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Ann Patchett
The novelist strikes literary gold again with Tom Lake

Also in the issue:
Susan Casey, Benjamin Dean, Noah Van Sciver, and Marlena Myles
How’s your summer reading going? We’ve hit the season’s midpoint, and after ticking off some weighty literary achievements (I devoured all 688 pages of Jonathan Eig’s top-shelf biography of Martin Luther King Jr.), I’m ready for less sprawling, more focused books. As far as nonfiction goes, a good memoir fits the bill—and fortunately August promises some excellent ones. Here are four I’m especially looking forward to; all received Kirkus stars.

**Waiting To Be Arrested at Night: A Uyghur Poet’s Memoir of China’s Genocide** by Tahir Hamut Izgil, trans. by Joshua L. Freeman (Penguin Press, Aug. 1): I know too little about the situation of China’s oppressed Uyghur minority, but as with many political issues, I expect that a personal story is the best entry point. Izgil is an acclaimed poet (his work has been published in the *Atlantic* and the *New York Review of Books*) who witnessed firsthand the government’s campaign against his people, eventually finding asylum in the United States in 2017. According to our reviewer, the “text is lyrical, heartfelt, and perfectly paced; the narrative unfolds with a slow, simmering burn.”

**The Girl in the Yellow Poncho** by Kristal Brent Zook (Duke Univ., Aug. 8): What did it mean to be a biracial girl in the 1970s, raised by a Black mother and grandmother and yet full of her privileged and destabilizing Manhattan upbringing, the dissociative disorder that nearly questions about her absent white father? Zook, a professor of journalism at Hofstra University and the author of *Color by Fox* (1999) and other titles about race in America, takes a deeply personal turn in this book of excavated memories (an episode of childhood sexual abuse by a neighbor looms large) and unflinching self-discovery. Our review calls it a “powerful memoir about a woman’s odyssey for connection, self-identity, and love.”

**Chinese Prodigal: A Memoir in Eight Arguments** by David Shih (Atlantic Monthly, Aug. 15): A favorite book from earlier this year was Ava Chin’s *Mott Street*, which traced the author’s complicated Chinese American family history across a century. This assemblage of autobiographical essays looks like the perfect companion, an examination of the author's experiences growing up in a Chinese immigrant family in Texas in the 1970s and ’80s and then navigating life as an Asian American—a relatively new-fangled identity, forged by the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin—into adulthood. Our critic calls it a “profoundly thoughtful, unflinchingly honest Asian American memoir.”

**Everything/Nothing/Someone** by Alice Carrière (Speigel & Grau, Aug. 29): In a debut memoir our critic calls “spellbinding,” the daughter of an acclaimed, extravagant artist (Jennifer Bartlett) and a magnetic German actor (Mathieu Carrière) reckons with her privileged and destabilizing Manhattan upbringing, the dissociative disorder that nearly consumed her in adolescence, the psychiatric hospitals that didn’t help, and the relationship with a recovering addict that did. The book renders “real and poignant her experience—both material and interior—in stunning prose,” according to Kirkus’ review.
The Kirkus Star is awarded to books of remarkable merit, as determined by the impartial editors of Kirkus.

In award-winning author **Bryan Washington**’s intimate second novel, food, family, and sex drive the difficult search for true connections. Read the review on p. 42.

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THE LIGHT OF SEVEN DAYS
Adams, River
Delphinium (432 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781953002259

In Adams’ first novel, a young Russian Jewish ballerina comes of age and immigrates to America. Dinah lived in Leningrad with her Babby after her parents’ deaths. As a young girl, she was invited to study at a famous ballet school, where she worked hard against difficult odds. Amid political turmoil, with a resurgence of Nazism culminating in a traumatic anti-Semitic experience, Dinah applied for refugee status to leave the city and life she once loved and immigrated to America, where she settled in Philadelphia. The novel begins with Dinah as an adult in Philadelphia confronting a critical crossroads in her life, finding comfort in a surprising encounter with Judaism. The reader, however, is as yet unaware of the complicated twists of religious and national identity that have brought her to this point. The story then turns back to her childhood in the Soviet Union two decades earlier and slowly builds up to that moment. As it spans decades and oceans, the novel asks questions of belonging and culture, inviting a reconsideration of Soviet, Soviet Jewish, and American Jewish identities through a recent immigrant’s eyes. Adams’ lyrical prose paints a lush, vivid, and imagistic portrait of the world through Dinah’s eyes. Careful aesthetic intention is evident in each sentence, and if the plot is sometimes slow-moving, it is worth it for the sake of the luminous prose. Rosy scenes of Dinah’s youth with her Babby sometimes read like a love letter to childhood, made all the more poignant by their juxtaposition with occasional flash-forwards that reveal, plainly and without fanfare, the eventual and often tragic fate of a minor character. Rich descriptions of Dinah’s early life in Leningrad, brimming with sensory details, remind us of the stakes of immigrating, making palpable all that she has lost in her pursuit of a “better life.”

A quiet, artfully rendered story of the beauty and difficulty of coming-of-age between cultures, in the shadow of history.
Quite a change for professional Network assassin Nena Knight: Despite her protests, her father packs her off on a complicated diplomatic mission.

The Tanzanian village of Latema is sitting on an enormously valuable tanzanite mine that American entrepreneur Frances Dubin—a textbook racist and sexist whose French wife, Bridget, delivered Nena to traffickers when she was a child—is itching to develop and expand. The national government, in the persons of Prime Minister Samwell Asogi and minister of mining Farida Odemba, wants a piece of the action. Councilman David Tegete is running point among Dubin, the government officials, and the miners, whose spokesperson is charismatic Robin Hood figure Judah Wasira. Ignoring Nena’s apt observation that “she wasn’t one for diplomacy or too much conversation,” Noble Knight assigns her and her crew—Eritrean American Network colleague Femi, high-level South African op Billy Thom, and tech specialist Evers, ne Everlasting Nevermind Chinoba—to make sure the negotiations go smoothly, do their best to prevent the villagers from being cheated, and cover Tegete’s back.

Readers of the first two installments of Nena’s adventures won’t be surprised when everything goes wrong: A suspicious accident makes the mine distinctly less marketable, several important parties are shot, a child is kidnapped, and the ransom demanded, apart from a paltry $2 million, is a one-sided mining deal that’s unfair to everyone but whomever hired the kidnappers. Luckily, Nena is now in her element, since every problem this new turn of events poses can be solved with condign violence, even though the story could well have ended before the last few twists.

Watch your back, Liam Neeson. This avenger is tough.
It’s August, time to grab hold of every last bit of summer you can. Ever since I spent the dog days of 2020 lying in a hammock reading James McBride’s *Deacon King Kong*, it’s been the epitome of a summer read for me, the one I’m always trying to replicate. I’m glad to report that McBride has delivered again with *The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store* (Riverhead, Aug. 8), a warm and exuberant introduction to Pottstown, Pennsylvania, where in the 1930s the Jewish and Black communities live together on Chicken Hill, united by Chona Ludlow’s grocery store and her husband Moshe’s dance hall, which hosts klezmer and jazz alike. “If it’s possible for America to have a poet laureate, why can’t James McBride be its storyteller-in-chief?” our starred review asks. He’s got my vote.

Ann Patchett’s *Tom Lake* (Harper, Aug. 1) is set over two summers: one during the Covid pandemic, when Lara and Joe Nelson and their three adult daughters are isolating on their Michigan cherry farm, picking fruit as fast as they can before it spoils on the tree; and one several decades earlier, when Lara was a young actress starring in a summer stock production of *Our Town*. Her daughters want to hear about that earlier summer, and particularly about Lara’s relationship with Peter Duke, who went on to become a huge movie star. Our starred review calls the book “poignant and reflective”, cementing Patchett’s stature as one of our finest novelists.” (Read our interview with Patchett on Page 14.)

Edan Lepucki returns with *Time’s Mouth* (Counterpoint, Aug. 1), her first novel since *Woman No. 17* (2017), and our starred review says that “in a word, [it’s] a trip, narrated by Time itself.” Sixteen-year-old Sharon discovers that she can revisit her own past, and she finds herself happy to be reliving her father’s funeral. She’s run away from her awful childhood in Connecticut and reinvented herself in California, where her unusual abilities turn her into a cult leader. “Lepucki is known for combining domestic realism with a magical worldview and/or SF-adjacent elements...and for evoking California in all its real, surreal, and unreal glory. She does it again,” according to our review. “This emotionally intense, wildly imaginative novel is both down-to-earth and out-to-lunch.”

Jamel Brinkley’s first book, the story collection *A Lucky Man*, was a National Book Award finalist in 2018. He’s returned with *Witness* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Aug. 1), and our starred review says that “after just two collections, Brinkley may already be a grand master of the short story.” Set in gentrifying New York City neighborhoods, the stories show people grappling with their lives and their changing circumstances. “In some ways, the plots of these stories, however engrossing, are less significant than their vivid physical details, graceful language, and acute observations of even the most bewildering of human behavior,” according to our review.

August is Sarah MacLean month in my home, and I’m looking forward to reading *Knockout* (Avon, Aug. 22), the third installment of MacLean’s Hell’s Belles series. The Belles are a group of women in Victorian London who are dedicated to helping people “whom society ignored,” particularly women who are being exploited by powerful men. Lady Imogen Lovelace is the group’s explosives expert, and she’s sure been lighting a fire under Detective Inspector Thomas Peck of Scotland Yard. “MacLean delivers big action, high heat, profound emotions, and a thoughtful critique of power and privilege in this dynamite tale sure to keep readers tearing through the pages,” according to our starred review. “This sensational romance completely lives up to its title.” And if you prefer audiobooks, Mary Jane Wells brings MacLean’s books brilliantly to life.

Laurie Muchnick is the fiction editor.
WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING FOR IS IN THE LIBRARY

Aoyama, Michiko
Trans. by Alison Watts
Hanover Square Press (320 pp.)
$21.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781335005625

A series of interlocking vignettes follow Tokyo residents who find themselves at the local library.

The Hatori Community House is located adjacent to an elementary school. It houses meeting rooms, a kitchen, and a library. Small but well stocked and boasting a full-time reference librarian, it is this room—and the librarian, Sayuri Komachi—around which each of the stories rotates. All of the library’s patrons are floundering, and a few words and a book recommendation from Ms. Komachi, as well as a little “bonus gift,” set them on the path to seeing more clearly what it is that they hold valuable. (Think a fictional Marie Kondo who doesn’t recommend paring down a life cluttered with fears but rather helps a person discover their own way forward.)

There is Tomoka, 21, who left her small country town for junior college in Tokyo and now works in the womenswear department of a local general store, feeling unfulfilled and adrift. Ryo, 35, works in the accounts department of a furniture manufacturer but has long dreamed of opening an antiques shop while being terrified of the uncertainty of such a venture. Hiroya, 30, unemployed and living with her mother, trained as an illustrator but has too much anxiety to find and keep a permanent job. Natsumi, 40, a former magazine editor, feels sidelined after returning early from maternity leave after having found herself unexpectedly pregnant at 37. And Masao, 65 and newly retired, finds himself adrift after 42 years of focusing solely on his work to the detriment of hobbies, social connections, and his relationships with his wife and child. Each character is wrought with care, as are their blossoming realizations about how their futures can develop despite their worries.

A delightful, gentle unfolding of stories that offer hope and joy to those who find themselves in a pivotal moment in life.

SHOOT THE MOON

Arsen, Isa
Putnam (336 pp.)
$27.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780593543887

Time is fractured in this story of a woman’s life as a child, college student, and 20—something set against the development of the atomic bomb and efforts to land the first man on the moon.

When Annie Fisk was a child growing up in New Mexico, she had a best friend, Diana, who would appear and disappear in her backyard. A number of small trinkets appeared and disappeared in the same way. As Annie grew up, she decided her friend must have been imaginary, and she never told her mother or her father—a physicist working on the atomic bomb at Los Alamos—about it. After her father’s death and her graduation from high school, Annie headed to college in San Antonio, where she met and fell in love with Evelyn, a fellow college student with dreams of being a painter. But, drawn by an imaginary thread, Annie leaves Evelyn after graduation to move to Houston, with the goal of working for NASA. And she does—starting as a secretary, and then moving into programming. What begins as a straightforward story veers into science fiction territory almost unexpectedly as Annie discovers a wormhole and begins to research and test the implications of that finding with a colleague. Explorations of love, loss, science, and the edges of the universe and what is—and is not—possible in the space-time continuum collide in this story; it’s reminiscent of the thoughtfulness, matter-of-fact science, and female strength of Connie Willis’ well-known time traveling series beginning with Doomsday Book (1992) as well as the world portrayed in Margot Lee Shetterly’s Hidden Figures (2016).

A delightful and surprising story of a woman drawn through life by curiosity.
A woman tangles with a cultlike spa and her own obsession with physical beauty in the wake of her mother’s death in this hypnotic tour de force.

Mirabelle Nour hasn’t lived with her mother in years, but she’s built a life that nevertheless feels like both a reflection and rejection of Noelle Des Jardins. She works in a dress shop, but not the one her mother co-owns in Southern California. She goes by Mira as an adult instead of Belle, the nickname Noelle always preferred. She puts a high premium on her appearance, just like her mother, but in a way Noelle struggles to understand: prioritizing elaborate skin care routines and collagen shakes over red lipstick and sun hats. When Noelle dies in a supposed accident, Mirabelle must come home to La Jolla and confront their disconnect. In the process, she finds her way to La Maison de Méduse, the home of the titular Rouge, which offers otherworldly spa treatments to clients in pursuit of their “Most Magnificent Self,” and uncovers long-suppressed childhood memories of a man who resembled Hollywood royalty. Awad approaches the increasingly well-trod ground of sinister wellness gurus with aplomb, creating an atmosphere of creeping discomfort and surreality right from the start. There is a lot to skewer about the beauty industry at large, but Awad smartly grounds her critique in the corrosive envy and misunderstandings that spring up between biracial Mirabelle and her white mother. Mirabelle is a singularly unreliable narrator, but readers who stick with her throughout bouts of confusion and peril will be richly rewarded.

“This is the stuff of fairy tales—red shoes, ballrooms, mirrors, and thorns but also sincerity, poignancy, and terror.
An obsession with Herman Melville emerges amid pandemic lockdown.

It’s not immediately clear why the book opens with the narrator’s husband saying to her: “Bon voyage.” She calls it an “edict inside a valediction,” suggesting that these are people who enjoy words and wordplay. And irony. For this is the time of the pandemic. The couple are academics stuck at home with their two daughters, but the narrator has embarked on a research project concerning Herman Melville. A desk-chair traveler, she roams through scholarship, criticism, fans’ notes, and ephemera, presenting facts, coincidences, and insights in mostly short, one-sentence paragraphs that form a kind of enchiridion of Melvilleana, reflecting an obsession with Herman not unlike Ahab’s with Moby. At the same time, the narrator sparingly provides glimpses of her home life and marriage, moments of domestic ease or of uncertainty, hints of past discord, like “the Bad Time.” The narrator’s Hermania should engage book lovers, as she collects and connects facts about Melville and references from his biographers and other writers – E.M. Forster, Walker Percy, William Gaddis, Marilynne Robinson, Lauren Groff et al. – in a way that points up the delights of literary trawling. Elizabeth Hardwick’s short life of Melville and his marriage are tied to Hardwick’s rocky union with Robert Lowell as well as Melville’s intense friendship with Hawthorne. The toll that creativity can take on partnerships is a pervasive theme. The authors themselves are husband and wife. Bachelder was a National Book Award finalist for his 2016 novel, The Throwback Special. Habel won the Iowa Poetry Prize for her 2020 collection, The Book of Jane. Some autobiographical points are evident, but what may be more revealing is the tonal consistency of this collaboration and the sense of creative pleasure that went into making it.

A remarkable, unusually rewarding work.

A fantastical journey reveals a wounded heart.

Making an assured debut, Binyam spins a haunting, often surreal tale that begins one morning when the narrator, a 55-year-old Black man, receives a telephone call telling him to board a flight. His suitcase has been packed; his jacket pocket holds a ticket to the African country from which he fled to the U.S. 26 years before and where he had been a political prisoner. Even before he lands, the trip seems ominous: His seatmate suddenly dies, and he winds up sitting beside a corpse for the entire flight. Not knowing why he is returning to his homeland, he surmises it is to see his brother, who has claimed to be ill for years and who may, or may not, be dying. Manipulative, selfish, and needy, the brother has repeatedly begged for money, property, or a visa. Nevertheless, with the goal of finding him, the narrator embarks on a convoluted, disorienting trek, encountering bizarre characters and assorted long-lost relatives. He witnesses the effects of poverty and greed, exploitation and insidious corruption: A railroad project abandoned by investors, for example, left viaducts that “cast the city in shadow, enticing its inhabitants to ascend staircases that led to nowhere.” He notes that traditional cultural practices have been abandoned, undermined by consumerism, TV, and the internet, “which forced people to forget their interests, habits, and historical way of life.” Hypocrisy is rampant: A man distributes mounds of dirty clothing donated by people in rich countries to assuage their consciences. A foreign aid worker, with no expertise to
improve the plight of farmers, professes that her aim is “to promote mutual understanding,” a phrase that the narrator finds incomprehensible. Reluctantly listening to uninvited confessions by random strangers, he finds himself reflecting on politics, loss, exile, the vicissitudes of human nature, and, ultimately, the meaning, or meaninglessness, of his own life.

A savvy, wildly imaginative narrative.

**PROPHET**
Blaché, Sin & Helen Macdonald
Grove (480 pp.)
$29.00  |  Aug. 8, 2023
9780802162021

An intriguing and deftly plotted (if overstuffed) hybrid of dystopian SF, medical thriller, and queer romance.

Chaotic, irreverent Sunil Rao, an ex–MI6 agent plucked from jail for the assignment, and cool, analytical, ultraorderly Adam Rubenstein, an American intelligence officer, have worked together before under extremely trying circumstances, and when a bizarre series of events unfolds at a U.S. air base in Britain, culminating in the sudden appearance in the countryside of a full-sized generic American diner, the two are reunited to investigate. Rao has the uncanny ability not only to detect lies, but to intuit the truth of anything said in his presence, and the buttoned-up Adam is the only person he can’t read, an inscrutability that makes their collaboration possible and creates odd-couple tension. Soon they land at a top-secret lab in Colorado, on the trail of a new pharmacologic substance called Prophet. The drug, which resembles mercury, has the effect of spontaneously creating comfort objects from the nostalgic memories of those exposed to it...but with horrendous side effects: The affected person disappears down the rabbit hole of the memory, plunging into a comalike state, sometimes even dying. Worse, those effects—aided by reckless experimentation—are intensifying; the protean substance keeps evolving unpredictably. Adam and Rao turn out to be perfectly suited to the investigation; after an initial exposure, the former is immune to Prophet (it even shrinks from him), and the latter proves able to extract and assimilate the drug.

The book’s first section feels a bit languid and talky, but the pace accelerates in the middle, and the long final action sequence, in which Rao, Adam, and a team of military contractors negotiate a bizarre, surreal, deadly desert landscape of plush toys (some of them animate), bicycles, arcade games, golden apple trees, and the like, is excellent: pulse-pounding, philosophically fascinating, even blackly funny. The romance plot feels both fresh (in who its principals are) and creaky (there’s too much slow-on-the-uptake and swelling music).

