t let him backstage to see the hit group Quiet Catastrophe. Bennett discovered the band and shepherded them to stardom with their first two albums, but his own rotten behavior has alienated him from the group. Wicked Records has heard a rumor that the band has breached their contract by secretly recording their third album, House Made of Sound, and Bennett has been dispatched to get the master recordings by any means necessary. With the help of a lovely medium named Daphne, he gets backstage at last but finds nothing—so he stows away on the band’s plane, hoping for a chance to steal the album and somehow get his life back on track. Instead, the plane crashes, and when Bennett wakes up, he’s in some kind of afterlife; he’s told that although his mortal body is still back at the crash site clinging to life, the members of Quiet Catastrophe are as “dead as disco,” leaving Bennett with the task of finding them in this weird paradise and learning the location of that elusive third album before he’s pulled back to life. From these strange elements, the author has carefully constructed an absolutely winning story, a rousing, funny, and surprisingly moving tale of love lost (as Bennett points out to himself, he hasn’t loved many people in his life—but he’d loved the lead singer of Quiet Catastrophe, back when they’d been as close as brothers) and love found (Daphne’s assistance may serve as the prelude to a real romance). Jayce’s elegant prose is a joy to read: “But now the void, familiar and unwelcome, had come home. His thoughts returned to the empty wallet, and to the ousted presidents that once held office there.” Readers won’t want the novel to end.
This fifth book in a series about Jewish history and culture, edited by Kaplan, covers the years 1500 to 1750. The “early modern period” discussed here was a time of many upheavals in Jewish history. Expulsions from various European locales (Vienna in 1670, for example) and communities in the New World and outbreaks of the plague are just a few of the occurrences that shaped Jewish life. This was a time of great thinkers, like Baruch Spinoza, and men who claimed to be the messiah, like the Portuguese-born Solomon Molkho (while the former was exiled for his controversial views, the latter was executed in 1532). Such is the wealth of information the reader encounters in the writings, visual arts, and miscellanea referenced here. The Chantilly Haggadah, from an unknown artist in the 1500s, includes the rules for a Passover seder as practiced by “Greek-speaking Jewish communities of the eastern Mediterranean.” Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, a rabbi born in 1578, writes of his experience being arrested for blasphemy against Christianity. Visual material includes images of a Torah ark from a synagogue in Urbino, Italy, and of ceremonies such as a wedding at a synagogue in Germany in 1705. With over 1,000 pages of content, even a cursory glance requires commitment, which pays off in unexpected ways. The reader may be surprised at just how contemporary many of these early modern period writers may seem. A brief guide written in Yiddish for traveling to Jerusalem includes the practical advice to “buy Turkish-style travel garments” during the journey. Other entries surprise in different ways: Excerpts from confessions of the Spanish Inquisition include statements from some who were enticed into “serving the Law of Moses” at the behest of a girl who was eventually burned at the stake. Though the length of the book may be daunting, it is filled with enticing subject matter.

*A robust collection that sheds light on multiple aspects of Jewish history.*
In Luetkemeyer’s novel, a struggling writer imagines the histories of the people he encounters at a local coffee shop. Adrian Lomachenko gives up a profitable career as a banker to become a writer, moves to the small town of Jacksonville, Oregon, and decides to spend a year writing one story each month inspired by the people he encounters at the Good Bean Café—specifically, stories about “unlikely and inexplicable” events in each person’s life. Guided by his “muse,” Miranda (a stuffed monkey), Lomachenko often speaks directly to the reader, addressing them by the name Sam as he tells the often implausible, frequently impossible, and always fascinating tales of his neighbors. He recounts the bizarre history of the café’s cook, the heir to a fictional kingdom who fled after encountering his doppelgänger; he describes one man’s cross-country journey to buy drugs that turns out to be a drug trip itself; he imagines a conversation with a woman after finding her headstone in the local graveyard; and he shares a horrific tale of spousal murder. The stories are each complete narratives capable of standing alone, but they are also full of connections, with characters, locations, and themes recurring throughout the novel, creating a single unified piece of fiction. The author’s prose is considered and often clever (concluding the cook’s story, Lomachenko acknowledges that “the heir apparent to the Kingdom of Sandu makes a mean breakfast burrito”), though it can occasionally grow ponderous, particularly as the more art-minded characters discuss their interests. The stories paint a vivid picture of Lomachenko’s community, and the framing device is generally effective. The book concludes with Lomachenko’s own story, an outcome that brings together elements of the earlier chapters in often surprising ways, providing a satisfying resolution.