A crisply written, inventive, complicated brew of a novel, though one that could have used some boiling down.

**THE LONG FORM**
Briggs, Kate
Dorothy (400 pp.)
$16.95 paper  |  Oct. 3, 2023
9781948980210

A collection of nine stories dealing with male protagonists at various stages in life who experience events that leave either a psychological or physical memory scar.

“Brimming with resounding themes and notable characters.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“Incisive short stories about persevering as life scars us.”
—Booklist Reviews by Publishers Weekly, Editor’s Pick

“...a collection of stories about learning to live with past pain, whether that means keeping it close or letting it go.”
—Foreword Reviews

For All Inquiries, Please Visit wroyceadams.com

A single mother and her baby daughter move through the course of one day in this debut novel, which cleverly incorporates the woman’s past and present relationships and intellectual life.

Helen is trying to get her 6-week-old, Rose, to nap. She nearly succeeds, but a delivery wakes the baby up. It’s a used edition of Henry Fielding’s *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* that Helen ordered. Time expands and contracts, moves backward and into the minutiae of the present, as Helen and Rose’s day continues from here. In particular, Helen returns again and again to her close friendship with her ex-flatmate Rebba, considering how it has changed since Rose was born and Helen moved into her own apartment. She contemplates the act of caring for a child as described in *Tom Jones* and the nature of time as described by such thinkers as E.M. Forster, Gertrude
Stein, and D.W. Winnicott. For Helen, any definition of time is utterly exploded by the fact of her newborn baby’s complete lack of a sense of schedule. As Helen’s thoughts unspool as she tries to get Rose to sleep in their apartment, while out for a walk, and then back in their apartment again, the reader is given direct insight into a parent’s sense of space and time during this often Sisyphean activity. While some readers may be put off by the interweaving of Helen’s experiences with mini-essays on the everyday terms and concepts of her intellectual and domestic life, there are imaginative interjections, such as when Helen places herself in a Forster lecture with her baby, that should appeal to Virginia Woolf fans.

This don’t-miss debut captures the details of early parenthood while engaging with ideas about time and caregiving.

Danger abounds in the 20th ocean adventure in Cussler’s NUMA Files series. Kurt Austin and Joe Zavala “find trouble the way a prize bloodhound finds a scent,” and this time they find it in the seas near Nassau. There, the National Underwater and Marine Agency training ship Edison responds to a mayday call from the MV Heron saying that they’re under attack. The ship at first appears to be empty, but once the rescuers explore inside, a group of crazed men attacks them. The crazies are victims of Martin Colon, formerly of Cuban Intelligence and now VP of Ostrom Airship Corporation. The guy’s a bad dude with a serious grudge against the United States. He and his henchmen have injected the Heron’s crew with tiny microchips, electromagnetic sensors half the size of an average grain of pollen. If you get jabbed with this, your brain imprints and blindly obeys the first voice you hear. And if you’re told to kill your friends, you’ll kill them if you can. So now that Colon has successfully tested the weapon on individuals, he’s ready to go big time. And what better device for spreading the dust-sized chips in the billions than to disperse them from his luxury airship the Condor? It’s as big as an ocean liner and lifts with helium, so no fair comparing it to the hydrogen-hindered Hindenburg. Imagine a craft larger than the Empire State Building that lands “as soft as a feather.” Indeed, it’s “a world-class ocean liner plowing the skies.” NUMA sends people to inspect the Condor on the pretext that they might want to purchase a similar airship. To put it mildly, exciting action ensues. Can the NUMA crew head off a psyops attack that would cause mass madness and chaos? Though readers can guess the answer, they’ll enjoy seeing the heroes at work in this fast-moving yarn.

A worthy addition to an entertaining series.

**THE WATERS**
Campbell, Bonnie Jo
Norton (400 pp.)
$30.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780393248432

Familial and communal conflicts roil a swampy corner of Michigan.

A fairy-tale atmosphere coexists with harsh realities from the opening sentence: “Once upon a time M’sauga Island was the place where desperate mothers abandoned baby girls and where young women went seeking to prevent babies altogether.” The island is home to elderly Hermine “Herself” Zook, who fabricates medicines from wild plants that populate the wetlands separating the island from the town of Whiteheart, and her 11-year-old granddaughter, Donkey. The girl is nicknamed for the animal milk that nourished her as an infant after her mother, Rose Thorn, left her with Hermine. Rose was raped by Titus Clay Sr., the
men with the Zook women, but the new arrival does not solve everyone's problems. Campbell's thoughtfully rendered characters find life rewarding and bewildering in equal measures.

Atmospheric, well written, and generally satisfying despite some overly familiar elements.

THE DEVIL OF THE PROVINCES

Cárdenas, Juan
Trans. by Lizzie Davis
Coffee House (376 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
9781566896771

A biologist returns to his Colombian hometown after 15 years abroad and tum- bles into a mystery in this metaphysical crime novel.

Cárdenas' unnamed protagonist returns home to his mother licking his wounds. He's recently divorced, and his research fund- ing has evaporated. He's taken a job, apparently the only one he can find, as a substitute teacher at an all-girls boarding school. His only friend is his pot dealer. But a chance encounter with an old acquaintance leads him to reconsider the unsolved murder of his brother, a closeted gay man with political aspirations. This is a detective novel of sorts, yet it's not a spoiler to say it won't end in a Scooby Doo–like reveal. There is a web, but it may not have a cen- ter. W as the narrator's brother killed by unscrupulous palm oil executives or a jealous lover? And does the murder have anything to do with the Knight of Faith, a church "for the true believers, with a parking lot for UFOs and everything"? Cárdenas generates queasy intrigue from something as strange as the birth of a devil child and as mundane as a text message that has been read but not replied to. He can find poetry in anything, like a flicked joint that becomes "the last leg of the smoking insect, a jot of almost-ash that died in the wet grass without putting up a fight, swathed in the song of a thousand frogs." This is Cárdenas' second novel to be translated into English, after Ornamental, which was a final- ist for the 2021 PEN Translation Award, and more translations are eagerly anticipated.

Briskly paced, thoughtful, and truly weird: a whodunit that takes on the very idea of blame.

THE VICAR

Chambers, A.J.
Blackstone (300 pp.)
$26.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9798200918102

Battling an imminent threat rejuvenates a veteran MI5 agent.

Chambers' peripatetic debut thriller runs for a while on two parallel tracks nearly 30 years apart. In 1989, novice MI5 agent Terry Nolan works undercover in
A boozzy, neon spiral of sex, drugs, rock and roll, colorful language, explicit content and poor taste.

“A gritty rock story with an endearing, complicated narrator.”
—Kirkus Reviews for Enfant Terrible: Showstopper

“In this engaging, well-crafted sequel, Damen’s narrative voice is distinct, raw, and cynical, just right for a 30-year-old rock star trying to get back on top.”
—Kirkus Reviews for Enfant Terrible: Headliner

“The author's subversive sense of humor captures the essence of a man struggling to raise himself out of obscurity. A colorful cast of characters... make for a wacky, erratic tale.”
—BookLife Review for Enfant Terrible: Headliner
When Ann Patchett told her friend Tom Hanks (yes, that Tom Hanks) she was writing a book that takes place in a cherry orchard, he said, “Tell me there are three sisters!” There are indeed three sisters in Tom Lake, (Harper, Aug. 1), and quotations from The Cherry Orchard are brandished in a central scene. But Chekhov’s symbol of nature destroyed by carelessness and greed is transformed in Patchett’s tender novel into a place of beauty and comfort, sustained by a family’s determination to maintain their small farm against the odds. The family is isolated at home in Michigan by the pandemic in the summer of 2020, and Lara’s recollections mingle with glimpses of their grueling labor harvesting cherries as she tries to convey to her daughters why she walked away from what seems to them a glittering life.

“I picked acting as a profession,” Patchett says, “because it’s impossible for anyone to believe that someone who was having success in acting would say, ‘You know what? I did it, and it was fun, but I’m not really good at it and I don’t want to do this with my life.’ In the same way as her daughters are saying, ‘Anybody would want to be with Peter Duke!’ what she’s saying is, ‘No, you’ve got to pick. Just because everybody thinks you want to be an actress and that being with Peter Duke is the best thing in the world, that’s not the case.’ ”

We see how demanding Duke is in Lara’s account of their affair and also through his relationship with his brother, Sebastian, the steady support his turbulent sibling relies on. Sebastian was very nearly the novel’s narrator, Patchett reveals. “I could not figure out until the very last minute whether I wanted to write this book from Lara’s point of view or Sebastian’s. Did I want to write the story of Sebastian’s life with Duke or Lara’s summer with Duke? They’re completely different books, one isn’t right and one isn’t better, but I had to make up my mind. The reason I picked Lara is that The Dutch House had a male first-person narrator, and I thought I shouldn’t do that twice.”

The novel she decided to write draws a sharp contrast between charismatic, crazy Duke and Lara’s gentle, supportive husband, Joe. “A huge thing I was thinking about,” Patchett comments, “is that the kind of love I had in my 20s is not the kind of love I would want at 59. I’m much happier with my reliable, loving husband than I was with some of the roller-coaster boyfriends I had when I was young. But how do you explain that to someone young? I think that when Lara gets to really unpack-
ing it, she has revelations—you look back on these relationships and you think, ‘Wow, that really wasn’t very good for me!’ At the time you think, ‘He’s so brilliant, I am unworthy.’ You look back and think, ‘Actually, no: I wasn’t unworthy!’”

Lara’s reevaluation of her past while she’s recounting it to her daughters was part of the appeal in writing *Tom Lake*, Patchett says. “I am always interested in the fact that nobody tells the same story to different people. We all tailor our experience to the listener, and we change the story depending on who we’re telling it to. Having that fact of human nature be central to the novel was an interesting thing to play with. At this point, having written many novels, it’s important to come up with something that I think, ‘All right, I haven’t done this before, this is engaging and a challenge.’”

An additional benefit of a long track record, she says with a laugh, is that “having dedicated books to every member of my family and every person I felt an obligation to, I’ve been able to dedicate the last three books to friends.” *Tom Lake* is dedicated to children’s book author Kate DiCamillo, “who held the lantern high.”

“Kate was and is a really steadfast friend,” Patchett explains. “She would send me an email every morning saying, ‘I’m going down to the rabbit hole to work, and you’re off to the cherry orchard.’ Then she would email later and say, ‘Are you still out there in the trees? It’s late, I’m out here holding the lantern, come out of the trees.’ She felt like a very big part of the working process.”

Another important source of support was Patchett’s friend Erin Whiting. “She grew up in Michigan on a cherry orchard, went to Interlochen, the arts school there, then started a professional theater company in Traverse City. A big reason I set the book in Michigan—I’m no fool—is that I knew I would have Erin to lean on. I went up there several times, but really it was me asking, ‘OK, what kind of cherries? What would the schedule for a summer theater be?’ That was so helpful.”

In a scene that stands at the emotional center of *Tom Lake*, Lara tells her daughters about visiting Joe’s family farm for the first time, with Duke and their fellow actor Pallas, on a day off from the nearby summer-stock theater where they are performing *Our Town* and Joe is the director. “It’s the tipping point in the book,” notes Patchett. “Duke and Pallas both say, ‘When I was a kid, I dreamed I’d be in this house and this life.’ Lara transitions into her own future on that day. She will leave acting and go to the farm, and Duke won’t even though he desperately wants that life too. That’s what she’s say-
Belfast, on the trail of IRA terrorist Kieran Martin. In 2018, Terry drinks too much and lives on a Catalina sloop moored in Boston Harbor. He’s still with MI5 and still in pursuit of the IRA, but in a managerial position in which he’s known as “the Vicar.” Operating on the East Coast of the U.S., the current IRA is less political and more criminal: “the Irish Mafia.” After a vodka-fueled sleep, 2018 Terry awakens to two armed thugs, dispatching both with panache. The less savvy 1989 Terry walks out of a pub and into an ambush, landing in a London hospital. Both narratives share a laconic edge and a focus on action, reminiscent of Ian Fleming’s James Bond, right down to the hero’s wry stoicism. The contrast between the eager young Terry and the jaded elder Terry adds pathos. As the deft killing of the two would-be assassins proves, the elder Terry may have lost his innocence but not his skill set. It’s good that Chambers gives Terry a chance to shake off the rust and regain his dedication, for the deadly duo are just the tip of an annihilating iceberg. Terry’s trail takes him all over the East Coast, to much of England, and through a platoon of henchmen. Enlivening the action is the requisite female companion, Kristen Burris, and a villainous femme fatale, An Dailtín, Gaelic for “The Terror.”

A formulaic but appealing espionage caper strongly reminiscent of vintage spy fiction.

RAVAGE & SON
Charyn, Jerome
Bellevue Literary Press (288 pp.)
$17.99 paper | Aug. 22, 2023
9781954276192

A bleak tale of murder, corruption, and antisemitism in pre–World War I Manhattan.

Bosch’s The Garden of Earthly Delights has nothing on Charyn’s Lower East Side, described by one character as home to “every kind of vermin.” Abraham Cahan, muckraking editor of the Jewish Daily Forward, has no shortage of targets, including all-powerful real estate baron Lionel Ravage, “the fallen angel among Jewish aristocrats,” who mistreats and abuses immigrants in equal measure. Having spawned countless illegitimate children, Ravage has little to do with any of them, including his conflicted son Ben, whom Cahan takes under his wing and gets into Harvard Law School. Shrugging off his law degree, Ben becomes an investigator for the Kehilla, a neighborhood watch-type group funded by wealthy Jews. Their aim is to stop rampant assaults on young Jewish women, one of whom is pulled out of the East River “like a broken mermaid.” Ben will stop at nothing to find the culprit, including getting the stuffing kicked out of him. Painful revelations await. Stuffed, à la Ragtime, with real-life celebrities including Henry James (whose “sympathies didn’t extend to the Jewish quarter” on Ellis Island), the novel doesn’t always justify their presence. There are enjoyable touches of magic realism, including an enforcer whose threatening presence is announced by canaries flitting around his too-small derby, but descriptions and digressions can make for slow reading. A bold effort, but following Charyn’s brilliant Sergeant Salinger (2021) and enjoyable Big Red (2022), a disappointment.

One of Charyn’s less-rewarding forays into historical fiction.

THE GOLDEN GATE
Chua, Amy
Minotaur (384 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781250903600

An old-fashioned detective novel set in 1940s San Francisco, with an injection of contemporary concerns.

In her fiction debut, Chua, best known for Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother (2011) and several books about immigration and politics, pays tribute to the mystery novels...
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she loved growing up, incorporating extensive research on topics ranging from the architecture of San Francisco to the Chinese Exclusion Act to the biographies of Wendell Wilkie and Madame Chiang Kai-Shek. When presidential hopeful Walter Wilkinson is found shot dead with his pants down in his room at the Claremont Hotel, the prime suspects are three young women: Isabella Stafford and her cousins, Nicole and Cassie Bainbridge. Unfortunately, the Mexican housekeeper who saw one of them coming out of Wilkinson’s room can’t tell one blond white girl from another. On the case is hard-boiled homicide detective Al Sullivan, originally Alejo Gutiérrez, a member of the Berkeley police force who is half Mexican, half Nebraskan, and part Jewish on his Mexican side, who’s been passing as white for many years. Among the many complications he faces in his investigation is the fact that Isabella’s 7-year-old sister, Iris, died at the Claremont 10 years earlier under circumstances that remain unclear. The novel opens with the deposition of the girls’ grandmother, Genevieve Bainbridge, who controls the fortune to which they are heir. She’s been told that if she doesn’t give up the killer, all three will take the rap—and while she won’t do that, she has plenty to reveal, and her testimony is parcelled out in sections throughout the book. The many threads of the plot as well as the author’s concerns about race, class, and other matters come together in the cleverly imagined character and voice of her detective.

Satisfyingly twisty, highly educational, and lots of fun.

PENANCE
Clark, Eliza
Harper/HarperCollins (336 pp.)
$30.00 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780063327856

Three girls in a failing seaside town brutally murder a classmate in this (fictional) true-crime exposé.

True crime has become such a ubiquitous genre over the last 10 years—through podcasts, television, and nonfiction books—that it’s now fodder for fiction. Clark, who was recently named to the Best of Young British Novelists by Granta, approaches the genre with both a critical eye and an instinct for the lurid. The novel is framed as a nonfiction account of the brutal murder of a teenage girl by three of her classmates, written by disgraced tabloid reporter Alec Z. Carelli, who has unethically tinkered with his material. Joan Wilson, the victim of the crime, was tortured, assumed dead, and then set on fire, although she survived long enough to seek out help. Carelli investigates Joan’s life as well as the lives and actions of each of the three perpetrators: posh, bratty Angelica Stirling-Stewart; Joan’s old friend Violet Hubbard; and disturbed Dolly Hart, who’s obsessed with a hunky school shooter. Interspersed with Carelli’s reporting are podcast transcripts, fan fiction and online forum excerpts, and historical background about the bleak northern English town where the murder took place. Clark isn’t afraid to write about gruesome violence or bullying, and she tries to critique our culture’s fixation on true crime. Unfortunately, the execution of this long, often tedious novel is not strong enough to support its ideas; instead, it reads like just another grisly story of a murdered girl. Great investigative nonfiction authors write novelistic prose, while Clark’s is clunky by comparison. The structure of her novel is similarly uninspiring, moving from one long interview to the next with little analysis. This book is not believable as a work of investigative nonfiction, which renders its conceit annoying rather than provocative.

An ambitious sophomore attempt bites off more than it can chew.
Clowes' latest graphic novel weaves nine interrelated stories into a tale of curiosity, corruption, and humanity's addiction to significance.

The book opens with a two-page spread of the roiling waters, cratered land, and fiery skies of our primordial planet, then runs through snapshots of history: single-cell organisms, ancient Egyptians, the plague, Shakespeare, Hitler, *The Beverly Hillbillies*. It's an ambitious opening that the book lives up to through its intersecting narratives of Vietnam soldiers, counterculture, horror, ambition, control, and mommy issues—all spinning around the orbit of a woman named Monica and her quest for her origins. Initially we meet Monica's mother, Penny, as an art student in the 1960s, seduced away from her sedate life plans by the ideas of her new bohemian lover and his friends. As Penny delves deeper into free love and artistic pursuits, she soon finds herself a mother to young Monica and the subject of Monica's observations as Penny cycles through men, eventually abandoning Monica to follow her own path—perhaps into the clutches of a desert-dwelling cult. After a macabre interlude about a young man's return to his boyhood home only to find the town under a sinister influence, we catch up with Monica as an adult, dealing with her own loss and encounter with the uncanny. In pursuit of her long-gone mother, Monica peels back opulent and fantastical layers of her own life until she finds the haunting core. Clowes strikes an irresistible balance of cultural criticism, philosophy, and pulp. The pacing and interconnection of the stories tease the reader along as narration and dialogue pop with insight and humor. Clowes' art retains a classic comics aesthetic while delivering a thoroughly modern vibe.

*A timeless nugget of polished pulp.*
“A provocative and profound meditation on art and life in a world of terror.”

THE POLE

J. M. Coetzee
Liveright/Norton (176 pp.)
$26.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
978132493882

A droll novel that skips lightly across serious matters—art and death and love.

There’s a playfulness from the outset of this slim work by the Nobel Prize-winning Coetzee. “The woman is the first to give him trouble, followed soon afterwards by the man,” it begins. The woman, we soon learn, is Beatriz, a board member of the music series that has brought the man to Barcelona. The man is the title character, a Polish pianist “whose name has so many w’s and z’s in it that no one on the board even tries to pronounce it—they refer to him simply as ‘the Pole.’” Which leaves “him,” and that would be the novelist, who presents himself as not creating these two characters but chronicling them, perhaps channeling them, as if they have hearts of their own. The pianist is known for his idiosyncratic readings of his countryman Chopin, though he falls well short of a virtuoso’s renown. Just as he is not an extraordinary musician, she is not an extraordinary listener. She seems to be doing her civic duty, as some women of a certain age and income might. She will soon be turning 50; he’s almost a quarter-century older. “Surely, at his age, he will not expect sex,” she thinks, even before the beatrice fixation, and his obsession with her changes his life.

Coetzee seems to be having some compassionate fun, and so will the reader.

TREMOR

Cole Teju
Random House (256 pp.)
$28.00 | Oct. 17, 2023
97803853997118

Cole’s first novel in 12 years provides a master class in the morality of art as an Ivy League professor revisits his Nigerian homeland and confronts his doubleness.

Like his protagonist, Tunde, the novelist is a Harvard professor, raised in Lagos, a photographer and writer and cultural critic with a seemingly omnivorous appetite for artistic expression. (They even share an occasional vision problem in one eye.) But this thematically multilayered novel has much higher ambitions than fictionalized memoir. It’s a novel of ideas but also of voices, of different perspectives claiming the first-person narrative.

The precision of detail stresses the importance of seeing, but identity, perspective, and context determine who is seeing what. Tunde experiences push back over what and whom he shoots in his photos. He raises questions in the classroom and public lectures about who determines the value of a work and who profits from it, as he lives within a realm of white privilege that plunder and dehumanizes so much of the globe. “After nearly three decades in the U.S. his sympathies have been tutored in certain directions,” Cole writes. “He learned early that a ‘terrible tragedy’ meant the victims were white.” Tensions in Tunde’s marriage to a woman of Japanese descent send him to revisit Lagos, which he sees with fresh eyes. Always looming is the possibility in the title, the tremor of an earthquake, another natural disaster, or a medical diagnosis. He lives in a world where everything seemingly solid shifts but where the richness of Coltrane and Calvino, Bergman and Monk not only persists but illuminates.

“A provocative and profound meditation on art and life in a world of terror.”

PLAYING THE WITCH CARD

KJ Dell’Antonia
Putnam (352 pp.)
$37.00 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
9780593713792

Three generations of witches summon their powers from tarot cards or, in some cases, cookies.

With just five days to go before Halloween, Flair Hardwicke couldn’t feel less enthusiastic about the holiday spirit oozing out of every inhabitant of Rattleboro, Kansas. If anything, Flair is counting the days until Nov, “the least-witchy day of the year” and the day when her magical heritage would remain blissfully hidden. Like her mother and grandmother before her, Flair has the ability to perform magic by reading a particular deck of tarot cards. Hand-painted by a Hardwicke ancestor and “fused with all the magic of generations of witches,” these cards answer only to Flair. She hasn’t seen the deck in almost 30 years, not since she stole them and hid them from her tarot-obsessed mother and gave up magic for good. But since her grandmother Marie’s recent passing, Flair and her 13-year-old daughter, Lucie, have returned to Rattleboro in hopes of a new beginning, one without her cheating ex, David. Lucie would rather be anywhere than her mother’s hometown, but to Flair, Rattleboro looks just the way she left it, although she can’t help but notice a strange undercurrent running through town. One night, she unconsciously bakes a batch of Hardwicke tarot card cookies, and Rattleboro’s Halloween festival director Renee Oakes can’t seem to stop giving her threatening stares. Renee’s mother, Loretta, might even know the Hardwicke family secret, though her son (and Flair’s high school fling), Jude, appears none the wiser. Just when these spooky happenings begin to feel more sinister, Flair’s mother, Cynthia, turns up with a bewitched
David in tow...and the stash of hidden cards. Dell’Antonia’s third novel is full of mysterious and eerie plot twists, and most chapters end with a low-stakes cliffhanger. However, Flair’s unwillingness to listen to anyone creates too many frustrating moments of miscommunication and situations that could have been avoided, and Renee’s constant irritation with her might echo the reader’s own sentiments.

A complex tale about motherhood and witchcraft with an exasperating protagonist.
More important, will it answer the question of why he keeps seeing his lost Sophia in crowds?

Readers frustrated by the Swiss-cheese plot holes aren’t the target of Donellan’s clever, idiosyncratic writing.

MARY AND THE BIRTH OF FRANKENSTEIN
Eekhout, Anne
Trans. by Laura Watkinson
HarperVia (384 pp.)
$30.00 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780063256743

A moody and evocative reveal of the backstory (behind the backstory) of Mary Shelley’s masterpiece, Frankenstein. Shelley’s writing of the now-classic gothic novel—featuring a scientist whose experiments unwittingly create a monstrous life form—occurred, remarkably, while she was still a teenager. Eekhout explores the 18-year-old author’s actions during the summer of 1816, when she and Percy Bysshe Shelley, her poet husband, traveled to Switzerland with a coterie of fellow authors and family members. Spurred to write a ghost story by an impromptu contest among members of the group (which also included Lord Byron) to enliven the dreary and stormy summer, Shelley began the work that is often considered the first English-language science-fiction novel. Intertwoven with the story of the summer of 1816 are Shelley’s imagined recollections of time spent in 1812 with family acquaintances in Dundee, Scotland, during a sojourn to restore her ailing health. There, the imaginative and sensitive girl forms an intimate friendship with Isabella Baxter, another restive and motherless teen, and the two embark on a monthslong intense and meritorious relationship. Encouraged by the Baxter family’s love of storytelling, and with access to more sources of creepy fables, folklore, and myth than she enjoyed at home in London, Shelley entertains (with the companionship and encouragement of Isabella) more and more of her fervid imaginings. The girls’ fever dream of a summer together is marked by sexual longing and exploration as well as Mary’s growing awareness of the roles of reality and unreality in narrative. Translated from the Dutch by Watkinson, this novel includes a translator’s note with a nod to the role of imagination in filling the gaps left by history books.

Creative confirmation of Shelley’s position as the mother of all goth girls.

and also provide a view of reservation life and traditions. In “The Casket in the Backseat,” a man gets a ride from a hearse and discovers his grandfather’s spirit is trapped in the casket. In “Snow Bath Season,” a dead mother speaks to her daughter through Amazon’s Alexa. In the title story, a teen witnesses the disappearance of Miss Northwestern Arizona. These ingenious tales are rangy in their scope and form. “Under the Porchway” is notable for the way it interweaves plot with instructions for how to butcher a sheep. The author’s sharp prose is amplified by extraordinary similes such as “roots clenched into the earth like wiry brown fists” and “veins clung in clusters beneath the skin of their hands like turquoise squash blossoms.” Not only are the metaphors and similes surprising, but the turns within each story are as well. Just when it feels like a plot might move into a familiar trope, it upends itself in the best way. The stories don’t provide tidy resolutions, but they reveal essential truths about the continued effects of colonization on Indigenous people, including the lack of resources on tribal lands, ongoing mental health and substance abuse crises, violence against women, and Indigenous women going missing.

**Propulsive and complex, this is a gorgeously written debut.**

**RUMORS OF HER DEATH**
*Donellan, J.M.*
Poisoned Pen (304 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
9781728273112

After a highly classified courier identity-hops in an effort to forget a lost love, a new neighbor may force him back to reality or send him away forever.

American Eric Blair wakes up in an Australian hospital bed pumped with pain meds, nothing unusual in his life or line of work as a discreet courier for high-stakes packages containing, well, he knows not to ask. With no time to waste before he must report to Saklas, his impatient current boss, that he lost the package after being hit by a car, he hops out of bed and onto his hog, ditching his latest fake ID, and poor, Eric Blair is gone. Just another day in the life of Archie Leach, or whoever he is this week. He’s changed identities so many times it barely registers, still trying to run away from the night many years ago when he watched Sophia, his great love, end her life to prove to him that she could commit to something. Since then, Leach has been operating on autopilot, making money to exist without really living. The loss of Saklas’ package activates further plot movement when Leach realizes that Saklas not only wants $2 million to make up for the missing package, in unreasonably large installments, but that he’s also going to take over Leach’s apartment as an ad hoc yoga studio as well as a morgue and storage facility for blood and urine. If Leach’s life weren’t bizarre enough, he’s befriended by new neighbor Nisha Mukherjee and her dog, Dante, neither of them put off by his brusque demeanor. Will Nisha’s connection to the Orrery, a temple of hedonism, help Leach sort out his life?
“A descent into the conspiracy hellhole of Hollywood in the early 1960s.”

THE ENCHANTERS

Ellroy, James
Knopf (448 pp.)
$29.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780593320440

A descent into the conspiracy hellhole of Hollywood in the early 1960s.

Within the dirty fun of Ellroy’s fiction, all sorts of lines continue to blur. There is little distinction between characters taken from so-called real life and inventions from the novelist’s fevered imagination. Marilyn Monroe, JFK, Jimmy Hoffa, and J. Edgar Hoover were all real people, of course, before they became Ellroy characters. So was protagonist Freddy Otash, the rogue cop who subsequently dug up dirt on celebrities for the scandal-sheet Confidential, though he has become better known as a figure in Ellroy’s fiction.

As for the lines between good and bad and innocent and guilty, they simply don’t exist here. The cops are as crooked as the crooks, maybe more so, and guilt is a matter of degree. Freddy has been hired by Jimmy Hoffa to expose scandal among the Kennedys in retaliation for Robert Kennedy’s targeting of the Teamsters. Attorney General RFK hires Otash away to besmirch the reputation of Marilyn Monroe and distance her from the Kennedys. Monroe’s death proves pivotal—but was it an accident, suicide, or murder? And then there’s the Sex Creep, whose rampages among a half-dozen or so lonely divorcées bearing some resemblance to Monroe have gone tabloid viral, largely due to Freddy (who is also sleeping with a Kennedy, sister Pat, married to the despicable Peter Lawford). A tireless investigator who operates without scruples, Freddy discovers how deeply implicated he might be within a web of crime and murder. The plot embeds Monroe in porn, prostitution, pedophilia, and political protest as well as a scheme to blackmail the president into divorcing Jackie and making Marilyn first lady. There are so many layers of sleaze that it can be tough to keep things straight as the breakneck momentum accelerates.

The climax might well leave the reader as breathless as Ellroy’s prose, and in need of a good shower.
SAVING EMMA
Eskens, Allen
Mulholland Books/Little, Brown (336 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780316566353

Boady Sanden, former director of the Innocence Project, is persuaded to reopen a case that was closed four years ago. And the clock is ticking.

Ruth Matthews is convinced both that her brother, Elijah, is a prophet who talks with God and that he didn’t kill Jalen Bale, the pastor bashed to death while Elijah was a janitor at the Church of the New Hope, even though he’s been locked in a mental hospital since having been found not guilty by reason of insanity. The evidence against Elijah was overwhelming, but the real reason Boady doesn’t want the job is that Elijah’s attorney was Ben Pruitt, Boady’s law partner and best friend, who killed his wife, nearly got away with it, and then, when Boady confronted him with proof of his guilt, committed suicide by cop in Boady’s study as his partner looked on. The good news is that Boady almost immediately starts to find holes in the case against Elijah, who’s more interested in oracular prophecies than answering simple questions. The bad news is that Emma Pruitt, the daughter Boady and his wife, Dee, took in as a ward four years ago without telling her how her brother, Elijah, is a prophet who talks with God and her own fractured family: a dead mother, an alcoholic father, and a cold husband. They’re both drawn into the orbit of wood-working teacher Tadhg Foley, who proposes that an Irish boat, a currach, could satisfy Boady’s desire for perpetual motion and keep him out of the sway of some of the more toxic boys. Feeney tracks both Jamie and Tess, and the sections following Jamie are the stronger. She uses a stream-of-consciousness first-person narration and poetic syntax to capture the boy (“I would like that solitude for this boat, / so / I resisted their invitation / but Mr Foley passed no notice”). Tess’ sections, written in a more traditional style, seem flat by comparison. The novel is an intensive probe of contemporary Irish society; the island’s culture of shame and silence is picked apart (one minor character exits with a defeated repetition of “We don’t talk about it”), as is the continuing influence of the Catholic Church. But the characters find meaning in the currach and as well in the concept of meitheal, or communal effort. Jamie’s conflict is to reconcile the haphazard construction of the boat and the perfect machine he has imagined. He must leave his comfort zone, just as Tess must leave the safe prison of her marriage.

Feeney has insights into boyhood and, more importantly, has written a great boy to help her tell them.

HOW TO BUILD A BOAT
Feeney, Elaine
Biblioasis (304 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Oct. 3, 2023
9781982627522

Two teachers and a teenage boy in western Ireland go through painful changes and, yes, learn to build a boat. Math-obsessed teenager Jamie O’Neill is raised by a single father after his mother died during childbirth. Literal-minded and sensitive, he keeps himself secure by making lists and working on his notes for a perpetual motion machine. So when he starts at a new school, run by the conservative Father Faulks and full of bullies, he’s soon spending most of his time in the classroom of Tess Mahon, a kind English teacher with her own fractured family: a dead mother, an alcoholic father, and a cold husband. They’re both drawn into the orbit of wood-working teacher Tadhg Foley, who proposes that an Irish boat, a currach, could satisfy Jamie’s desire for perpetual motion and keep him out of the sway of some of the more toxic boys. Feeney tracks both Jamie and Tess, and the sections following Jamie are the stronger. She uses a stream-of-consciousness first-person narration and poetic syntax to capture the boy (“I would like that solitude for this boat, / so / I resisted their invitation / but Mr Foley passed no notice”). Tess’ sections, written in a more traditional style, seem flat by comparison. The novel is an intensive probe of contemporary Irish society; the island’s culture of shame and silence is picked apart (one minor character exits with a defeated repetition of “We don’t talk about it”), as is the continuing influence of the Catholic Church. But the characters find meaning in the currach and as well in the concept of meitheal, or communal effort. Jamie’s conflict is to reconcile the haphazard construction of the boat and the perfect machine he has imagined. He must leave his comfort zone, just as Tess must leave the safe prison of her marriage.

Feeney has insights into boyhood and, more importantly, has written a great boy to help her tell them.

SHADOWHEART
Gardiner, Meg
Blackstone (330 pp.)
$27.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
9781982627522

The fourth of Gardiner’s UNSUB series opens a door into what seems like an endless series of homicides.

Arrested by Jessup County Deputy Marius Hayes in a Tennessee motel parking lot, drifter Efrem Judah Goode insists he had nothing to do with the deaths of the three women inside the motel or the fourth, also mummy-wrapped with duct tape, in the back seat of the car he’d been driving. But he’s perfectly willing to cop to 13 other homicides stretching back to 2003. He’s unsurprisingly convicted of the four brand-new murders as well, but Special Agent Caitlin Hendrix of the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit, isn’t satisfied. Working with other members of the unit willing to put in endless hours in pursuit of scant evidence, she realizes that this new streak of murders, which continues apace while Goode is safely imprisoned, is the work of a copycat. Acting on further information from Finch Winter, an adopted teen who’s convinced that her birth mother was one of Goode’s victims, she uncovers enough links between Goode and the copycat to reach a truly alarming conclusion: Yesteryear’s killer knows perfectly well about his latter-day imitator and is doing his best to provide information and directives about potential victims from his prison cell. As the bodies dot roadsides from the Southeast to New York, Caitlin, who also gets potentially distracting hints that the elusive killer she’s called the Ghost is still active, struggles to come up with a reason why at least two different killers
“Brilliantly constructed and puzzling in a good way, the way that even our own lives can be puzzling to us.”

THE CHILDREN’S BACH
Garner, Helen
Pantheon (176 pp.)
$25.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780553387414

In late-1970s suburban Melbourne, a cluster of family and friends is disrupted by shifting allegiances. This new edition of the short 1984 novel many consider the eminent Australian author’s masterpiece has a foreword by Rumaan Alam in which he admits to having a hard time encapsulating its virtues. In the end, he cedes the mic to Garner herself, quoting from her diary: “The best I can do is to write books that are small but oblique enough to stick in people’s gullets so that they remember them.” This small, oblique, and gullet-sticking book circles around a group of nine people: Dexter and Athena Fox; their children, Billy, who has a developmental disability, and Arthur; Dexter’s long-ago ex Elizabeth, who in the wake of her mother’s death has been joined by her teenage sister, Vicki; Elizabeth’s sort-of boyfriend, a rocker named Philip; and Philip’s daughter, Poppy. In brief scenes, the perspective of the novel shifts around the group from one shoulder to the next, often not making it immediately clear which characters are involved. This elusive inspires careful reading and works to closely focus attention on the key issue of how each character understands and misunderstands the others. For example: “Athena’s life was mysterious to Vicki. She seemed contained, without needs, never restless.” Young Vicki is going to be quite surprised when Athena’s needs and restlessness drive her to an action that affects everyone in the group. Garner gives a master class in her own technique with some advice musician Philip offers an aspiring songwriter: “Take out the clichés...Just leave in the images. Know what I mean? You have to steer a line between what you understand and what you don’t. Between cliché and the other thing. Make gaps. Don’t chew on it. Don’t explain everything. Leave holes. The music will do the rest.”

THE CHILDREN’S BACH
Garner, Helen
Pantheon (176 pp.)
$25.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780553387414

GANGSTERS DON’T DIE
Goldberg, Tod
Counterpoint (384 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781640093041

In the third and final installment of Goldberg’s sardonic series about a prolife Chicago hit man posing as a Las Vegas rabbi, the mobster’s dual identity begins to fall apart. His surgically altered face pulverized by a sucker punch at a bar mitzvah, Sal Cupertine’s disguise as Rabbi David Cohen is badly compromised. Bizarrely, he now resembles his former self, even under a beard. With FBI agents present and past gunning for him, along with old adversary Peaches Pocotillo, the new Native American head of the Chicago mob, he needs all the protection he can get. After Peaches burns down Sal’s house in the Windy City and has ousted Family boss Ronnie Cupertine’s wife and kids cut up and left in trash bags, Sal fears for the safety of his long unseen family, in protective custody somewhere. He once flirted with moral uplift after reading and quoting the Torah to become a passable rabbi: “The longer he pretended to be a rabbi, the better at being a rabbi he became.” But that was four years ago. Now asked whether he has any problem with killing, he says, “None at all.” While Goldberg continues to redefine hard-boiled with his stream-of-consciousness profanity and ripe intellectualism, he and his protagonist seem to lose interest in Sal/David’s split personality. The murderous rabbi’s inability to do wrong with his adoring flock in Vegas speaks to today’s moral climate, but the comedic sparks that made Gangsterland (2014), the first novel in the series, so entertaining are in short supply. A sprawling effort with gratuitous elements including a cadaver farm of embalmed heads and other body parts, this book misses the concision of Goldberg’s brilliant collection, The Low Desert (2021).