A complex and intriguing novel told in stories.

Mahoney fondly recalls his career as a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio technician in this memoir. In 1988, the 23-year-old author realized it was time for him to get a real job, one that would support an adult lifestyle. Across the street from the Toronto apartment Mahoney shared with three other young men was the CBC Radio building. He walked in and told the receptionist he was looking for a job. When she asked him what kind of a job, he replied “something technical.” To this day he doesn’t know why he said that, but his response would define his career over the next three decades (his memoir focuses on the 20 years before he advanced to a managerial position). His first job was keeping track of all the signal frequencies connecting the CBC network that stretched across Canada: “The idea was to patch the audio down these lines one after another and work with other audio engineers across the country to measure the frequency response.” By the time he was encouraged to move into management, he was a recording engineer and producer, a job he loved. In dozens of amiable, frequently humorous vignettes, Mahoney describes the plethora of equipment that had to be set up, monitored, calibrated, and modified, all to produce the perfect sound for transmitting across four time zones. The decidedly upbeat, conversational tone of his prose will help nontechies past the stumbling blocks of text heavy with technological jargon and the minutiae of putting together a successful radio program (Mahoney includes a useful glossary of terminology). And although only a few of the numerous luminaries he has worked with will be familiar to non-Canadian readers, the stories are entertaining. They contain a wealth of information about the intricacies of creating sound effects that will enable listeners to mentally visualize action as Mahoney details the nuances involved in picking the right mic, the best buffer, the acoustically appropriate flooring for different footsteps, and a host of other elements.

An amusing and highly informative, albeit occasionally challenging, read, best for radio buffs.
ATG. Set after the Soviet Union’s dissolution, the story concerns nuclear weapon inventory remaining unchecked in Russian manufacturing warehouses, where threats of theft loom daily. Nefarious collective Operation Alpha Count has rallied their members to smuggle this ordnance out of Russia to sell to radical guerilla groups with destructive intentions. Their machinations, however covert, catch the attention of Gold’s ATG team. They are dispatched to intercept and shut down Alpha after the group illicitly obtains crates of plutonium warhead spheres from a bankrupt facility in Russia’s closed city of Ozersk. Gold immediately resumes his womanizing ways with Natasha, a flight attendant with whom he has a dalliance. He again joins forces with colleagues, including the Russian black market expert Dima and the beautiful, CIA-trained Sofia, with whom Gold has a complicated “emotional and romantic” reunion. The discovery of a dismembered teammate puts the group on high alert and catapults the espionage narrative into overdrive (“The horror of dying in a place like Odessa and disappearing without a clue began to sink in. For the time being, though, the twelve-inch width of the shelter’s heavy-duty frame was taking all the rounds that would have blown his head off”). Once it’s clear who’s on which side, there’s a satisfying conclusion to this twisty thriller that’s filled with secret agendas and merciless bloodshed. The open ending signals more adventures in Warsaw and Russia, readers new to the series may want to start with Mays’ first Contractor installment to get all the dirty details on its audacious hero.

Further captivating adventures of a resilient spy continuously dodging enemy fire.

**THE EMPTY KAYAK**

* A Queen City Crimes Novel
* Millman, Jodé
* Level Best Books (368 pp.)
* 9781685122874

The investigation of a mysterious accident puts a fragile friendship at risk in Millman’s thriller.

In this third installment of the Queen City Crimes series, Det. Ebony Jones is assigned to the case of a man who disappeared after a severe storm popped up while he was kayaking on the Hudson River. The identity of the missing kayaker comes as a blow to Ebony—he’s Kyle Emory, the ex-boyfriend of Ebony’s estranged best friend, attorney Jessie Martin, and the father of Jessie’s daughter, Lily. Ebony has to deliver another shock to Jessie, now reunited with her true love, Judge Hal Samuels: Kyle was engaged to Olivia Vargas, a much-younger social media influencer. Ebony first has to confirm whether Kyle is missing or dead; if he’s dead, she must determine whether his death was an accident, a suicide, or murder. If Kyle is a homicide victim, Ebony will have no shortage of suspects, including Olivia, who’s now entitled to half of Kyle’s life insurance payment; Olivia’s debt-ridden brother, Auggie; and Olivia’s current husband, Raul.

**THE ALEUTIAN VOYAGE... HANG ON!**

* Marich, Lou
* Marlet House Productions (80 pp.)
* $4.99 e-book | April 25, 2022

A perilous 19th-century voyage to the wilds of Alaska awakens a subterranean terror.