A HAUNTING ON THE HILL
Hand, Elizabeth
Mulholland Books/Little, Brown (336 pp.)
$27.00 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780316527323

A struggling band of hopeful artists wander into the malevolent orbit of Hill House in this contemporary restaging of Shirley Jackson’s classic novel. Looking to escape New York City in the wake of the pandemic, Holly Sherwin and her partner, Nisa Macari, enjoy exploring charming “little towns long since colonized by self-styled artists and artisans.” Holly, once a promising playwright, is now teaching English at a private school but has recently won a grant to produce the witchy play that may just revive her career. When she stumbles upon a creepy old
The novel doesn’t draw any kind of straight line between Big Walk,” and it was originally aimed at the Marine Corps—Jackson’s characters and Hand’s, other than some “echoing” afraid of her abusive brother, with a stolen item to dispose of; a as they painstakingly traverse the thick woods and hunters’ and around their towns and cities. This community effort is and patriotic fervor, planned out and hiked 50 mile paths in the country had taken up the challenge and with grit, stamina, extremely well not only as a way to delineate her characters and make a show of the country’s spirit. It was called “The a tablecloth, an unearthly field of cold by the nursery, and mys - and around their towns and cities. This community effort is and patriotic fervor, planned out and hiked 50 mile paths in the country had taken up the challenge and with grit, stamina, extremely well not only as a way to delineate her characters and make a show of the country’s spirit. 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It was called “The a tablecloth, an unearthly field of cold by the nursery, and mys - and around their towns and cities. This community effort is and patriotic fervor, planned out and hiked 50 mile paths in the country had taken up the challenge and with grit, stamina, extremely well not only as a way to delineate her characters and make a show of the country’s spirit. It was called “The a tablecloth, an earthly field of cold by the nursery, and mysterious voices at night. Not to mention the horrible black hares that keep popping up. Are they real or imaginary? Yes, and yes. While the novel doesn’t draw any kind of straight line between Jackson’s characters and Hand’s, other than some “echoing” voices on a recording, clearly this novel is shaped around Jack -son’s legacy, not only in the setting, but also in the characters, specifically the relationship between Holly and Nisa. What she offers, then, is not merely retelling or update, but almost palimpsest. A timeless, gothic ode that serves up the stuff of nightmares.

An intimate look at a small Pacific Northwest town and the complex lives of its people.

In early 1963, in order to reinvigorate the American people after the nervous terror of the Cuban missile crisis, President John F. Kennedy had an idea for a national event that could bring folks together and make a show of the country’s spirit. It was called “The Big Walk,” and it was originally aimed at the Marine Corps—a challenge to walk 50 miles in 20 hours. Soon people all over the country had taken up the challenge and with grit, stamina, and patriotic fervor, planned out and hiked 50 mile paths in and around their towns and cities. This community effort is the framing device of Harun’s novel, a premise that works extremely well not only as a way to delineate her characters as they painstakingly traverse the thick woods and hunters’ paths of the Washington coast and forestland, but also thematically, as a metaphor for the ways in which these people climb, slip, stumble, bump, and redirect themselves through their lives. The residents of Humtown making up this motley pack of sojourners include the local gossip, who happens to be the town’s sole phone operator; a teenage girl, desperately to prove. Overshadowing all in this exceptionally well-drawn, dusky world is the eerie disappearance of a young mother and her two children, the husband likely enough responsible for it but with no evidence against him, a dark man skittering nervously, threateningly round the edges of the group’s physically punishing, ultimately redemptive path.

Harun’s novel reverberates with nostalgia, psychological insight, and the sacredness of community.

Indigenous authors explore the meaning of haunted spaces.

In his foreword to this anthology of “dark fiction,” Stephen Graham Jones notes the value of examining the blurry regions between reality and unreality, and in locating the indeterminacies of identity that linger there. The great potential of narratives which engage such topics, he says, is that they can offer redemptive alternatives to the stricter concep -tual boundaries often found in non-Indigenous traditions. As Jones puts it, “Telling ourselves stories about the world being bigger than we thought, big enough for bigfoot and little people, that’s really kind of saying to the so-called settlers that, hey, yeah, so you took all that land you could see. But what about all this other territory you don’t even know about, man?” The best of the stories here deliver on this promise of imaginative discovery and liberation. In their explorations of obscure but decisive truths and murky crossings between the human and more-than-human, they provide some often spine-tingling and suggestive storytelling. Among the most memorable are Nick Medina’s “Quantum,” Kelli Jo Ford’s “Heart-Shaped Clock,” and Kate Hart’s “Uncle Robert Rides the Lightning,” each of which chillingly implies the vulnerability of contemporary Native America to unburied history and undead antagonists. The most gripping and poignant of the stories is, perhaps, Mathilda Zeller’s “Kush-tuka,” which cannily explores the fragmented in-between spaces of a selfhood afflicted from within and without: “There was something outside the house that was clearly murderous and looked just like me. There was something inside me that was clearly murderous and felt nothing like me.” Though the rest of the stories are somewhat uneven in quality, this collection is entertaining and thought-provoking, especially in its high-lighting of the lurking terrors—from intergenerational trauma to environmental destruction to toxic allyship—confronting Indigenous peoples today. Unsettling tales from the otherworldly shadows.
“War, love, and the sea intermix in this novel of bravery and conscience.”

THE OCEANS AND THE STARS

Helpin, Mark
Overlook (512 pp.)
$30.00 | Oct. 3, 2023
9781419769085

War, love, and the sea intermix in this novel of bravery and conscience.

Capt. Stephen Rensselaer is over-qualified to lead Patrol Coastal Ship 15, the Athena, but that is his assignment. While a hot war blazes in the Middle East, he and his vessel are assigned to the Indian Ocean near the Horn of Africa. His patrol craft is “best suited to the littorals,” while his crew, including SEALs, itch for action. They need not worry, as they engage in seven battles of increasing ferocity, ultimately resulting in Rensselaer’s trial for a capital crime. In one instance, a French cruise ship is hijacked by Islamic State group terrorists off the Somali coast. IS starts butchering the passengers one by one, drawing out the process to maximize worldwide publicity and fear. The Athena is in the area, but the president of the United States expressly forbids her to come to the aid of the ship. Rensselaer disobeys and follows his conscience. He is highly educated and loves to quote Shakespeare to his puzzled subordinates. “Our indiscretions sometimes serve us well, Horatio,” he tells a bemused officer, “and praised be rashness for it.” Comments like that fire up the ship’s gossip machine: “It was in fact a lot of fun to think that the old man was slightly off his nut.” Indeed, he is crazy about Katy Farrar, whom he meets early on, plans to marry, and thinks about in quiet moments during their inevitable separation. “Katy alone was worth all the blue oceans and all the bright stars,” he muses. The yarn hits a snag 60 pages in when the author stops for 10 pages to describe Athena’s architecture. Skip to Page 70 if you don’t want to read about it, he writes, but it interrupts the story’s momentum. Better he weave it in or tack it on at the end. But the action is terrific, and despite occasional verbosity, the writing is as good as anything else in the genre.

Fans of war stories and nautical tales will enjoy this one.

THE ASCENT

Hertmans, Stefan
Trans. by David McKay
Pantheon (416 pp.)
$29.00 | Aug. 29, 2023
9780593316467

The stories of a Belgian “Jew-hunter for the Waffen-SS,” his family, and their home are reassembled through a combination of historical fact and the author’s imagination.

“In the first year of the new millennium, a book came into my hands from which I learned that for twenty years I had lived in the house of a former SS man.” So begins Flemish author Hertmans’ cleverly intriguing re-creation of the life and circumstances of Willem Verhulst, whose commitment to Flemish Nationalism led to an allegiance with Hitler and the German Reich. Son of a “Bad” Fleming, the book that revealed the house’s connection to the Nazis, was written by Verhulst’s son, Adriaan, and lends much detail on the father’s shameful story, as do various other sources, including the diaries of Adriaan’s mother, Mientje, and the reminiscences of his two sisters. Verhulst’s early life is quirky but inauspicious. The sight, in one of his eyes is damaged in a convulsion. He studies horticulture in Brussels and takes a Jewish lover, Elsa Meissner, marrying her before her divorce is complete. Elsa succumbs to cancer, but before she dies Verhulst is already flirting with devout Mientje, who, as wife No. 2, will suffer worse from her husband’s promiscuity. Resident in Ghent but often absent,
Verhulst’s politics align him so that when war begins and the Germans invade Belgium, he’s happy to work for the occupiers and reap the benefits. Hertmans precisely locates Verhulst in the Ghent house, where Mientje forbids him to wear his SS uniform indoors though a bust of Hitler sits on a mantelpiece. His crimes are more outlined than specified, but the mood and the corruption are nicely mirrored in the rotting, tainted house Hertmans later buys and inhabits. As much a story of the family and the setting as of the horrible yet ludicrous figure at its center, the book, while overlong, delivers a haunting, detailed record of people, place, and atmosphere.

A ghostly evocation of faded but eternally repulsive history.

OUR PHILOSOPHER
Hofmann, Gert
Trans. by Eric Mace-Tesler
NYRB Classics (176 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Sept. 26, 2023
9781681377582

This unsettling tale concerns the persecution of one man in pre–World War II Germany. Herr Veilchenfeld, a philosopher in his 60s, comes to a small town after apparently having been forced to leave his university position. He finds that “instead of talking to him, people hurry by him silently.” Someone breaks a window in a home he’s visiting. Young men beat him up on the street, then take him to a group of older men who shave his head. Someone pees in the milk bottle delivered to his door. Another group invades his home and trashes his library. When he tries to move elsewhere, the town bureaucracy ties up his paperwork and finally-shreds his passport, declaring him a noncitizen. Hofmann never explicitly says why all this is happening. But his was a German writer (1931-1993) for whom some history is apparently having been forced to leave his university position. He finds that “instead of talking to him, people hurry by him silently.” Someone breaks a window in a home he’s visiting. Young men beat him up on the street, then take him to a group of older men who shave his head. Someone pees in the milk bottle delivered to his door. Another group invades his home and trashes his library. When he tries to move elsewhere, the town bureaucracy ties up his paperwork and finally-shreds his passport, declaring him a noncitizen. Hofmann never explicitly says why all this is happening. But he was a German writer (1931-1993) for whom some history is inescapable, even for a book first published in 1986, 50 years after Veilchenfeld arrived in the town, even when the crime is not mass slaughter but the slow destruction of one person over three years. Hofmann never uses the words Jew, Nazi, Hitler, or brownshirt, as noted in the introduction by his son, the poet and translator Michael Hofmann. The full name of Bernhard Israel Veilchenfeld comes only on Page 51 and the last year of the action, 1938, on Page 99. Hofmann tells his story through the voice of a boy who has no sense of what he’s witnessing. The author surrounds his philosopher with mostly nondescript townspeople who abet, approve, or only quietly, and rarely, censure. Veilchenfeld exists and suffers in nearly total isolation—as a man in a small town, as a human in history. The author’s notions of complicity aren’t original, but they have an unusual force in his understated style and its clear translation, as does the implicit suggestion that the reader take a moment to multiply this victim by millions.

A painful, powerful work.

THE ILIAD
Homer
Trans. by Emily Wilson
Norton (720 pp.)
$35.96 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781324001805

A bloody tale of ancient war and grief comes to vibrant life in modern-day English.

While, in 2018, Wilson was the first woman to translate Homer’s Odyssey into English, her Iliad is the second by a woman in the past 10 years, following Caroline Alexander’s in 2015. The new work, like her well-received Odyssey, is a hefty package of more than 700 pages, with a highly informative introduction, maps, textual notes, genealogies, and a glossary. Wilson has again presented a Homer that sings, in sprightly iambic pentameter and pellucid language that avoids ponderosities like, well, ponderosities and pellucid. It’s repetitious, yes. The last phase of the Trojan War alternates between bickering and battles, starting with the fateful falling out of Achilles and Agamemnon that causes the former to withdraw to his tent for the next 400 pages. Thereafter, and often, the gods bicker and the military leaders bicker, and when they’re not fighting verbally, the stage is filled with sorties, routs, and one-on-ones, gorefests whose repetition is relieved by some variety in the slaughter, as eyeballs pop out or entrails pour out or heads come off, leaving torsos to tumble to the ground with a clatter of bronze armor. The shortness of Wilson’s lines—compared to Alexander’s or those in the popular translation by Richmond Lattimore—abetted by her unfussy diction and lyricism, are easy on the reader’s eye and seem to help the mind grasp the breadth of Homer’s canvas at any given moment while still marveling at details. Part of that bigger picture is a complex ambivalence about war, which can bestow or restore honor but also destroys friends, families, towns—the common bonds from which people and nations build empathy and tolerance. That message is clear in the closing scenes, as Achilles grieves for his lifelong companion, Patroclus, and Troy mourns Hector.

A masterful, highly readable rendering of the Greek classic.

THREE HOLIDAYS AND A WEDDING
Jalaluddin, Uzma & Marissa Stapley
Putnam (368 pp.)
$35.96 paper | Sept. 26, 2023
978059354391

Two women from entirely different backgrounds meet by chance on a plane that is diverted to a small Canadian town in a blizzard and become fast friends during the subsequent week.

Anna Gibson, 27, raised in a hybrid Christian-Jewish household, is an only child who’s still grief-stricken over her father’s death two years earlier and reeling from her stepmother’s
remarriage. Maryam Aziz, 30, is a divorced Muslim woman working as a pharmacist for her father and dedicating her life to her family—her parents, her grandfather, and her sister. The two women meet by chance on a flight from Denver, Colorado, that’s scheduled to land in Toronto, where Anna will be meeting her newish boyfriend’s wealthy family for a whirlwind of Christmas celebrations and Maryam’s sister, Saima, will be getting married to a fellow doctor during Ramadan. But a “Storm of the Century” derails everyone’s plans, and the women instead share deep secrets with one another during the turbulent flight and spend the next week in the idyllic town of Snow Falls, where the Christian-Jewish-Muslim population and diversity of food and religious options both surprise and welcome them—as does a movie crew that’s filming Two Nights at Christmas, the follow-up to a hit rom-com. Anna is welcomed into Maryam’s family and the small community of friends who were en route to Saima’s wedding. Romance blooms for both women in this straightforward holiday romance meets dreams-come-true story that focuses on how one’s commitments to family and to one’s dreams can coexist with a few adjustments here and there.

With a backdrop of the holiday season(s)—specifically the 2000 Century” derails everyone’s plans, and the women instead share deep secrets with one another during the turbulent flight and spend the next week in the idyllic town of Snow Falls, where the Christian-Jewish-Muslim population and diversity of food and religious options both surprise and welcome them—as does a movie crew that’s filming Two Nights at Christmas, the follow-up to a hit rom-com. Anna is welcomed into Maryam’s family and the small community of friends who were en route to Saima’s wedding. Romance blooms for both women in this straightforward holiday romance meets dreams-come-true story that focuses on how one’s commitments to family and to one’s dreams can coexist with a few adjustments here and there.

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is doing things manuscripts don’t usually do, is advised by her dead grandmother, in the form of a gecko: “There are ways to tell Hawaiian stories and ways to make Hawaiian stories vulnerable to the white hand. You’ll need to be extremely careful with your choices.” Those choices animate these absorbing stories.

Magical events illuminate the all-too-real problems of Hawaiian women in an impressive story collection.

WHAT WE KEPT TO OURSELVES
Kim, Nancy Jooyoun
Atria (384 pp.)
$27.99 | Oct. 10, 2023
9781668004821

The year-old disappearance of a Korean immigrant woman in Los Angeles is still a mystery to her family when a dead Black man with a letter addressed to her appears in their yard.

Sunhee “Sunny” Kim did not seem like the kind of mother who would vanish without a word from the lives of her daughter, Ana, a college graduate, and her son, Ronald—but there is much about the family’s situation that is, as the title of Kim’s second novel suggests, hidden from view. Sunny’s relationship with her husband, John, a man deeply damaged by the atrocities and dislocations of the Korean War, is far from nurturing, and the family has not recovered from the burning of their gas station during the Rodney King riots. The complicated timeline, moving between the end of 1999 and earlier periods going back to 1977, very gradually provides answers to myriad questions: Why did Sunny leave? What was her relationship to the dead home-les is still a mystery to her family when a man head-
to her appears in their yard.

Loyal King stans may disagree, but this is a snooze.

A much-beloved author gives a favorite recurring character her own novel. Holly Gibney made her first appearance in print with a small role in Mr. Mercedes (2014). She played a larger role in The Outsider (2018). And she was the central character in If It Bleeds, a novella in the 2020 collection of the same name. King has said that the character “stole his heart.” Readers adore her, too. One way to look at this book is as several hundred pages of fan service. King offers a lot of callbacks to these earlier works that are undoubtedly a treat for his most loyal devotees. That these Easter eggs are meaningless and even befuddling to new readers might make sense in terms of costs and benefits. King isn’t exactly an author desperate to grow his audience; pleasing the people who keep him at the top of the bestseller lists is probably a smart strategy, and this writer achieved the kind of status that whatever he writes is going to be published. Having said all that, it’s possible that even his hardcore fans might find this story a bit slow. There are also issues in terms of style. Much of the language King uses and the cultural references he drops feel a bit creaky. The word slacks occurs with distracting frequency. King uses the phrase keeping it on the down-low in a way that suggests he probably doesn’t understand how this phrase is currently used—and has been used for quite a while. But the biggest problem is that this narrative is framed as a mystery without delivering the pleasures of a mystery. The reader knows who the bad guys are from the start. This can be an effective storytelling device, but in this case, waiting for the private investigator heroine to get to where the reader is at the beginning of the story feels interminable.

Loyal King stans may disagree, but this is a snooze.

This thinly veiled fictionalization of Ted Bundy’s attack on a Florida State University sorority begins with the horror rather than making it the climax. As president of her sorority, Pamela Schumacher is used to staying up late to deal with paperwork while her sisters are out partying. The night of Jan. 15, 1978, is no different. Jarred awake at 3 a.m. after having fallen asleep with her clothes on, she hears running footsteps and sees a man heading for the front door. He can’t see her in the shadows—a fact that turns out to save her life, rendering her the only eyewitness
to a horrible crime and a notorious criminal, “a man who murdered thirty-five women and escaped prison twice.” The novel goes on to follow several alternating timelines: From Pamela’s perspective, it builds from the day of the sorority murders and also follows her return trip to Tallahassee more than 30 years later in response to a mysterious letter. These chapters are interspersed with the 1974 story of Ruth Wachowsky, believed by her girlfriend, Tina Cannon, to have been one of the killer’s earlier victims. Knoll makes an interesting—and powerful—choice not to name Bundy at any point; Pamela asserts that she “vowed to stop using [his name]” because “there isn’t anything exceptionally clever” about him. Choosing not to name him deflates the myth of the monster, of the charmer, of the criminal genius that people often consider Bundy to be. As the title indicates, this novel belongs to the women: the ones killed because they were too kind to reject an “injured” man asking for help; the ones who lost people they loved; the ones who ultimately had to look him in the eye and not let it destroy their lives. There are twin threads of mystery that lead readers through the maze: the rumor of a suppressed confession tape and Ruth’s story. But in the end, it’s the latter that’s so much more important than the former. In this world of true-crime mania, Jasmine knows that every choice—and every name—matters.

A stunning, engaging subversion of the Bundy myth—and the true-crime genre.

THE LEFTOVER WOMAN
Jean Kwok
Morrow/HarperCollins (288 pp.)
$30.00 | Oct. 10, 2023

A rural Chinese villager becomes a nanny by day and cocktail waitress by night after illegally immigrating to the U.S. in a bid to reclaim her stolen daughter.

Month after month, Jasmine tries to find work in Manhattan’s Chinatown, but her lack of documentation compels most aboveboard employers to turn her away. She owes an astronomical sum to the snakeheads—human smugglers—who ferried her to New York. If she doesn’t repay them by a certain date, they’ll force her into prostitution. Overhearing Jasmine petition the manager of a teahouse for a job, a customer offers a cryptic referral: Ask for Aunt Glory at Opium. Opium turns out to be a seedy Asian strip club, Aunt Glory its ruthless proprietress. While Jasmine is repulsed by the nature of the work, she has no choice but to sign on. Her reasons for fleeing China become clear as her backstory is revealed. She is not only escaping her abusive husband, Wen, but also searching for their only child, a daughter taken from Jasmine at birth. Mindful of China’s one-child policy, Wen arranged for the baby to be spirited out of the country in an under-the-table adoption and told Jasmine the baby had died, all because he wanted a son. By snooping through Wen’s email account, Jasmine discovered the truth, identified the adoptive parents as New York City couple Brandon and Rebecca Whitney, and resolved to track down her daughter whatever the cost. Her plan is to disappear with her daughter after making enough money to both repay the snakeheads and start a new life. Chapters end on cliffhangers that keep the narrative moving forward. Unfortunately, some of the plot points recall the overwritten beats of a soap opera, such as Jasmine’s will-they, won’t-they relationship with her childhood best friend and a violent confrontation that serves as the novel’s climax. Jasmine herself embodies the rom-com trope of the stunning female main character who somehow doesn’t know she’s beautiful.

A highly entertaining page-turner that has a propensity for melodrama and cliche.

THE MANIAC
Benjamín Labatut
Penguin Press (368 pp.)
$28.00 | Oct. 3, 2023

Lightly fictionalized studies of envelope-pushing science and its consequences.

Much like Chilean author Labatut’s excellent When We Cease To Understand the World (2021), this novel turns on brilliant minds leading troubled lives. First in its triptych of profiles is Austrian physicist Paul Ehrenfest, who killed his son with Down syndrome before killing himself. (Labatut notes that among Ehrenfest’s scholarly interests was turbulence.) The second and most substantive concerns Johnny von Neumann, a prodigiously brilliant Hungarian physicist and mathematician who worked on the Manhattan Project and spearheaded a host of developments in quantum mechanics and computing. The book’s title refers to MANIAC, a successor to the pioneering computer ENIAC, though as von Neumann’s broken relationships and decline become clear, the title becomes double-edged. The third section moves closer to the present day and concerns Lee Sedol, a Korean master of the notoriously challenging board game Go; in 2016 he was defeated by AlphaGo, an AI program, leaving him so devastated he retired from the game. In each section, but especially the latter two, Labatut elegantly captures the sense of geniuses outstripping the typical boundaries of intellectual achievement and paying a price for it. In Sedol’s case, his matches with AlphaGo are characterized not simply as man-versus-machine battles, but a hint of what an AI-driven future might look like; they were “casting a new and terrible beauty, a logic more powerful than reason.” Labatut can approach this with a certain optimism about the magic of unfettered genius. (Sections narrated by physicist Richard Feynman lighten the tone.) But the prevailing mood is dread; as Labatut tracks the ethical debates regarding the A-bomb and the impact of AlphaGo’s triumph, he sounds a concern that humanity is engineering its undoing.

Sharply written fiction ably capturing primitive emotions and boundary-breaking research.
“Filled with intelligence and sorrow, these sharply drawn glimpses of Roman lives create an impressively unified effect.”

ROMAN STORIES

Lahiri, Jhumpa
Trans. by the author with Todd Portnowitz
Knopf (224 pp.)
$27.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780593536322

A brilliant return to the short story form by an author of protean accomplishments.

Lahiri’s third collection follows her Pulitzer-winning debut collection, Interpreter of Maladies (1999), and Unaccustomed Earth (2008), with novels and essays interspersed. In 2011, she moved from the U.S. to Rome, where she has become a prolific translator and editor in Italian, and like its immediate predecessor, the novel Whereabouts (2021), the stories in this book were written in Italian then translated to English. As a group, they evoe her new city from the perspective of an outsider looking in—sometimes one character peering into the life of another, or characters staying in houses that belong to other people. The first story, “The Boundary,” establishes this theme, narrated by a girl whose family rents out a guesthouse on their property—she watches the renters, listens to them, and draws conclusions about them, and it later turns out they’re watching right back. In the moving and marvelously economical “The Procession,” a couple cannot get settled in the apartment they’ve rented, the wife particularly agitated by a locked room and a dangerous-looking chandelier. In “Well-Lit House,” an immigrant couple with five children is hounded from their home by bigots; the wife and kids return to their country, and the man wanders the city, homeless. Dark-skinned people in numerous stories are tormented by random acts of cruelty; in several cases by children. The central story of the book, “The Steps,” is like the game of picking out passersby and imagining what lives they have. Seven characters are seen on ancient stairs of 126 travertine steps in the middle of town, and each is presented in their own story: the mother, the widow, the expat wife, the girl, two brothers (who share a section), the screenwriter. In the last story, “Dante Alighieri,” a woman at her mother-in-law’s funeral reflects on the long-ago loss of a friend, a memory that connects to other losses and distances. “Our deepest memories are like infinite roots reflected in the brook, a simulacrum without end.” She comforts herself by going for pizza with a group of women friends, one of whom utters the book’s perfect last line: “This city is shit….But so damn beautiful.”

Filled with intelligence and sorrow, these sharply drawn glimpses of Roman lives create an impressively unified effect.

BROOKLYN CRIME NOVEL

Lethem, Jonathan
Ecco/HarperCollins (384 pp.)
$30.00 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780062938824

The award-winning Lethem makes a puzzling return to the scene of an earlier novel.

The title of Lethem’s 13th novel stirs memories of his comic-noir treasure, Motherless Brooklyn (1999), but the clear antecedent here is The Fortress of Solitude (2003); the new book stands as a kind of sociological survey of the urban street life that underpinned Fortress. The crimes involved stem largely from a real estate revolution starting in the 1960s that transformed run-down parts of Brooklyn into desirable residential areas. Lethem focuses on the same Dean Street that featured in Fortress. The narrator, who is from the neighborhood, cites the white “pioneers” who venture into mainly Black areas and renovate old buildings. With vague thoughts of fostering integration, they end up forcing their school-age boys—girls and women are scarce here—to endure getting their pocket money regularly stolen by Black youths from nearby housing projects, an intricate ritual called “yoking” in Fortress and here termed “the dance.” The book consists of brief chapters with recurring characters, like the two boys who cut up quarters in a funny scheme that won’t be resolved for hundreds of pages. Much of the narrative touches on youthful pastimes and traumas, frrom muggings to skateboards to graffiti, Spaldeens, shoplifting, and sex. The crimes range from actual ones, like theft and rape, but also implicated are poor parenting and property inflation along with the neb-jolting sins of gentrification. The title notwithstanding, the book is at best an interesting alternative to a conventional novel. Maybe, with its dizzying array of local color, it’s a memoir gone rogue, as is a lot of fiction. The narrator says “it is about what a small number of people remember” and how that knowledge “wishes and doesn’t wish to come out.” When it does, it’s Fortress, or it’s this.

An entertaining, challenging read that may appeal mainly to Lethem fans and scholars.

PEACH PIT

Sixteen Stories of Unsavory Women
Ed. by Llewellyn, Molly & Kristel Buckley
Dzanc (237 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
9781950539871

A 16-story anthology highlights a diverse list of authors who let their protagonists embrace their unhinged natures. A smart-mouthed child locked inside a shed discovers a match and the intoxicating allure of fire (“All You Have Is Your Fire” by Yah Yah Scholfield). A disabled
teenager takes the Devil, named Max, as her girlfriend through the summoning power of masturbation (“The Devil’s Doorbell” by Amanda Leduc). A Black woman ruthlessly disposes of men guilty of “the crime of wasting a Black woman’s time” (“Fuckboy Museum” by Deesha Philyaw). The protagonists of these stories bring new meaning to unsavory and unhinged and prove that characters—women especially—need not be well behaved or morally pure to have delightful literary value. Ranging from merely unlikable to downright deplorable, these women leave bodies, burning buildings, and broken plates in their wakes in these deeply disturbing and sublime narratives. The latter half of the collection is heavy on speculative fiction and magical realism. In Chantal V. Johnson’s “MS Wrong,” Valerie contemplates the benefits of an Impenetrable Body Mod that seals up “all three holes” but instead turns to drugging men with an aphrodisiac—“ethical angle” aside—to enjoy mutually pleasurable kinky sex. Alison Rumfitt’s “Buffalo” features a genderqueer woman who falls under suspicion when the skinned bodies of young women keep popping up in the neighborhood—just because she happens to own eight skin suits (“made from a clever mix of plastic, latex, and lycra,” not real flesh, thank you very much). While the book has a few weak links, standouts include Chaya Bhuvaneswar’s “The Monolith,” in which oncologist Jane Chun obsessively works to destroy the budding career of a young female medical student; Lauren Groff’s “Amaranth,” in which the title character spends years following her father’s death calculating the best way to ruin her mother’s happiness; and Chana Porter’s “Aquafina,” which takes the form of poetry written by the narrator about her best friend, whom she lusts after and envies in equal measure.

A riveting collection in which downtrodden, vindictive, and occasionally just plain evil women choose violence at every turn.

**SPIN A BLACK YARN Novellas**
Malerman, Jay
Del Rey (400 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Aug. 15, 2023
9780593237861

A collection of odd tales by the author of *Bird Box* (2014) and other books. Returning to his made-up city of Samhattan, Michigan, Malerman offers five stories about pitiable lost souls. In “Doug and Judy Buy the House Washer™,” a bickering couple of considerable wealth tries out “the most luxurious item on the market,” shutting themselves inside a large glass tube in their living room as the house and all its contents are submerged in miracle cleaning goop. As revealing letters and other secret items swoosh up against the glass, they contest their troubled past—and, unable to shut off the machine, panic over their immediate future. In “The Jupiter Drop,” a rich man estranged from his family confronts his sad existence on an “interstellar thrill ride” that has him free-fall through Jupiter’s stormy atmosphere inside a luxury apartment with transparent walls and a “virtual mom.” “Half the House Is Haunted” charts the long-term psychological effects of an 8-year-old girl’s ceaseless efforts to scare her 6-year-old brother in their creepy home. In “Egorox,” the best of the stories, set around the turn of the 20th century in Samhattan’s Little Russia, two identical 24-year-old triplets use their ghostly presences to find the murderer of their brother. And in “Argyle,” a dying man celebrates getting through his life without acting on his murderous desires. “Is there any greater sign of a father’s love than not drowning his children in the tub?” Malerman never runs out of wild premises or the knack for ridiculing the human condition à la *Mad* magazine. But these long stories reveal his tendency to drive his concepts into the ground. Most of them go on and on before petering out without a satisfying conclusion.

**THE GOLEM OF BROOKLYN**
Mansbach, Adam
One World/Random House (272 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Sept. 26, 2023
9780593729823

A 9½-foot, 400-pound golem, built out of stolen clay by a stoned Brooklyn art teacher, heads south to tear limbs from antisemitic limbs at a post-Charlottesville rally.

The Golem, we learn, is a reincarnation of sorts of the Golem of Prague, who, Jewish folklore has it, perished at Babyn Yar along with more than 330,000 Jews. He’s a bit out of it at first blush, able to speak only in Yiddish and miffed that the teacher, Len Bronstein, a nonobservant Jew who somehow worked the magic that only rabbis had worked before, neglected to give him something. “Avu iz mayn shmok,” he blurted. “Translation: ‘Where is my dick.’” But after learning English from binge-watching *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, The Golem (as he insists on being called) is ready to rampage, part Frankenstein’s monster and part insult comic. “Could crush your head like walnut,” he says. Committed to his role as protector of Jews, he prepares to unleash major mayhem when told of the Save Our History’s Future rally in Kentucky, where chants of “Jews will not replace us” will fill the air. Len hopes to convince The Golem that “Defending ourselves is different than killing every Jew-hater;” but Larry David has the humanoid’s ear in encouraging him during a video call to “maybe rip their heads off.” In his squishy preaching of restraint, the author of *Go the F**k To Sleep* (2011) loses some of his edge. And the narrative has a difficult time staying on track with all of its digressions, including mini-histories of golems, the Jewish people, the Hasidic movement, and, for good measure, the Ku Klux Klan. There also is a long, uncommented-on excerpt from a Joseph Brodsky poem about race and a weird trip to Sweden by Len to confront an Airbnb scammer. Though there is much to enjoy, the book fails to make much of an impact.

A farcical spin on the Jewish plight.
When Cleftwater is visited by the reign of terror caused by the Mam and the opaque legacy she left for Martha. (Among the Rosaria, a “fallen woman” Francesco loved and tried to reform few cherished keepsakes she has from her mother is a small fellow villagers, to herself, and to the fading memory of her execution. Based on records of an actual period of witch hunts of public opinion turns against Martha and other village women, conflicting loyalties: to her master, to her fellow servants, to fellow villagers, to herself, and to the fading memory of her Mam and the opaque legacy she left for Martha. (Among the few cherished keepsakes she has from her mother is a small wax doll—a poppet—which acts as a talisman and comfort and, ultimately, source of mystical power for the beleaguered Martha.) Perhaps the most corrosive of these conflicts is the one within Martha herself as she struggles to reconcile aspects of her own nature with blunderbuss accusations raised against women struggling to survive in an environment of poverty and ignorance. As witch-hunt mania overcomes the village, the tide of public opinion turns against Martha and other village women, and they are forced to defend themselves against increasingly barbaric methods of interrogation, coerced confession, and execution. Based on records of an actual period of witch hunts in East Anglia during the years of the English civil war, Meyer’s saga of prejudicial ignorance and the horrors that result from innuendo campaigns is replete with period and chilling atmospheric detail.

Meyer’s narrative illuminates a dark historical period (and cautions against its re-creation).

A masterpiece by one of Italy’s foremost modern writers.

THE WITCHING TIDE
Meyer, Margaret
Scribner (336 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781668011362

“Got no witches in Cleftwater. Leastways, we had none, until the witch man came.” A woman accused of witchcraft sums up the situation in Meyer’s fraught tale of misogyny, prejudice, and mob rule in 1640s England.

Martha Hallybread, an aging and mute servant in the household of her beloved master, Kit, uses her knowledge of botanicals and herbs to help generations of villagers in the East Anglian town of Cleftwater through pregnancy, childbirth, and illness. When Cleftwater is visited by the reign of terror caused by the itinerant “witch man” and the hideous methods he employs to prove women’s status as witches, Martha is overwhelmed by conflicting loyalties: to her master, to her fellow servants, to fellow villagers, to herself, and to the fading memory of her Mam and the opaque legacy she left for Martha. (Among the few cherished keepsakes she has from her mother is a small wax doll—a poppet—which acts as a talisman and comfort and, ultimately, source of mystical power for the beleaguered Martha.) Perhaps the most corrosive of these conflicts is the one within Martha herself as she struggles to reconcile aspects of her own nature with blunderbuss accusations raised against women struggling to survive in an environment of poverty and ignorance. As witch-hunt mania overcomes the village, the tide of public opinion turns against Martha and other village women, and they are forced to defend themselves against increasingly barbaric methods of interrogation, coerced confession, and execution. Based on records of an actual period of witch hunts in East Anglia during the years of the English civil war, Meyer’s saga of prejudicial ignorance and the horrors that result from innuendo campaigns is replete with period and chilling atmospheric detail.

Meyer’s narrative illuminates a dark historical period (and cautions against its re-creation).

LIES AND SORCERY
Morante, Elsa
Trans. by Jenny McPhee
NYRB Classics (800 pp.)
$24.95 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
9781681376844

An epic tale of passion and obsession. At the heart of this novel, first published in Italy in 1948, is a tortured pair of love triangles: When Francesco falls in love with Anna, Anna is already desperately in love with her cousin Edoardo, who loves no one but himself. In the meantime, there’s also Rosaria, a “fallen woman” Francesco loved and tried to reform before he’d ever heard of Anna. Rosaria loved Francesco, too, but—alas!—in came wealthy Edoardo with his expensive gifts to ruin everything. Morante’s vast, sprawling epic of passion and delusion, obsession and madness, certainly contains multitudes. In that sense, as the publisher has noted, the influence of old masters like Tolstoy and Stendhal can be felt, though Tolstoy’s exquisite kindness and patience for his characters isn’t exactly prevalent here. Morante’s novel is peopled with characters it can be exceedingly difficult to sympathize with: No one here is blameless except, perhaps, the self-effacing narrator. The events are described years after the fact by Elisa, the daughter of two of the major players, who, following her parents’ deaths (which are revealed in the book’s first few pages), goes to live with Rosaria. There, Elisa is so consumed by her family’s past—or what she imagines to be her family’s past; who can say what the difference might be?—that she is unable to live her own life. “If I did happen to find myself among others,” she says, “their voices reached me as echoes, their faces mere reflections, and all that was present and real appeared to be at a great distance across time and space and to have no connection to me whatsoever.” Morante’s novel is a masterpiece, and to have it finally translated into English in unabridged form is a great gift.

An unsuspecting host finds himself at the center of a supernatural plot to eradicate life from the planet. Rattled awake from a disorienting slumber—and apparently unaware of his own nudity and physical arousal—mild-mannered Black family man Marty Just wanders onto his balcony, the elaborate details of an intergalactic plan to end life on Earth seared into his mind. “Mama, look!” a neighbor child cries, and from that moment, Marty’s week only gets weirder: He’s arrested for public indecency; kills his vile, racist cellmate in a fugue state of self-defense; posts bail and returns home, only to encounter Aryan gang members ready to avenge their murdered leader. Until this point, the question of whether Marty has suffered a psychotic break or schizophrenic episode is unresolved, but then something inside Marty—an entity called Temple—takes over, attacking the racist thugs with his teeth, biting and tearing the life out of them in a marvelously frenzied action sequence. As it turns out, not only can Temple summon inhuman strength, he can resurrect the dead (!), and he recruits the formerly lifeless racists to help him prevent the encroaching genocide, personified by Tor Waxman, the Angel of Death. Equal parts body horror and necromancy, the book has cinematic fast cuts and an explosive pace that make it read like a Black Mirror episode set against the Hollywood Hills. While a subplot about Marty’s pending legal woes adds little to
“Chaotic and cathartic.”