This lively work of historical horror opens in 1866 when President Andrew Johnson assigns Interior Department Field Director Jack Cal-sin to survey the Alaskan territory that the U.S. is about to purchase from Russia. Johnson hopes it will bolster his chances in the upcoming election if the survey finds evidence of gold and other valuable resources. In Jack’s first-person account, trouble begins when one of the ship’s main boilers explodes, killing crew members. From then on, the catastrophes mount—fatal illnesses, a destructive storm, and a disastrous landing on Alaska’s coast. Even as Jack is given a brief respite to marvel at the abundant wildlife, plentiful ore deposits, and rugged beauty of the surroundings, the author ups the suspense with the threat of something deadly looming. “A creature,” says a tribal shaman, “who hunts during the anger of the big wind and frozen water!”

A credible approximation of a 19th-century diary that deftly blends history and horror.

**CONTRACTOR II**

* Operation Alpha Count
* Mays, B.V.
* Olympia Publishers (262 pp.)
* 9781680074674

A government operative intercepts nuclear arms heisters in Mays’ international spy thriller.

In this electrifying sequel to *Contractor* (2021), the author continues the daring adventures of American CIA contractor Andrew Gold, divorced father of two and outspoken leader of the counterterrorist outfit
Esperanza, whom she hasn’t yet divorced. Ebony’s investigation is complicated by her fractured relationship with Jessie and by Jessie’s insistence on conducting her own off-the-books inquiry. The author impressively juggles several viewpoints (including those of Ebony, Jessie, and new district attorney Cindie Tarrico) of the same complex case. She also deftly illustrates the fraught political landscape that the police must navigate when dealing with the wealthy Vargas family (“Carlos Vargas’ words contained the undertone of a command rather than a request, and it was apparent he was used to controlling the situation”) and vividly conveys the breakneck pace of the investigation. Millman creates relatable, flawed characters: There’s Ebony, who is so tentative about reaching toward the future, both in her work and her personal life, and Jessie, who should be looking forward to a future with Hal but instead wallows in her past with Kyle. The tension between the two former close friends effectively raises the stakes of the narrative.

An involving whodunit with strong characters who must find a way to work together.

“A comforting cadence of promises well suited to bedtime reading.”

I LOVE YOU THAT MUCH
Murphy, C.A.
Self (32 pp.)
979876438992

Murphy’s picture book of questions and answers reinforces the no-matter-what promise of a caregiver’s love.

Toddler Lee, who has fair skin and brown hair, asks their mother, “How much do you love me?” The mother promises that she loves Lee “as much as all of the leaves on all of the trees, in all of the forests.” But what if the leaves fall, Lee wonders? The mother responds with further promises, each one based on nature, as Lee asks what-if questions meant to stump their parent. Lee’s mother never gets stuck, though—she pivots each time, describing another natural wonder, until finally she says that even if all of nature vanished, she would still love Lee that much—and Lee agrees that they love their mother that much, too. The author uses the same repeated phrases, but the subtle context changes—from a certainty to a what-if and then back to a promise—make each use feel fresh. The continued use of similar phrasing makes this a perfect read-aloud choice for toddlers, especially those who constantly ask what-if questions, who can chime in on each occurrence. Murphy’s full-color digital art is also repeated, in concert with the text; while in some books that sort of reuse feels lazy, here it effectively reiterates the theme and the depth of the mother’s love.

A comforting cadence of promises well suited to bedtime reading.

I HAD TO BREAK ME
A Poetry Collection
Nisha
Self (240 pp.)
March 9, 2023
979898714001
979898714018 paper

Nisha’s personal poetry collection offers a searching reflection on losing love, losing one’s home, and losing oneself.

The works in this book are initially full of distress. The collection is divided into six sections, and references to molestation and loss of faith give its early poems an anguished tone. The speaker calls herself a healer in a broken health care system and also notes her privilege: “I don’t know why I complain when every luxury is presented / to me on a plate.” She also depicts her emotional pain through a lens of ongoing meditation and rumination, including cycles of insight followed by relapses into feelings of hopelessness. At times, an abundance of abstractions ("sins," "toxicity") make it a struggle to identify a distinct personality behind the voice. The collection becomes more compelling when it addresses the speaker’s experience after an earthquake in the author’s home country, Nepal, in 2015. This section’s poems are more image-driven; readers see the author step away from personal disheartenment and toward empathy with a devastated community. Readers will notice the shift as the speaker looks outward: “This building may shatter / This gate may collapse / Every luxury is presented / to me on a plate.” She also depicts her emotional pain through a lens of ongoing meditation and rumination, including cycles of insight followed by relapses into feelings of hopelessness. At times, an abundance of abstractions ("sins," "toxicity") make it a struggle to identify a distinct personality behind the voice. The collection becomes more compelling when it addresses the speaker’s experience after an earthquake in the author’s home country, Nepal, in 2015. This section’s poems are more image-driven; readers see the author step away from personal disheartenment and toward empathy with a devastated community. Readers will notice the shift as the speaker looks outward: “This building may shatter / This gate may collapse / Every luxury is presented / to me on a plate.”

Meditative works from an author who finds her strongest imagery in accounts of a disaster’s aftermath.

SUMMER RENTAL
Ross, Rektok
Ic13 Books (266 pp.)
$17.99 paper | $5.99 e-book | June 13, 2023
9780988256828

A Fourth of July celebration turns deadly for a group of teens in Ross’ YA psychological thriller.

Eighteen-year-old Riley March and four girlfriends—Cam, Val, Nia, and Blake—are off on a celebratory Independence Day weekend away, their last before they all leave for college in the fall. Their destination is the exclusive and remote...
THE WARRIOR GENE
Staley, Neil
Self (322 pp.)
Jan. 27, 2023
978218100742
978218100759 paper

In Staley’s thriller, groups from around the globe are willing to kill to get their hands on a mysterious DNA code. Renowned geneticist Dr. Alex Bishop’s newest project at a Washington, D.C., lab is top secret: The military is technologically capable of rewriting DNA to change human behavior, and it wants him to perfect it, allowing the tech to make these changes instantaneous. One night, while alone in the lab, Alex makes a startling discovery—a specific genetic code that could shake the entire world. He confides in FBI Special Agent Gabby Morgane, a loyal friend. That doesn’t stop a rival geneticist from attacking him to get the code, which he’s stored on a flash drive in his pocket. Meanwhile, Karesh Harrison, a former Royal Marine Commando, accompanies a man named Aaron Bashir to the United States to deliver an ancient book. Mercenaries and assassins, all tied to a millennia-old prophecy, enter the mix, though only a few fully understand what’s going on. The narrative thrives on ambiguity. Though the code on Alex’s flash drive provides some illumination, the story is largely puzzling—even to many of the characters—until late in the story. Still, it’s engrossing throughout. The author introduces riveting characters like the capable and resilient Gabby and Alex, whose vivid dreams feature silhouetted creatures and bloody assaults. Tension builds as killers strike and the prophesied “greatest evil ever to walk the earth” gradually comes to light. Not all of the groups involved are after the same thing, a fact that ignites a handful of exhilarating action sequences featuring explosions, bullets zipping past, and flying bodies. This novel reads like a series opener, leaving myriad questions unanswered, from certain characters’ true identities to mysterious objects that remain enigmas.

A fun and scary slasher thriller.

A GILDED DROWNING POOL
Tichi, Cecelia
Self (374 pp.)
$15.99 paper | $2.99 e-book | May 9, 2023
978985121667

In Tichi’s fifth installment of her Gilded Age mystery series, murder and intrigue disrupt the usual upper-class frivolities in New York’s Hudson Valley. In early June 1899 (the “between season” for those who follow the social calendar of the Gilded class), New Yorkers Roderick “Roddy” Windham DeVere and Valentine “Val” Louise Mackle DeVere prepare to enjoy Roddy’s newest creative cocktail when Val learns that they have been invited to Kiddwood, the Ulster County country estate of family friends Alfred “Alf” Kidd and Mercedes “Sadie” Kidd. The invitation includes a not-so-subtle request to discover the cause of Kiddwood’s recent water problems (their water flows from the adjacent undeveloped acreage owned by Roddy’s parents, and that flow has dwindled down to a trickle). Before Val can convince Roddy to send their polite regrets, a telegram arrives informing them that a woman’s body has been found on the DeVere property. Two days later, Roddy and Val take a Hudson River steamboat up to Kingston, New York, where they are to liaise with Assistant Police Chief Clyde Fitch. And so begins another murderous adventure through the Gilded Age, complete with all of its glamour and suffocating social conventions (as well as its gritty underbelly). Readers are likely to particularly enjoy the outrageously lavish displays of luxury relished by those living at the pinnacle of the economic heap, as meticulously described by Val, the story’s narrator. Indeed, the author pays attention to every detail of the clothing and cuisine, including the recipes for Roddy’s exotic cocktails (“My Roddy had just mixed one of his fabulous, mysterious cocktails (“My Roddy had just mixed one of his fabulous, mysterious drinks, this one called a Collins. We tapped our tall glasses and sipped. ‘Delicious, Roddy.’ I sipped again. ‘I taste orange, Florida orange. The name of this must be the Florida Collins’”). Although the tension is mild in this cozy mystery, there are plenty of juicy secrets behind the glittering façade and enough suspects to keep the reader guessing.