I’M A FAN

A London woman is consumed with a married artist and his numerous lovers.

The unnamed narrator of Patel’s debut novel is in a love triangle of sorts. There is the character called only “the man I want to be with,” who is married but has a number of women on the side, including “the woman I am obsessed with.” The narrator and this woman have never met; the narrator hears about her secondhand from the man, and she spends hours screenshotting and mulling over the woman’s carefully curated Instagram feed. This woman and the narrator are both side pieces—“What we should have done is unionise,” says the narrator about the artist’s “harem”—but the narrator has a boyfriend, too, whom she admittedly treats abysmally. (Perhaps this is more a love spiderweb than a love triangle?) Blisteringly self-aware, the narrator knows she is trapped in a cycle of desiring the things she hates the most: wealth, influence, fans, prestige, expensive objects. (There is plenty that comes in for unequivocal skewering, however: neo-liberals, white women influencers, Trump supporters.) Threaded through every action and emotion is the narrator’s sense of her own relationship as a person of color to the white artist and his white paramours. Of the artist she writes, “It takes me a long time to realise that when the man I want to be with tells me he likes being seen with me in public what he means is, he enjoys what my skin colour says about him to other people.” Patel is a member of the 4 BROWN GIRLS WHO WRITE poetry collective, and there are echoes of poetic structure here, as in the way the very short chapters are each titled, like prose poems—

Chaotic and cathartic.

CONFESSIONS OF A FORTY-SOMETHING F**K UP

A woman returns to London to start over in her 40s.

Nell Stevens thought she would have everything figured out by the time she was 40-something. And by “everything” she meant an Instagrammable idyll: husband, children, beautiful home, and, somehow, the body of a bikini model. Instead, she has left the fiancé she was living with in California and returned to England, heartbroken, broke, and very lonely. Nell spends a great deal of time in the first half of the book bemoaning her failure to have a social media–worthy life and assuming that she meant an Instagrammable idyll: husband, children, beautiful home, and, somehow, the body of a bikini model. Instead, she has left the fiancé she was living with in California and returned to England, heartbroken, broke, and very lonely. Nell spends a great deal of time in the first half of the book bemoaning her failure to have a social media–worthy life and assuming that
When she and Jacob—scion of the town’s most prominent family—Jacob is grievously wounded, his parents disowned him, and now they refuse to have anything to do with him. 

Jacob Hampton, gets drafted into the Korean War, during the Depression—met and fell in love, Jacob’s family shopkeepers revered for their generosity with credit from distant Tennessee who came east to work as a hotel maid; afraid to have it out with his owner/landlord, an eco-obsessive who prefers to keep the flat freezing and dark. Also hiding is the reason her past relationship fell apart, which takes a while to come to light. Once Nell starts to find her footing, the narrative energy picks up and big life events start occurring, giving the reader a slight sense of whiplash. Nell also starts the titular podcast, which goes viral and allows her friends and women everywhere to stop pretending their lives are perfect.

A pleasant enough romp over well-trodden territory.

**THE CARETAKER**

*Rash, Ron*

Doubleday (272 pp.)

$28.00  |  Sept. 26, 2023

9780385544276

Set in Rash’s beloved midcentury Appalachia, a nimbly plotted, suspenseful romance with a twist—its titular hero is the third wheel.

Blackburn Gant is by habit, inclination, and necessity a loner. Disfigured (as he sees it) by polio and abandoned by his family members, who’ve moved to Florida, Blackburn has taken work, permanently it seems, as live-in caretaker of a mountain cemetery near Blowing Rock, North Carolina. When his closest friend, Jacob Hampton, gets drafted into the Korean War, Gant assumes responsibility, too, for protecting and tending to Jacob’s pregnant wife. Naomi Clarke, only 16, is an outlander from distant Tennessee who came east to work as a hotel maid; she’s ill-educated (but working diligently on that so that she can write better letters), without means, friends, or support. When she and Jacob—scion of the town’s most prominent family, shopkeepers revered for their generosity with credit during the Depression—met and fell in love, Jacob’s family disowned him, and now they refuse to have anything to do with Naomi. After a scary confrontation with Jacob’s father early in her third trimester, when Naomi and Blackburn venture out to the movies, Blackburn helps Naomi move back home, seven hours west, to await the baby and her husband’s return. But when—as recounted in the novel’s bravura opening, a hand-to-hand combat scene that evokes James Dickey’s *To the White Sea*—Jacob is grievously wounded, his parents see the prospect of his long convalescence as a chance to put things right—or to put them horribly wrong—and they seize that chance. Rash writes with finesse and affection, as usual, of western North Carolina and its people. But the mood isn’t mere nostalgia—there’s a flirt and an unflinching realism underneath, especially in his portrayal of the stalwart, utterly solid Blackburn Gant, that elevates the novel. Rash’s 20th book is among his best.

**MY WORK**

*Ravn, Olga*

Trans. by Sophia Hersi Smith & Jennifer Russell

New Directions (416 pp.)

$18.95 paper  |  Sept. 4, 2023

9780811234719

An intimate exploration of the brutal wonders of motherhood.

Anna, a Danish author, and Aksel, a Swedish playwright, have just had their first baby. Or they are pregnant with their first baby. Or their eldest child is turning 4 and Anna is pregnant with their second. All these time frames are alternatingly true in this heady, iconoclastic examination of Anna’s journey through pregnancy and into motherhood. In the decentralized space of the novel, Anna’s diaries and journal notes have been compiled in a chronology that appears random, but would be better described as intuitive, by an unnamed curatorial presence to whom Anna has entrusted “the pages [that] lay haphazardly in a large pile.” This curatorial presence ascribes a pattern to Anna’s thoughts, which veer steeply into a dark psychology of anxiety, isolation, and fear as the pregnancy progresses, a condition that worsens in the early years of the child’s infancy. Anna describes the book she herself is writing in these pages as a “dirty book, a misspelled book, a book cut wrong….A book written in the child’s time. A chopped-up, stuttering book. A book with bottomless holes to fall into, like never-ending breastfeedings…a book that creates space for pain and from this space engenders a possible future happiness,” upon which the curatorial presence seeks to impose some kind of transliterated order. The fact that the curatorial presence is likely also the author, that Anna herself is an invention created to preserve a necessary distance between the experience of pain and the arrangement of pain into art, does nothing to lessen the intensity of the intimacy created between the reader and Anna. As page after page unfolds—sometimes in diary entries, sometimes in verse, sometimes in recorded scraps of pregnancy advice or ad copy—what is created is an unflinchingly honest reflection of a woman’s experience of her own body as it becomes a body that belongs also to the child. This experience includes beauty and pain, rage and tenderness, fear, suspicion, doubt, and the imperative Anna feels to do her work: the work of writing, of mothering, but above all, as Anna says, “These parts of me, separate yet linked, to connect them, to gather them in one place; that is my work.”

A stunning book that speaks aloud thoughts the reader believed had been theirs alone in long nursery hours of the night.
When the wealthy patriarch of a family business invites his children on a trip from Newport Beach to Catalina Island aboard his new yacht, Rouda fans will know to buckle their seat belts.

John and Ted Kingsley have hated each other for years, their mutual antipathy sharpened by John's success in forcing Ted out of Kingsley Global Enterprises a few years ago. So both they and their wives—John's wife, ruthless lawyer Rachel, and Paige, a successful Orange County food-bank fundraiser who used to work alongside Ted before he was bounced—are truly dismayed to learn that the invitation from Richard Kingsley, whom John identifies as "one of Southern California's biggest sinners," and Serena Kingsley, his fifth wife, for an overnight cruise aboard their yacht, Splendid Seas, includes all four of them. In fact, it's even worse, as they realize when Sibley, the bad-girl sister they haven't thought about for years, drops into the party with her boyfriend, knife-carrying creep Colson Kelly: Richard's goal of observing his children individually and interactively in order to decide whom to appoint as Kingsley CEO when he steps down provides a nominal structure for the journey, but really, it's all about the dish. Although the characters are paper-thin, Rouda sends them toward a reckoning but their frailty isn't their family. When long-deferred violence finally breaks out, they may be divided between shock and a sense of anticlimax. No matter: The hits keep on coming.

King Lear goes to the beach. Yes.

These nine stories focus on desire and betrayal and how people cope with the consequences. Many of the stories are set in Los Angeles, a city whose allure and harshness seem to have a withering effect on the characters' ability to empathize. Yet Sather takes great care to avoid mocking their folly. They make terrible choices, young and old, and the stories are juicy plotwise but never saccharine. Whether it's a teenager trying to blackmail a parent or a deadbeat musician throwing away a big chance, Sather unearthed levels of pain behind the desperation. She also writes about illness very well, including a character with Lou Gehrig's disease and a young woman facing an early death from cancer. These stories offset others about a paparazzo in rehab, a fatal home invasion, and a teenage girl ditching summer camp. The varied plots and themes give the book surprising force, and Sather writes with the confidence and verve of a seasoned author. In "God's Work," an older judge goes on his first date since the death of his son. In a hotel that night he recalls his son pitching a baseball, feeling "stunned by such fragility," how, as the boy played that day, "the ball carried something he didn't want to happen, something he worked against and couldn't stop from coming anyway." There's also humor and wit, as in "Venice," in which a teenage girl says of her mother, "Her hair in a ponytail but her face a touch jowly, she looked like a competent babysitter who had overstayed their childhoods." But for all the characters' bravado or callowness, Sather sends them toward a reckoning and lets us make judgments at our own risk.

A strong, versatile collection as thought-provoking as it is entertaining.
SING A BLACK GIRL’S SONG

The Unpublished Works
Shange, Ntozake
Ed. by Imani Perry
Legacy Lit/Hachette (496 pp.)
$30.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780306828515

Previously unseen writing from an essential Black author.

Shange is perhaps best known for her Obie Award–winning play, for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf. But in addition to being a playwright, she was also a poet, a novelist, and a diarist, and when she died in 2018, she left behind a wealth of unpublished work. Harvard professor Imani Perry searched through these archives and chose the essays, poems, short stories, and plays presented in this collection. Tarana Burke, founder of the #MeToo movement and bestselling author, offers a foreword in which she explains how “Shange’s words gave me language for my own experiences with trauma and love.” Born Paulette Williams in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1948, the writer would ultimately change her name and become a prominent figure in the Black Arts Movement. In some of these pieces, Shange offers glimpses of her family—well-educated, financially well off, and keenly aware of racial difference. She describes a voracious love of reading that encompassed everything from Nancy Drew to Giovanni’s Room as well as the process of discovering the voice that begins to emerge in her early poems. Those acquainted with the author will see familiar themes emerge as she engages with colonialism, code switching, white supremacy, liberation politics, sexism, sexual violence, and collective trauma. She writes of desire and despair and revolution and Black joy using language and imagery that she was taught to hide from white people. In a series of short vignettes Perry gathers into a chapter called “Dark Rooms,” Shange speaks candidly of her struggles with mental health and her years in psychoanalysis, and she insists that therapy made her a better writer. Several plays, only one of which has been performed, are presented here. Shange continued writing and experimenting right up until her death, and the last section of this book contains poems and prose she produced between 1996 and 2018.

The literary value of these works extends far beyond the insight they offer into Shange’s life and artistic career.

HOUSE OF CARAVANS

Suneja, Shilpi
Milkweed (328 pp.)
$26.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781639550142

One family feels the ripple effects of Partition for generations after India and Pakistan are cleaved in 1947.

Reminiscent of Zadie Smith’s White Teeth in its structure and themes, Suneja’s debut novel splits its pages between two politically turbulent eras. One narrative thread follows Barre Nanu and Chhote Nanu, a pair of Hindu brothers, as they deal with the consequences of a misguided bomb plot and an illicit romance in Lahore amid the sunset of the British Empire. With World War II raging, many Indians have begun to chafe against colonial rule, Chhote Nanu among them. His revolutionary aspirations are complicated by his love for the beautiful Nigar Jaan, a Muslim sex worker of mixed Indian and English heritage, but he still follows through on an attempt to assassinate a cruel police superintendent. Backfiring, the scheme fails to kill the superintendent and sends Chhote Nanu to jail for nearly two and a half years. Following his release in 1946, Partition plunges the region into chaos and turns Lahore into a Pakistani territory, stranding Barre Nanu and Chhote Nanu on the wrong side of the border. Witnessing horrors as violence against Hindus intensifies, they fight to escape a country they can no longer call their own. Six decades after Chhote Nanu’s imprisonment began in 1943, New York City graduate student Karan Khatri returns to his hometown, the Indian city of Kanpur, for the first time in six years after his sister sends word that Barre Nanu, their grandfather, has died. In the wake of 9/11, long-standing tensions between Hindus and Muslims have flared up in the United States, reminding Karan and his friends that they are welcome in some worlds but not in others. In addition to paying his respects to Barre Nanu, Karan has another reason for making the trip to Kanpur: He wants to know more about his parentage. While his mother has always told him that he and his sister were fathered by a Muslim man and a Hindu man, respectively, she has disclosed few other details, seemingly reluctant to do so. Family secrets come to the fore and old wounds reopen as Karan and his sister search for answers.

A moving evocation of life before, during, and after Partition and the past’s immeasurable impact on the present.
Dave and Jeannette, who can’t reach Sara by phone or text. Her friends haven’t seen or heard from her since before the first bell, fails to report for class. The principal’s office calls her parents, doubles as scathing social commentary about America’s true-crime obsession.

Zee, Dani, and Fiona meet up at Newark Airport to commence a five-day adventure. Zee and Dani are thrilled to reunite and explore the city, while Zee is studying life science at Queen’s University in Ontario.

Helen’s partner, Hew, Perry’s cancellation too closely. (It involves a sexual indiscretion, but details are withheld for a clever late plot twist.) Taranto initially plays this setup for laughs; the Institute is centered off the Eastern Seaboard that’s determined to provide a haven for academics and artists dubbed “cancellees and deplorables.” (Protesters have dubbed it “Rape Island.”) Helen’s partner, Hew, grudgingly tags along but attends anti-Rubin protests; Helen, meanwhile, is determined to sidestep politics and not scrutinize Perry’s cancellation too closely. (It involves a sexual indiscretion, but details are withheld for a clever late plot twist.) Taranto initially plays this setup for laughs; the Institute is centered in an overtly phallic tower named the Endowment, R. Kelly is initially plays this setup for laughs; the Institute is centered in an overtly phallic tower named the Endowment, R. Kelly is.

Fiona is self-assured to the point of being standoffish, decrying anything touristy such as Times Square and quick to offer forceful opinions (she skewers the Metropolitan Museum of Art as “a real monument to Western imperialism”). An attraction blossoms between feminine Fiona and androgynous Zee, beginning with subtle touches and stolen kisses while their trio is out sightseeing before culminating in more. Zee and Fiona’s budding closeness, though fraught in its own ways, leaves Dani feeling hurt and alienated, and the splintered dynamics threaten to compromise not only their trip, but also friendships old and new. This graphic novel presents a tightly focused story about the difficulty of competing loyalties and the anxieties of entering young adulthood and facing the possibility of growing apart from people you care about. Jillian Tamaki’s illustrations, rendered in peach, gray, light blue, and black, vividly capture the characters’ emotions and the wondrous clutter of the city landscape; double-page spreads meld reality with visual embellishment to depict especially potent experiences, from witnessing the scale of the giant blue whale at the American Museum of Natural History to the exhilaration of exploring queer crushes. Readers looking to indulge nostalgia about being a tourist in New York, from staying in a hostel to comparing the merits of different slices of pizza, will find much to enjoy; so will readers of stories about coming into one’s own in adulthood, with all of the myriad joys and stumbles that entails.

A visually and narratively appealing work of coming-of-age fiction.

“A physicist’s dream lab proves to be a not-so-safe space.”

HOW I WON A NOBEL PRIZE
Taranto, Julius
Little, Brown (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780316513074

A physicist’s dream lab proves to be a not-so-safe space.

Helen, the narrator of Taranto’s smart and funny debut, has made a devil’s bargain. She’s a rising researcher in the field of superconductors, addressing knotty quantum-mechanics problems that might resolve the climate crisis. Her adviser is Perry, a Nobel Prize–winning genius. But staying with Perry means joining him at the Rubin Institute, a billionaire-funded and defiantly un-PC think tank on an island off the Eastern Seaboard that’s determined to provide a haven for academics and artists dubbed “cancellees and deplorables.” (Protesters have dubbed it “Rape Island.”) Helen’s partner, Hew, grudgingly tags along but attends anti-Rubin protests; Helen, meanwhile, is determined to sidestep politics and not scrutinize Perry’s cancellation too closely. (It involves a sexual indiscretion, but details are withheld for a clever late plot twist.) Taranto initially plays this setup for laughs; the Institute is centered in an overtly phallic tower named the Endowment, R. Kelly is among the attendees at get-togethers, and the spreads include “ostentaciously problematic meat: foie gras, roast suckling pig, octopus, horse.” But in time Helen becomes more enmeshed

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in the Institute's politics, complicating her relationships with Hew and Perry and her sense of the world. (The scientist in her assemblies a spreadsheet to clarify Hew's place in her life, but life isn't so tidy) Taranto expertly explores the messy discussions around cancel culture and how much genres might be forgiven inappropriate conduct—a dilemma personified by a louche, Philip Roth–like writer Helen befriends at the Institute. That subplot clangs a little against the main narrative, and Taranto's climax is over-the-top. But it's a fine study of the idea that, for all the complaints about the culture wars, nobody can pretend they're not implicated in them.

A bright, well-turned satirical debut.

THE WIND WILL CATCH YOU
Theall, Michelle
Alcove Press (320 pp.)
$18.99 paper  |  Sept. 19, 2023
9781639104659

A suspenseful debut novel follows two siblings who have raised themselves in the Texas Hill Country.

College student Sky Fielder is barely hanging on, with the help of a caseworker a few years older than she is, when she receives news that her older brother, Ben, whom she had been told died many years earlier, may be alive and in a coma in a hospital in Arizona. Sky and Ben had lived on their own for years, without telling the authorities, after their parents died when Sky was 5, until their lives reached a crisis point and they were placed in the foster care system. Author Theall moves between Sky in the present, as she struggles to adjust to this news at the same time that she becomes involved in a new romance, and what little does happen in his dreamlike world feels impermanent or inconsequential. Nonetheless, as page after page of description. During a storm, the mansion's "walls yield like flesh," and nearby houses being built by the ghosts appear as "skeletons of wood and metal." Corporeal metaphors like these find themselves lulled into an evocative trance.

Dreamlike and formally simple, a ghost story underscored by themes of detachment, self-doubt, and loss.
in Zimbabwe. When she was 11—a year before he died—she paid her single visit to him in New York. The memory remains indelible 12 years later when she arrives to do graduate study in the same elite science program he attended. Soon her romantic notions of the U.S. are challenged by uncomfortable questions concerning race, political consciousness, and scientific ethics. In Zimbabwe, tribal membership categorized Athandwa’s identity, not the color of her skin. But as her new boyfriend points out, “Here in America, you’re Black.” (He himself is Haitian, the son of Frank’s former lover, and he too worshipped Frank.) Politics here can’t be separated from science. Expect to learn about fungi and Greek astronomy as well as Frank’s philosophic musings on Bantu geometries as an answer to what he called “Euclidean austerity.” Meanwhile, the issue of identity takes a different shape in the unsolved mystery of why an idealist scientist like Frank was closely connected to an obscenely rich military entrepreneur and a sinister Zimbabwean political operative. At heart Tshuma’s novel is about Athandwa’s personal struggle to find herself as “The Terrors” that have troubled her since Frank’s death build toward a crisis. Observant, ambitious, obedient, stubborn, also at times purposely oblivious—what a thorny mix she is.

Tshuma’s novel is cerebral yet passionate, a heady stew of science, family drama, and political intrigue.

**WE ARE NOT STRANGERS**

*Tuininga, Josh*

Abrams ComicArts (208 pp.)

$24.99 | Sept. 12, 2023

9781419759949

A touching tale of friendship during World War II.

The debut graphic novel from Tuininga opens in 1987, with a man walking to a Sephardic synagogue in Seattle to attend his grandfather’s funeral. “My name is Marco,” he explains. “I was named after my papoo. My grandfather.” At the service, he notices mourners from “a different neighborhood,” one of whom signs the guest book with the name Sam Akiyama. The younger Marco introduces himself to Sam and learns that the man befriended his grandfather during the early days of World War II. The elder Marco, a Jewish immigrant from the Ottoman Empire, was horrified when he learned that after the invasion of Pearl Harbor, Sam and his family—along with many other Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans—would likely be imprisoned in camps under President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s now-infamous Executive Order 9066. Tuininga briefly depicts the Akiyama family’s imprisonment and then their return to Seattle and later reveals that Marco had been working behind the scenes to save their home and business. “Some say all it took was a little research and some paperwork,” the younger Marco explains. “While others say the only thing needed was a simple handshake.” Tuininga’s illustrations are uniformly beautiful, with mostly dark, understated colors that match the anxieties of the era; his characters’ facial expressions convey their emotions beautifully. Some of the most powerful pages in the book are ones that lack dialogue, such as a spread in which Marco fishes alone, missing his friend Sam. The writing is less successful, heavy on exposition—Tuininga understandably wants the book to be as much history lesson as novel, and it turns heavy-handed in parts. The book needs more story, more detail; as it is, it feels unfinished. The artwork is undeniable, but one wishes the narrative were more than the broad strokes.

Beautiful illustrations can’t quite save an overly simplistic graphic novel.

**THIRTEEN QUESTION METHOD**

*Ulin, David L.*

Outpost19 (169 pp.)

$18.50 paper | Oct. 3, 2023

9781944853907

A visit from a troubled female neighbor kicks off a strange series of events for a man who struggles to distinguish between reality and tulpas—“invention[s] of my mind.”

The unnamed man, who is divorced and unemployed, lives alone in an unglamorous section of Hollywood with “nothing to do and all the time in the world to do it.” He knows his kohl-eyed visitor, Corinna, only from her daily bouts of screaming. She says she has come to apologize for the protagonist, who gets badly clawed himself—Corinna does it.” He knows his kohl-eyed visitor, Corinna, only from her daily bouts of screaming. She says she has come to apologize for her inheritance fight with her hated stepmother, Sylvia. For $200, he agrees to pay a visit to Sylvia to shake her up but then quickly melts in her haughty presence. On a subsequent uninvited visit to her lavish home, he learns more than he wants to know via a flash drive containing a video of a dominatrix-clad Sylvia whipping her bound and gagged late husband. With wildfires raging on the outskirts of the city—“purgatory” for the protagonist, who gets badly clawed himself—Corinna meets an untimely end. Or at least he thinks she’s dead after burying her in a shallow grave. Reminiscent of Iain Reid’s *I’m Thinking of Ending Things*, with its unreliable, unnamed narrator and twisted turns, and taking cues from classic noir and devil-at-the-crossroad blues, the novel is one long blast of existential despair. Ulin’s frequent needle drops and minilectures on blues songs (including “Corinne, Corinna”) weakly engage with the narrative. And deriving the title of the book and its 13 chapters from a Chuck Berry novelty tune is too clever by half. But the ill wind whipping through these pages leaves its mark.

The concept doesn’t work, but the visions are intense.
Margot became a beloved figure in Poppy's life through secret descriptions of her(her). Poppy's struggles with her body image often feel shoehorned into the plot, and her relationship with her mother—far more interesting than the book's romance—isn't explored deeply.

Six months later, Margot is dead and Poppy learns the truth: Margot ran a writers colony at her villa on the French Riviera, and she left it to Poppy to keep or sell, with two stipulations: Poppy must remain in France for at least six months, and she must draft a book while she's there. When Poppy arrives, she's met with gorgeous vistas, a handsome man who works for The Colony, and a life-changing $700,000 offer to sell the estate. Is this Poppy's big chance to become a writer or to get out for good?

Poppy's struggles with her body image often feel shoehorned into the plot, and her relationship with her mother—far more interesting than the book's romance isn't explored deeply enough. But the author deftly captures how it feels to be of a certain age without possessing the life one had hoped for, and descriptions of the sun-soaked French Riviera are rich and vivid.

A heartfelt debut.

Food, family, and sex drive this intimate novel about the difficult search for true connections.

After the tragic death of his boyfriend, Cam returns to Houston adrift, struggling with drug and sex addiction, and often seeing Kai's ghost. He gets a job as a bartender and finds himself pulled into the life and family of TJ, his former best friend, from whom he had drifted. Cam's grief and TJ's resentment keep them from fully reconciling, while Cam's addictions slowly overpower him. Readers of Washington's other work will find a familiar style and themes here. There are several narrators who tell the story in sections, some as short as a sentence or two. The characters are rarely alone but feel isolated or alienated from their families. For a book driven by dialogue, the characters often talk at a slant, not quite saying what's actually on their minds. The characters are part of both biological and built families. Cam and TJ grew up together and are closer than brothers.

In TJ's family bakery, grief over Kai's death creates another network. Characters find themselves pushed and pulled from their families in an often futile attempt to get away. Many of the characters are happiest when they're cooking or eating because that allows them to communicate without the burden of words. As Kai says, “My family taught me the difference between acceptance, allowance, and understanding. Also: just being. Sometimes they overlap. Usually, they don't.”

Washington brilliantly commits to his style and preoccupations in a novel about the often winding journey to family.
a loving stepfather. Watkins’ protagonists want to rise above traumatic childhoods but fear, often correctly, that they are failing as parents and spouses. The politics of race are a given in these stories, and equally important are the socioeconomic differences—money, social status, education—that cause divisions difficult to surmount. “Cutting Horse” is an aria about the doomed attempts of a “part gangster, part cowboy” to reinvent himself for his genteel accountant wife. Watkins powerfully depicts unsustainable relationships, but she offers solace in the tough-minded love story “Moving the Animal,” about a woman caring for her husband after his stroke. In the final story, “Time After,” a sister’s search for the brother she rejected out of religious rigidity reveals love’s redemptive possibilities.

Granular yet transcendent storytelling.

THE DELI DIARIES
Weber, Ella
Latah Books (292 pp.)
$19.95 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
9781957607160

A woman ponders life and sandwich meats in this debut novel. Della is 31, back in her hometown of Omaha, Nebraska, after a bad breakup, living in her parents’ basement. Despite her art degree, she’s picked up a job at the local supermarket and spends her days slicing meat and cheese for the customers who make their ways to the deli counter while also bantering with the wide array of characters who find themselves working there. The novel is a stream-of-consciousness tour through a shift that is at once one day and many days, with Della pontificating on life, reality shows, dating, the patriarchy, and everything in between, with deli-meat puns sprinkled throughout. The author has an MFA in printmaking, and every few pages the typography does something inventive, whether it be words twisted in the mockery of a smile, repeated pages of spiraling questions, or supermarket signs that draw the reader deeper into the mediocrity of Della’s daily life. The narrative winds around and around, frequently becoming surreal and almost nonsensical as it drifts, sometimes sentence to sentence, according to Della’s whims. Though it endeavors to poke fun at everyone, including housewives, millennials, gamers, Nebraskans, and middle-aged men, there is an undercurrent of derision. The novel’s whimsical nature precludes genuine feeling and so Della, the center of the narrative, spends the whole of the book laughing at, not with, the people around her, including herself. Though there is an illusion of warmth, the novel lacks the emotion or resonance that would have anchored its frivolity. Creative but held together with only superficial flavor, like deli meat sliced too thin.

I HEAR YOU’RE RICH
Williams, Diane
Soho (128 pp.)
$20.00 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781641939472

Miniscule stories from a master of the form.

In her latest collection, Williams delivers another serving of the teaspoon-sized stories with which she’s made her career. Some are as brief as a sentence or two while others span several pages. Either way, her sentences are constructed with an equally exquisite attention to detail. In “The Tune,” a narrator whistles along with a whistling bird. “He was my creature briefly,” Williams writes. “We didn’t even vary the volume.” That beauty at the granular level comes as a godsend because it’s sometimes difficult to say what these stories are about—or even what is happening on a literal level. Williams’ leaps in logic can seem to contain the width of continents. “I am afraid I’ve overdone it,” Connie said, and from the street I heard a hammer that was hitting metal somewhere,” Williams writes in the title story. It’s nearly impossible to categorize Williams’ work. She interrogates both the mundane and the metaphysical (“Could there be a speck of my original self anywhere—that I have left behind?”). In story after story, she upends what readers have grown to expect from traditional narratives—a beginning, middle, and end, to say the least—sometimes leaving us without any of those elements at all. A Williams story might be made up of a fragment of dialogue, a thought, a description, or some combination of these. But reading one after the other, something improbable occurs: The stories, in their very unpredictability, start to become predictable. You may not know where the stories will go, but you might start guessing where they won’t go.

Mysterious, gemlike, and strange, these stories end up oddly predictable by defying narrative conventions in similar ways.

MR. TEXAS
Wright, Lawrence
Knopf (336 pp.)
$29.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780593537374

An unknown West Texas cattle rancher is elected to the State House of Representatives and becomes a star.

The second novel from the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist is totally different from his first, The End of October (2020), a thriller about bioterrorism that appeared right at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also dramatically better. Tapping into his prodigious knowledge of and affection for the state of Texas, Wright gives us a novel about politics and people that at its best recalls classics like The Gay Place by
The novel moves nimbly and amusingly through the campaign of a powerful lobbyist named L.D. Sparks—"a silver-haired cynic in a gray western-cut suit and handmade boots"—shows up at the funeral of a longtime Democratic state rep, hoping to find a Republican who can take the seat. That turns out to be Sonny Lamb, who, with his wife, Lola, is barely keeping their herd going through the drought; they aren't having much luck expanding their own family, either. An Iraq vet with a checkered past, a currently incarcerated father, and no college degree, Sonny nonetheless has the heart of a hero, as we learn when he rushes into a burning barn to save a little girl's horse. The novel moves nimbly and amusingly through the campaign and Sonny's early days in Austin, with highlights including a feral-hog hunt and a fertility clinic debacle. When the newly elected Rep. Lamb chooses to follow his own lights rather than "dance with the one who brung [him]," he incites the ire of L.D. and his cabal, who immediately kick off plans for his ruin. Wright's prose is full of original and funny formulations—one character has "a smirk where his smile should be"; small towns between San Antonio and El Paso "cling" to the inner state like ticks on a dog; an obnoxious catfish farmer-turned-politico is "the brains behind the QAnon caucus," which is so dry it crackles. Just a few complaints: The sections about Sonny's plan to convert the wastewater produced by fracking into a solution for the drought sometimes seem to be turning into New Yorker articles, and the storyline about Sonny and Lola's marital troubles is not convincing.

Wonderful characters, Texas-sized helpings of wit and insight, and, believe it or not, a vision of post-partisan redemption.

**THE HIVE AND THE HONEY**

Marysue Rucci Books (160 pp.)

Widows, orphans, and refugees from Korea make their ways across alien landscapes in seven new stories.

Yoong's work, whether in novels or short fiction, tends to create miniature mysteries, but his latest is all unanswered questions and old regrets. In the opener, "Bosun," a life of crime leads to one of life's crossroads for an ex-con working at a Canadian casino. Cold war politics provide the backdrop but not the drama in "Komarov," which finds a North Korean maid who's lived in Europe for years traveling to Russia circa 1980 to reunite with the son she left behind, now a professional fighter. Yoong's interest in history also extends further back in two stories. The first, "At the Post Station," is set in 1608 and follows a feudal samurai on a diplomatic mission, while "The Hive and the Honey" is an epistolary ghost story in the form of a letter from a solider to his uncle written on the steppes of Eastern Russia in 1881. Most of the stories are little more than fleeting moments in the lives of the Korean diaspora, such as "Cromer," in which the children of North Korean defectors find their domestic happiness in London interrupted by a strange boy. There's a pervasive atmosphere of loneliness and forced solitude as reunions go awry and destinies lay unfulfilled, but there's also the steely stubbornness of people who have no choice but to keep going. These feelings are palpable in the final two stories, starting with "Person of Korea," in which a 16-year-old boy is orphaned by the death of his uncle and sets off for a remote island where he hopes to be reunited with his father, a guard who works at the prison where the boy's grandfather was once confined. Finally, "Valley of the Moon" chronicles the life of a man whose trespasses against others eventually translate into violence against his children.

Stories that echo with the loss, regret, and hope of migrants and nomads.

**THE PREMONITION**

Yoshimoto, Banana

Trans. by Asa Yoneda

Counterpoint (256 pp.)

$24.00 | Oct. 3, 2023

A young woman's relationship with her eccentric aunt leads her to startling revelations about her life and her past. Nineteen-year-old Yayoi is haunted by an inability to remember her past. She has an uncanny sense of the future, however: She can often sense who will be on the phone when it begins ringing. After an odd vision in her family's bathroom, she becomes unsettled enough to leave home, landing on the doorstep of her young aunt, Yukino. Yukino is only about 11 years Yayoi's senior, but she has already settled into a "spinster" persona, living alone in a large, cluttered house and teaching music at a local high school. When Yayoi begins to press Yukino for answers to questions she has about her blurry past, the pieces of Yayoi's past—and future—begin to fall into place. This short novel was first published in Japan in 1988, but its floaty interiority feels timeless. (Even Yukino's obsession with Friday the 13th films still feels plausible.) In some ways, this is an archetypal coming-of-age story about being young and needing to leave home in order to gain clarity, but both the style and the plot particulars (including a slightly off-kilter love story subplot) set it apart. Translator Yoneda elegantly renders Yoshimoto's synesthetic descriptions and atmospheric settings, which range from Tokyo to numerous rural locales. Yoshimoto has become a happier writer—or at least more interested in writing happy characters—as her career has unfolded. But this melancholy bildungsroman acknowledges the way that leaving behind adolescence can evoke the bittersweet sensation of waking up from a strange and vivid dream. "Only by coming through it," Yayoi thinks of her visit to Yukino, "could I get to living the rest of my life."

Worth the 35-year wait for Yoshimoto's Anglophone fans.
“Mournful and luscious, a gothic novel for the twilight of the Anthropocene Era.”

LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

Zhang, C Pam
Riverhead (240 pp.)
$27.00 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780593538241

Climate disaster provides both setting and a sense of urgency to Zhang’s second novel.

“I fled to that country because I would have gone anywhere, done anything, for one last taste of green sharp enough to pierce the caul of my life.” A cloud of smog has enveloped the Earth, hiding the sun and killing most of the planet’s food crops. A young chef takes a job at an “elite research community” perched atop an Italian mountain. Her employer is enigmatic and unnerving. His daughter is brilliant and headstrong. And the chef soon discovers that she is imprisoned in a simulacrum of paradise bound by secrets and ghosts. But, as she cooks lavish meals for those who can afford to escape the smog, she has access to crème fraîche, strawberries, and a French breed of chicken that should be extinct. To say that the narrator represents the moral center of this universe is not to say that she is incorruptible. This is, among other things, a story of what survival looks like in a world riven by gross inequality, and the narrator’s choices are driven by self-interest. Often, those choices come with a side order of self-loathing—a familiar dynamic for many participating in late capitalism. None of this, however, should suggest that Zhang has written a manifesto. Instead, she reminds us of what it’s like to be embodied and living on Earth with sumptuous scenes of food and sex. Zhang earned bountiful accolades—including her second novel.

Mournful and luscious, a gothic novel for the twilight of the Anthropocene Era.

MYS TERY

ANY POT IN A STORM

Balzo, Sandra
Severn House (224 pp.)
$31.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
97814448306749

Wisconsin coffee shop owner Maggy Thorsen proves that she can solve murders even when she’s outside her home venue.

It’s not clear at first why Maggy’s business partner, Sarah Kingston, wants to leave Brookhills to travel to the frigid northern reaches of Wisconsin and attend a writers workshop at Payne Lodge, the remote family home of Lita Payne, part owner of the Brookhills Observer. The workshop promises to be an emotional disaster since its host, acid-tongued Observer editor Kate McNamara, insists that the attendees center their writing on their most traumatic personal experiences. Soon enough, it’s a literal disaster as well. A storm cuts off power to the house, depriving everyone of light and heat. And when the inevitable bodies start to crop up, there’s no way to call the police since the isolated lodge is, of course, out of cellphone range. Here’s where shopkeeper-cozy veteran Maggy shows her adaptability, shifting seamlessly into old-dark-house mode. Far from the comforts of her suburban home base, she becomes a wary hunter, alert to the dangers that surround her, protective of her fellow storm-soaked refugees, and, most important of all, able to pierce the veil of deception that temporarily shields the culprits. It isn’t easy to unravel the tangled motives that drive this cascade of crimes, but Maggy proves herself up to the challenge.

An inventive mashup of cozy subgenres.

GRAVE EXPECTATIONS

Bell, Alice
Vintage (352 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9780593470633

How do you solve a murder when you don’t know who the victim is?

Claire Hendricks has a leg up on your-run-of-the-mill sleuth: Her BFF Sophie is a sassy teenage ghost who helps Claire communicate with the dead.

The live woman and the ghost—who died in the 1990s under mysterious circumstances—travel around England performing séances, and now they’re heading to Wilbourne Major, where they’ve been hired by Figgy Wellington-Forge to entertain at her grandmother’s birthday party. Three generations of Wellington-Forges gather at the family estate, where, unfortunately, Nana dies the night before her party. This simultaneously casts a pall over the festivities and leads Claire on a quest: Nana, in her first moments on the other side, sees a sad-looking ghost wandering through the library and begs Claire to figure out who it is and how they died. With the help of Figgy’s brother Basher and nonbinary nibbling, Alex, Claire is able to pin down Nana’s birthday party the year before as the site of the murder and one of the guests as the victim. Claire, who usually has little company other than Sophie and the rest of the dead, revels in her newfound friendships with Basher and Alex even as she turns a skeptical eye to the rest of their family. The next few days see Claire following a series of clues (with help from local ghosts) to try to figure out if a Wellington-Forge is in fact a murderer and which unlucky party guest died. But Claire has a secret in her past, and her excitement is clouded by anxiety: Will she be abandoned when the truth is revealed? There are certainly a few missteps in this mystery. The sprawling family, for example,
could have stood to be a little less sprawling (maybe Bell could have cut out a generation?) as the many posh-named characters are hard to keep track of. And while Bell occasionally mistakes cheap one-liners for wit, there is just enough humor and heart to keep readers amused.