A light, enjoyable escapist read with a satisfying final twist.
In Trull and Wargo's nonfiction account, a group of fourth graders inspires the establishment of a no-kill animal shelter in a small Texas town. It was an ordinary Tuesday in March 2003, in teacher Diane Trull's fourth-grade reading class. As the students sit in groups reading to each other from a newspaper, three girls came up to Trull's desk with a news photo of a box of stray puppies. The girls asked what happened to the puppies. Trull eventually had to tell them the truth: The town of Dalhart, Texas, had a stray-dog problem. If puppies picked up by animal control were not reclaimed or adopted within three days, they would be euthanized. The children were distraught; over the next few days, the students repeatedly returned to the problem of the homeless dogs and wondered what they could do to save them. One student suggested running their own no-kill sanctuary. Weeks later, Trull, her husband, Mark, and 28 nervous 9-year-olds found themselves in front of the town council. One by one, their voices quavering, the children presented their case. Despite some skepticism, the council voted to allow them to begin caring for the dogs. The very next day, an animal control officer showed up at Trull's classroom announcing he had 12 dogs from the pound: “Where do y'all want them?” To date, the Dalhart Animal Wellness Group and Sanctuary has helped rescue more than 20,000 dogs and cats. Written in collaboration with Wargo, Trull's poignant narrative traces the tribulations and triumphs of the unique no-kill animal sanctuary, where Dalhart's schoolchildren continue to provide a substantial portion of the love and daily care for the dogs and cats waiting for adoption. Dozens of rescue stories will leave readers smiling, but there are also a few incidents that reveal the heartbreaking, bone-chilling cruelty that humans have inflicted upon helpless animals.

A few tears, lots of love, some incredible children, and a bevy of wonderful pups enliven this inspirational true account.

SEARCHING FOR CHARLES
The Untold Legacy of an Immigrant's American Adventure
Watts, Stephen
Houndstooth Press (604 pp.)
Sept. 30, 2022
978-1544531946
9781544531922 paper

The letters of a 19th-century immigrant and pioneer are transcribed and contextualized by his descendant in this absorbing debut epistolary biography by Watts.

Charles Watts was born in Epping, near London, in 1812. Along with family friend William Abrehart, the 23-year-old boarded the Montreal in late 1835 hoping to escape poverty in a new life. The pair arrived in New York in January 1836, and on arrival, Charles began writing letters to his family in England, many of which were addressed to his brother, Edward. The letters discuss a broad range of matters—details about his new life as a farmer after recognizing the agricultural prospects of relocating to Illinois, and opinions on slavery, the Oregon boundary dispute, and the Irish Potato Famine. Charles eventually convinced Edward to join him in Illinois, and when leaving England, Edward brought his brother's treasured letters with him. At the turn of the millennium, the letters came into the hands of author Watts, Charles’ great-great-grandson, who began transcribing the documents as part of his genealogical research. Twenty-two of Charles’ letters survived, spanning 1836-68, and are now archived at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. The author notes the ways Charles’ lengthy letters revealed the “travails, beliefs, and attitudes of one of the millions of working-class English emigrants” who risked
“An era-encapsulating collection of stylish, deftly composed poems.”

AN ABUNDANCE OF CAUTION

Witte, George
Unbound Edition Press (114 pp.) $24.00 | May 9, 2023
9780991378067

Witte surveys our apocalyptic times in this poetry collection.

The title of this collection became a kind of slogan during the Covid pandemic. Simultaneously evoking the variable danger of the virus and the uncertain institutional response to it, the newly ubiquitous phrase heralded a suspension of normal life, explaining why we must no longer go near one another. As the speaker riffs in the title poem, “Proceed as if on shattered glass / around suspicious passersby / eyeing each other’s mask and gloves, / give way or cross the street devoid / of traffic, nowhere to commute, / on holiday but isolate.” Rather than presenting such furtiveness as a freakish deviation from the normal, the author suggests that these behaviors are more or less par for the course; in his view, humans tend toward defensiveness, reticence, hesitancy, and self-isolation. “Necks bow in unison, / alone,” begins “Who What When Where Why”; “At church or phone / in urgent prayer, awaiting / word: when and where / dread happens.” “Reap” begins in a damning, near-biblical register: “We sing what we have sown low voices / when and where / dread happens.”

AN ABUNDANCE OF CAUTION

Charles’s letters provide the only hint we have of the bitter reality. Nearly impassable roads limited the ability to get what remained of livestock and produce to market. Making matters still worse, the 1851 crop was coming to harvest, causing crop prices to plummet.” The study goes marginally awry toward its close, when the author elaborates on particulars that may be of significance to his family alone: “Charles’s letters provide the only hint we have of the bitter relationship that developed between Mary Ann Aland and Anthony Alma’s children from his first two marriages.” The focus broadens to become more of a genealogical study of the Watts family, whereas Charles, his letters, and the immigrant experience provide the true points of interest. The biography would benefit from the omission or abbreviation of the work’s final section, which addresses the research conducted by the author and his family. Still, for those interested in 19th-century American history, this book provides a vital window into the everyday life and concerns of immigrants.

Fascinating correspondence, illuminated by thorough research, despite a later loss of focus.

KARL’S DIARY

It’s a Dog’s Life

Winters, Sharon
9789886100401

A rescued pup describes the joys of finding a loving home in Winters’ novella.

This book tells the story of Karl, a sweet, brown dog with golden eyes, told in his own voice. When a man finds the frightened and hungry young Boykin spaniel in Arizona’s Yuma Desert, he brings the animal to the Humane Society of Yuma. He’s put up for adoption but is repeatedly overlooked; after a few weeks, he’s transferred to Friends for Life Animal Rescue in Gilbert, Arizona, but still he’s passed over: “I was feeling unloved and unwanted,” he narrates. Then a “doggy angel” appears to him on New Year’s Day 2014, and tells him to make a wish and click his paws three times. Soon, a photographer takes his picture, and it appears in a local paper. Before long, a man and woman show up, and it’s love at first sight. In whimsical, sporadic diary entries, he shares his pleasures, adventures, and mild difficulties (including girlfriend troubles) during his seven years as a pampered dog. “May everyone have a soft place to land; a place safe and warm, and always welcoming,” he narrates. “A place where you are loved completely. I’m in my place—Mommy’s arms. There is no other earthly place like it.” Karl focuses a little too frequently on the dog’s culinary delights, as he’s treated to a wide variety of carefully curated meals, but this is, most of all, a story of love and devotion. Winters’ sweet story for dog lovers includes a multitude of entertainingly captioned photographs of the real-life Karl, the rescue pup who provided the inspiration for this short volume. Inevitably, a dog story has a measure of pathos, but the author handles sadder moments with gentleness—along with a bit of spiritual magic.

A charming and enjoyable animal tale.
create an incantatory sense of inevitability. In “Back of the Napkin,” the speaker delivers some climate math in a latter-day Domestacy Book: “Assuming seven years the balance / tips both poles collapse so / oceans fall like hungry ghosts / upon our grain and property / then figure fifty give or / take’s when nothing stays sun / surveilling what it lasers off / infernos roam the highland…” It’s a slightly antiquated, modernist sensibility, but it perfectly captures something of the very recent past—the late Trump/early Covid era. When a more individualized speaker appears in the book’s final section, the reader has a sense that it’s too late, that everything has already been lost. There’s a historian’s resignation to it all, a sense that the last man is scribbling down the final observations about a civilization on the brink of collapse: “Above damp sand trash whirls like restless souls. / Warm humid afterbreath floods ventricles / with suffocating ease. I think we’re done.”

An era-encapsulating collection of stylish, deftly composed poems.

WIND ON THE SOUNDS
A Novel Set in the Yacht Race Around Vancouver Island Canada
Wyatt, Barbara
FriesenPress (348 pp.)
$25.99 | $16.99 paper | April 3, 2023
9780998446646
9780998446653 paper

A woman braves the ocean—and her past—in a daring yacht race around Vancouver Island in Wyatt’s novel.

Rebecca Dunbar has always played it safe. But when Brac, a student in the evening history class she teaches, suggests she join the land crew for the Van Isle 360 yacht race around Vancouver Island, Rebecca dives right in. All she has to do is follow the boats in land, carrying extra sails and spare boat parts; no big deal. But just a few days before the race, a member of the boating crew has to drop out due to a medical emergency, and Rebecca is chosen as the sub despite never having sailed in her life. After a crash course in safety and boating basics, Rebecca finds herself part of the Gallivant crew, under the watchful eye of the legendary captain, Tar McClain. Thus begins one of the greatest adventures of Rebecca’s life. After a few hiccups, including the Gallivant’s heavy penalty incurred in the fourth leg of the race, Rebecca begins to discover her own strength as she fights the negativity ingrained in her from being raised in foster care: “The yacht race was not about Rebecca or the voices from her childhood. It was about what she had to give back to life and to others.” The author includes uncredited black-and-white illustrations to contextualize some of the more technical boating terms (such as jib) and demonstrate proper knot tying. The novel vacillates between quiet, personal moments, such as sailors lamenting their lack of dance skills, and big, adrenaline-fueled scenes, as when Rebecca falls overboard into frigid waters. While Wyatt shoehorns in some historical facts and landmarks that don’t quite mesh with the rest of the story (although it is interesting to learn about humpback whales and the Da’naxda’xw Nation), the narrative’s blend of personal transformation and physical challenges makes for an inspiring read.

A sweet and sentimental tale of finding your inner strength when and where you least expect it, with a rousing nautical twist.
INDIE

Books of the Month

THE FALL WILL PROBABLY KILL YOU!
Brian McMahon
A compelling political thriller with a loyal friendship and an intriguing love affair at its center.

THE BABEL APOCALYPSE
Vyvyan Evans
A perfect fusion of SF, thriller, and mystery—smart speculative fiction at its very best.

THE FALL WILL PROBABLY KILL YOU!
Brian McMahon

SOMETIMES WHEN I’M WORRIED
Deborah Serani
Illus. by Kyra Teis
An empowering, soothing aid for children combating worry.

HEALING VISIONS
Various
Photos by Meg Boscov
Sublime botanical visuals elicit haunting meditations on the evanescence of beauty.

DETECTIVE DEATH
D.Y. Ebrahimi
Indelible heroes electrify this sublimely bizarre detective story.

A PLAGUE OF MERCIES
Adam Pelzman
Brilliantly observant poetry that captures a dark moment in our recent history.
MICHAEL CAINE TO RELEASE DEBUT THRILLER

At the age of 90, Michael Caine is about to become a novelist. The actor will release his debut thriller, *Deadly Game*, later this year, the *Guardian* reports. Hodder & Stoughton will publish the novel in the U.K.; it will be released in the U.S. by Mobius, the press formerly known as Quercus.

The novel follows Harry Taylor, an English police detective trying to track down someone who stole a box of radioactive material from a dump. Taylor and his associates zero in on two suspects, an art dealer and an oligarch.

A description on the Amazon page for the book calls it “a compelling, fast-paced novel of international intrigue and twisting suspense from a legendary actor and British icon, who now proves himself to be a first-rate thriller writer.”

Caine is one of the U.K.’s most recognizable actors. He is known for his roles in *Alfie*, *Get Carter*, and *The Man Who Would Be King* and won Academy Awards for his performances in *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *The Cider House Rules*.

He is the author of three memoirs: *What It’s All About?*, *The Elephant to Hollywood*, and *Blowing the Bloody Doors Off: And Other Lessons in Life*.


*Deadly Game* is slated for publication in the U.K. on Nov. 23 and in the U.S. on Dec. 5.

DELAY OF ELIZABETH GILBERT NOVEL DRAWS REACTION

*Eat, Pray, Love* author Elizabeth Gilbert stunned the literary world last month by announcing that she would postpone the release of her next novel after objections from Ukrainian readers about the book’s Russian setting—and now reactions to the move are pouring in.

Gilbert’s planned novel, *The Snow Forest*, follows a Siberian family that opposes the Soviet government and has lived in isolation for more than four decades. It was scheduled for publication next February, but Gilbert said she would delay the novel, which has drawn hundreds of one-star reviews on the website GoodReads.

In a statement, Suzanne Nossel, the CEO of the literary nonprofit PEN America, wrote, “It is regrettable that Elizabeth Gilbert felt it necessary to delay the publication of a novel set in Russia. Ukrainians have suffered immeasurably, and Gilbert’s decision in the face of online outcry from her Ukrainian readers is well-intended. But the idea that, in wartime, creativity and artistic expression should be preemptively shut down to avoid somehow compounding harms caused by military aggression is wrongheaded.”

At the *Atlantic*, staff writer Franklin Foer concurred, writing, “By withdrawing the book, she has set a terrible precedent. In meekly complying with the angriest voices, she accepted their argument that setting a book in Russia is an act of collusion, even though that’s an entirely nonsensical argument. In effect, she’s allowing the irrational feelings of her readers to set the terms of acceptable discourse.”

Gilbert’s move was met with confusion on Twitter. Novelist Rebecca Makkai wrote, “So apparently: Wherever you set your novel, you’d better hope to hell that by publication date (usually about a year after you turned it in) that place isn’t up to bad things, or you are personally complicit in them.”

And writer Elisabeth Donnelly tweeted, “The goodreads bombing of Elizabeth Gilbert’s book is wild and I hate hate hate this precedent with her pulling her book.”

*Michael Schaub, a journalist and regular contributor to NPR, lives near Austin, Texas.*
“Our revolution set us back fifty years. It will take generations for all this to evolve. You only have one life. It's your duty to live it well.” So Marjane Satrapi's father, a loving and smart man, tells her at the Tehran airport, sending her off to exile from her homeland in one of the last panels of Persepolis, an artfully drawn graphic memoir that has inspired many other books of its kind, such as Eleanor Davis’ The Hard Tomorrow and Keum Suk Gendry-Kim’s Grass.

Satrapi's story opens in a time of torment, when Iran, long ago invaded by Arabs and Mongols and more recently economically colonized by Great Britain and the United States, is under the rule of an autocratic, aloof shah. Young Marjane's mother is photographed participating in an anti-government demonstration. When the image lands on the covers of magazines around the world, she dyes her hair, dons dark shades, lives in fear. In a few years both her parents will take roles in the revolution that overthrows the Pahlavi dynasty only for the country to fall under the control of a reactionary theocracy that demands that women wear the chador and isn't reluctant to beat and imprison anyone who doesn't comply.

Satrapi, by her own account, is an imp and uncommonly smart. At the age of 6, she decides that she is a prophet only to have the bearded mullahs deny the possibility because of her gender. Religion gives way to irreligion as the religious police become ever more oppressive; pride in being Iranian and heir to the ancient center-of-the-world metropolis that gives her book its name leads to disgust with a regime that throws away hundreds of thousands of young men in a pointless religious war with neighboring Iraq.

As a teenager, Satrapi leaves for Vienna, where she discovers all that has been forbidden: drugs, anarchist politics, feminism, rock music, sex. (And bad hair, since it's the early 1980s.) Living in a boardinghouse run by grim nuns, she discovers that “in every religion, you find the same extremists.” After years abroad, ill and homeless, she returns to her parents' home to discover just how extreme religious extremism can be and that there’s no room in a theocratic hell for the likes of her.

An omnibus edition of Persepolis, published for its 20th anniversary, comes at a time when, Satrapi writes in a new introduction, a few rays of hope can be seen on the horizon. “Why am I hopeful?” she asks, answering that for the first time in Iranian history a revolution is building, led by women, and “women and men are fighting together, hand in hand for their freedom.” A generation of Iranians too young to remember why things are as they are increasingly rejects “gender apartheid and patriarchal culture, which are the biggest enemies of democracy.” Those young people are fearless—and, Satrapi notes, the government appears to be cowed enough to concede at least a few points, adding, “a dictatorship that is ready to accept reform is no longer a dictatorship.”

We can only hope that she’s right. Meanwhile, Persepolis stands in defiant resistance alongside other classics of its kind, from A Vindication of the Rights of Woman to “Letter From a Birmingham Jail” and Memoirs of a Revolutionist. Twenty years on, it remains urgent, necessary reading.

Gregory McNamee is a contributing editor.
“FRIENDSHIP IS THE SPICE OF LIFE”

Voyage de Gourmet is a fun foodie adventure that explores powerful social and cultural themes, while displaying challenges young adults face in the social media-dominant world of today.

Summary: Layne Green and Jiang-Mi Pipper used to be the best of friends, drawn together by a love of cooking. Each a social media star in their own right (Jiang-Mi covers historical cooking and Layne fancier recipes), their friendship came to an abrupt end when Layne posted some embarrassing videos of Jiang-Mi on his channel. It’s been forever since the two have spoken.

When Jiang-Mi lands a coveted spot on the reality TV show Voyage de Gourmet—a globetrotting culinary competition—she has to take Layne as her partner. While traveling the globe and cooking their hearts out, the two must come together to best some of the top chefs in the world. Will this cooking competition relight the fire in their friendship—or will they find their recipe simply not worth the effort?

“Writing Voyage de Gourmet set me off on my own journey! I’ve always been fascinated by both food, and by characters, and this was a chance to truly combine the two, and the thing I most learned is that food—like relationships—is both universal, and very personal. There’s a whole world of culture out there. Go taste it!”

- Paul Tobin