A goofy supernatural whodunit.

**DEATH THREAT**

*Brandman, Michael*

Poisoned Pen (356 pp.)

$16.99 paper | Sept. 12, 2023

9781728277356

The death of his old LAPD mentor sparks Buddy Steel's memory of a 10-year-old case.

Itching to get promoted from officer to detective in the Hollywood Division in 2012, Buddy sees a shortcut to his dream when Deputy Commander Jeremy Logan asks him to take a leading role in an operation targeting Los Pacos, a drug cartel preparing to offer interested clients a super-high grade of meth. But the price is equally high. Logan wants Buddy to masquerade as a Los Pacos client to replace Officer Nicholas Morgan, another cop who posed as a well-heeled buyer before he was executed. And the reason Logan’s chosen such an inexperienced officer as Buddy for the job is that he has a history with Officer Kara Machado, who’s already under the covers with Francisco Reyes, Pacos head of operations and heir apparent to the whole megalith. After hemming and hawing for less than a minute, Buddy agrees, but the nature of his job changes the instant he spots Kara with Francisco and she mouths, “Help me.” Now Buddy sees his job not as infiltrating Los Pacos but as exfiltrating the ex-lover who wouldn’t commit to him. Francisco, who’s not so distracted by the anti-police riots roiling the city that he hasn’t sussed out that his bedmate isn’t to be trusted, whisk her off to Mexico; Buddy enlists three old Marine buddies to make sure his improbable off-the-books rescue comes off. After a slow start that seems designed to remind fans what a tough maverick Buddy is, there’s nothing to slow them down as the tale hurtles toward its eminently predictable climax.

A speedy read that’s even more one-dimensional than Buddy’s first four adventures, which is saying a lot.

**MURDER BY INVITATION ONLY**

*Cambridge, Colleen*

Kensington (304 pp.)

$27.00 | Sept. 26, 2023

9781496742568

A prewar-set homage to Agatha Christie’s *A Murder Is Announced,* with the famous author playing a mostly offstage role.

While she’s waiting for the delivery of the new vacuum cleaner Agatha and her husband, Max Mallowan, have ordered, Phyllida Bright, the housekeeper at Mallowan Hall, opens an invitation to neighboring Beecham House, where “A Murder will Occur / Tonight.” Since Agatha and Max are staying in London, they can’t attend the festivities, but Agatha encourages Phyllida, who by now has quite the reputation as an amateur sleuth, to go in her stead. So Phyllida’s on hand when aspiring theatrical producer Clifton Wokesley, who’s rented Beecham House, announces a Murder Game, lies down to assume the role of the victim, and then never gets up again. Beatrice Wokesley, his wife and Phyllida’s best friend, is running late. When Sam arrives, she reports that her younger brother, Marcus, is visiting and thinks he might be the one else accuses of having killed their host. The delayed arrival of DI Cork gives Phyllida plenty of time to take a leading role in Constable Greensticks’ tedious interviews of the suspects and then adjourn to their bedrooms, which she thoroughly searches without authorization. After Brixton predictably removes himself from the suspect list by getting shot, it seems that anyone
“A rich and reeking swamp full of exploitation, despair, violence, and summary justice.”

BOOMTOWN
Carter, A.F.
Mysterious Press (312 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
978163164532

Capt. Delia Mariola of the Baxter Police struggles to contain a tidal wave of felonies spewing forth uncontrolled from a place where she has no jurisdiction.

Moments after Nissan announced its plans to build a new auto assembly plant just over the line in Sprague County, Boomtown, an enclave of trailers and Quonset huts financed by shadowy figures who’d just as soon stay shadowy, sprang up to accommodate all those construction workers. Faced with non-negotiable deadlines for every stage, the workers are naturally eager to fill their time off with life’s simple pleasures: drugs, gambling, whores. New York gang leader Ricky Ricci, spotting an opportunity from more than a thousand miles away, has designated ambitious Charlie Setter manager of Boomtown’s criminal operations. That’s why Charlie, in Carter’s opening scene, is driving through town with the body of overdosed prostitute Corey Miller in his trunk, ultimately ditching her in Oakland Gardens when enforcer Dominick Costa announces that the ground is too frozen to dig a grave. Determined to end any competition from the Horde, a local gang, Charlie executes biker/pimp Titus Klint when he won’t listen to reason, and the discovery of both corpses puts him squarely in the crosshairs of Delia—and of Aaron and Maggie Miller, Corey’s father and sister, who respond without advance notice to a “DO YOU KNOW THIS WOMAN?” poster bent on revenge and highly skeptical that it can be brought about through official channels.

Carter uses the alternating perspectives of Charlie, Delia, and Maggie to explore the moral, legal, and sociological depths of Boomtown, subordinating mysterymongering to a pitiless anatomy of a Midwestern hell. The most striking feature of Carter’s representation of Delia is that although she’s utterly tough and professional in her job and open about her relationship with child-abuse investigator Zoe Parillo, she’s surprisingly bashful about appearing with Zoe in public as a couple in her conservative Midwestern town. This conflict at once humanizes her and complicates her relationship to the hometown she’s sworn to protect and serve.

A rich and reeking swamp full of exploitation, despair, violence, and summary justice.
gangs and the Klan, which doesn’t like Black musicians. Fred’s wise and steady Aunt Lucy is warned to tell him to “watch out” by an anonymous phone call they assume comes from the Klan, but Elizabeth comes up with a plan to disarm the Klan’s suspicion and hatred by smothering the members of their ladies’ auxiliary club with niceness and cookies. More practically, Fred suggests that Elizabeth, who’s met gangsters before, call on Al Capone to ask him to deal with the Klan. Elizabeth, who’s long deferred to her high-strung, unlovable mother, finally loses her temper and decides to move out. With Lucy’s help, she looks at apartments but decides that a house will be more suitable for her needs. Before she manages to check out the houses, she’s kidnapped by gangsters but manages to escape, an escape that helps change her mind about marrying Fred. Unfortunately, the Frank Lloyd Wright house that most attracts her is occupied by mob members. A quick marriage and a get-out-of-town plan still leave the newlyweds exposed to danger. An adventurous tale.

MURDER AT A CAPE BOOKSTORE
Day, Maddie
Kensington (288 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Aug. 22, 2023
9781496740557

An officious chamber of commerce director meets an untimely end.
Although Wagner Lavoie has plenty of thoughts about how to promote small business in his hometown of Westham, Massachusetts, some of them seem pretty out there. Is it really a good idea to plan a spring festival in March, when the ground in Cape Cod is barely thawed? Or to cajole local merchants to offer freebies when there’s no guarantee of any financial gain? Mackenzie Almeida, owner of Mac’s Bikes, isn’t the only storekeeper to bridle at Lavoie’s enthusiasm for the unexpected but welcome adventure. Now, a week before the scheduled opening, Bria is jolted by discovering a stranger stabbed to death in one of Bella Bella’s upstairs bedrooms. In a panic, she calls her friend Rosalie Vivaldi even before calling police. Bria’s closest friends rally to her side, along with her mother, Fifetta D’Abruzzo, and even the chilly Imperia. Bria, afraid that the murder will become one more reason for the larger Positanesi community to reject her, does her best to solve the case on her own. But there are many looming questions. Who is the dead stranger? How did he find his way to Bella Bella? Why was he in possession of a bag filled with counterfeit lire, a currency no longer in use? Even if these may take a village larger Positanesi community to reject her, does her best to solve the case on her own. But there are many looming questions. Who is the dead stranger? How did he find his way to Bella Bella? Why was he in possession of a bag filled with counterfeit lire, a currency no longer in use? Even if these may take a village to answer, Bria’s adopted home proves itself up to the challenge. A promising debut highlights the pleasures of the sunny Amalfi coast.

MURDER IN AN ITALIAN VILLAGE
Falco, Michael
Kensington (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781496742131

Murder threatens an Italian innkeeper’s dream.
To the Positanesi, Bria Bartolucci, who grew up in neighboring Ravello, might as well have been from Australia. But when her husband, Carlo, announced he was buying a bed-and-breakfast in the seaside town, Bria was swept up in his enthusiasm for the unexpected but welcome adventure. Now, a year later, Bria’s on the verge of unveiling Bella Bella, although without Carlo, who was killed in a plane crash. Her determination to open despite her loss is a tribute to her love for Carlo and her desire to provide for their 8-year-old son, Marco, in her own right. (Carlo’s immensely rich mother, Imperia, has already set up a trust fund that will secure Marco’s future.) A week before the murder threatens an Italian innkeeper’s dream. To the Positanesi, Bria Bartolucci, who grew up in neighboring Ravello, might as well have been from Australia. But when her husband, Carlo, announced he was buying a bed-and-breakfast in the seaside town, Bria was swept up in his enthusiasm for the unexpected but welcome adventure. Now, a year later, Bria’s on the verge of unveiling Bella Bella, although without Carlo, who was killed in a plane crash. Her determination to open despite her loss is a tribute to her love for Carlo and her desire to provide for their 8-year-old son, Marco, in her own right. (Carlo’s immensely rich mother, Imperia, has already set up a trust fund that will secure Marco’s future.) A week before the scheduled opening, Bria is jolted by discovering a stranger stabbed to death in one of Bella Bella’s upstairs bedrooms. In a panic, she calls her friend Rosalie Vivaldi even before calling police. Bria’s closest friends rally to her side, along with her mother, Fifetta D’Abruzzo, and even the chilly Imperia. Bria, afraid that the murder will become one more reason for the larger Positanesi community to reject her, does her best to solve the case on her own. But there are many looming questions. Who is the dead stranger? How did he find his way to Bella Bella? Why was he in possession of a bag filled with counterfeit lire, a currency no longer in use? Even if these may take a village to answer, Bria’s adopted home proves itself up to the challenge. A promising debut highlights the pleasures of the sunny Amalfi coast.

DEATH ON THE DOWN BEAT
An Orchestral Fantasy of Detection
Farr, Sebastian
Poisoned Pen (208 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9781728278599

Murder during a concert performance kicks off a genuine curiosity: a one-off by pseudonymous music scholar and journalist Eric Walter Blom (1888-1959) that’s been mostly forgotten since its first publication in 1941. Almost none of the performers in the Manningpool Municipal Orchestra have a kind word for Sir Noel Grampian, their late conductor. He was sarcastic and abusive, and his wife, Letty, hadn’t lived with him for years, ever since she found out about his extramarital dalliances. But who could have ended his career with such shocking decisiveness by shooting him dead in the
middle of Richard Strauss' tone poem Ein Heldenleben? DI Alan Hope, the Scotland Yard detective who'd just left Maningpool to avoid hearing a concert in which Grampian might have been hard on his wife Julia's friend and Lady Letty's sister, Beatrice Gillighan, who plays second harp for the orchestra on those rare occasions when a score calls for two harps, is promptly called back to investigate. In a series of letters and other documents he sends to Julia, he explains why Grampian must have been shot by someone actually in the orchestra, someone who took advantage of a particularly noisy outburst in which the composer imitated, and now concealed, gunfire. The suspects and their motives are, as even Hope acknowledges, utterly forgettable, and his letters to Julia, cloyingly facetious. But the puzzle itself, drawing on details the author helpfully provides about the decorum of orchestral performance generally and Ein Heldenleben in particular, is first-rate.

A one-of-a-kind treat from the golden age best enjoyed with appropriate musical accompaniment.

HARLEM AFTER MIDNIGHT

Hare, Louise
Berkley (352 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 29, 2023
9780593439289

Disembarking from the Queen Mary after a trans-Atlantic tango with murder, a mixed-race British singer finds more of the same in 1936 New York.

When the Broadway gig Lena Aldridge has been promised vanishes upon her arrival, she's left with no prospects and little cash on hand. Luckily, Will Goodman, the bandleader she took up with on the crossing, offers a job. Will tells Julia, his wife, Lady Letty, and Lady Letty's sister, Beatrice Gillighan, who plays second harp for the orchestra on those rare occasions when a score calls for two harps, is promptly called back to investigate. In a series of letters and other documents he sends to Julia, he explains why Grampian must have been shot by someone actually in the orchestra, someone who took advantage of a particularly noisy outburst in which the composer imitated, and now concealed, gunfire. The suspects and their motives are, as even Hope acknowledges, utterly forgettable, and his letters to Julia, cloyingly facetious. But the puzzle itself, drawing on details the author helpfully provides about the decorum of orchestral performance generally and Ein Heldenleben in particular, is first-rate.

A one-of-a-kind treat from the golden age best enjoyed with appropriate musical accompaniment.

HANGING BY A THREAD

Howell, Dorothy
Kensington (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781496740427

A local murder puts pressure on the owner of a sewing studio who's determined to make her adopted hometown into the perfect host for an upcoming conference.

Abbey Chandler is almost happy that her life in LA has crumbled and forced her to start over in the aptly named Hideaway Grove. After all, she has tons of fond memories of spending her summers in the little town with her aunt Sarah and enjoying all the special local shops, though her aunt's bakery, Sarah's Sweets, will always be her favorite. But times have changed, and now Hideaway Grove's shop owners are feeling the crunch of a shrinking economy. And nobody feels the pressure as much as Aunt Sarah, especially now that notorious gold digger Blaine Hutchinson has decided to open a competing bakery with all the bells and whistles. Sheesh. Abbey has money woes of her own, too. She loves her volunteer work transforming donated pillowcases into dresses to be sent to African girls in remote villages, but her own sewing studio needs some contracts that will generate income or it'll go kaput. Abbey and Aunt Sarah's worries are made worse when Blaine's bakery plans are derailed by murder. Abbey's relief at losing a competitor is dwarfed by her fears that Sarah will be accused of the crime. At a time when all the business owners want to make sure Hideaway Grove is putting its best foot forward as the host of a women's conference they hope will offer economic respite, Abbey resolves to solve the case and clear Aunt Sarah from suspicion.

A sewing-focused cozy that lacks the sparkle that would set it apart.

MRS. CLAUS AND THE TROUBLE WITH TURKEYS

Ireland, Liz
Kensington (304 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Sept. 26, 2023
9781496737830

Holidays are a special challenge when you're married to Santa.

April Claus had to put up with a lot when she agreed to marry Nick, the current incumbent in a long line of Santa Clauses. Winters at the North Pole are brutal, and the wrangling among the elves, snowmen, and reindeer can get on anyone's nerves. So when elves Jingles and Butterbean suggest bringing a Thanksgiving festival to Santaland, April looks forward to a little touch of home. Of course, she encounters one challenge after another getting Santalanders with the program. For Sparkletoe's Thanksgiving Parade to march down Festival Boulevard...
in Christmastown, there has to be a marching band, but the only Thanksgiving song she can think to teach its members is “Over the River and Through the Woods,” which they play on repeat but not always on key. The reindeer quarrel over who’ll get to pull Santa’s sleigh, with patricians Comet and Dasher locking horns with humbler deer, like April’s sister-in-law Lucia’s pet Quasar. The local grocery can’t get enough frozen turkeys, creating long waiting lists on which April, never the most organized of housekeepers, finds herself at the very end. And to top it off, Gobbles, who was supposed be the main course at the festive meal at Castle Kringle, has now vanished. But these holiday hassles fade into the background when Nick’s cousin, Elspeth Claus, is poisoned at a family dinner and April’s deviled eggs seem to be to blame. Constable Crinkles is reluctant to arrest Mrs. Claus, and to be fair, there’s no place to put her, since the constabulary is filled to the brim with papier-mâché doughnut holes destined for the police department’s parade float. But if April doesn’t find the real culprit soon, she fears she will never be able to play bass drum in the Santaland orchestra again.

A bonanza for whimsy fans everywhere.

“**A slow-burning, spellbinding whodunit.**”

**REYKJAVÍK**

* Jónasson, Ragnar & Katrín Jakobsdóttir
* Trans. by Victoria Cribb
* Minotaur (384 pp.)
* $28.00 | Sept. 5, 2023

The search for answers about a missing schoolgirl takes 50 years to pay off. Fifteen-year-old Lára Marteinsdóttir, who’d contracted to work the summer of 1966 as a domestic helper for former Supreme Court of Iceland barrister Óttar Öskarsson and his wife, Ólöf Blöndal, in their retreat on the little island of Videy, announces one morning that she’s packed her bags and is leaving early to rejoin her parents in Reykjavík. The couple are jolted by her early departure, but her parents are far more jolted when she never shows up. Since not many young women go missing in Iceland, the case, first investigated by police officer Kristján Kristjánsson, swiftly becomes a cause célèbre, but that doesn’t lead to a solution—not in 1956, not in 1966, not in 1976. It’s not until 1986, on the eve of Reykjavík’s 200th anniversary, that Valur Robertsson, a promising reporter for the struggling weekly *Vikabladid*, gets a phone call from someone calling herself Julia that so whets his interest in the case that he keeps overpromising developments to editor Dagbjartur Steinsson, who in turn pushes him harder and harder and even leaks a wildly premature announcement of his upcoming scoop to other news outlets. Valur focuses on a quartet of old friends—Öskarsson himself, city councillor Páll Óskarsson, developer Högni Eyfjörd, and wholesaler Finnur Stephensen, whose dying words to his actress wife were “You have to go to Videy”—who regularly met on the island. When Valur is unable to deliver the goods, his sister, Sunna Róbertsdóttir, puts her dissertation in comparative literature on hold and takes over the investigation just as Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev announce their plans to meet in Reykjavík for their historic summit.

**REEFS, ROYALS, RECKONINGS**

* Keyse-Walker, John
* Severn House (224 pp.)
* $31.99 | Sept. 5, 2023

A royal visit provides a host of challenges for the indomitable Constable Teddy Creque. The Royal Virgin Islands Police Force not only serves as the crime-fighting unit of Tortola, Anegada, and more than 50 other islands in the Caribbean archipelago; it also has a significant diplomatic function. So when Princess Portia, seventh in line to the British throne, comes to town, Teddy, along with Inspector Rollie Stoutt and Teddy’s mentor, Deputy Commissioner Howard Lane, is expected to help host the official reception. Teddy’s friend Lord Anthony Wedderburn, Lord of the Thetford—known throughout Anegada as De White Rasta from his not-too-distant ganja-enhanced days—helps him brush up on royal protocol. And the gentle presence of Teddy’s domestic partner, lovely Jeanne Trengrouse, completes the picture of a well-set-up young officer. The illusion of civil and domestic tranquility is shattered when gunshots ring out and Teddy finds Lane standing over the body of his wife, Letitia, his weapon drawn. Since the Deputy Commissioner is the prime suspect, it falls to Teddy to investigate. Teddy’s path, as always, is to follow regulation. But his heart naturally wants to protect his mentor. Watching Teddy try to reconcile his competing instincts while struggling with the delicacy required in interrogating privileged and capricious royal witnesses provides a treat both for readers new to the franchise and for die-hard Teddy Creque fans.

**MISS MORTON AND THE SPIRITS OF THE UNDERWORLD**

* Lloyd, Catherine
* Kensington (304 pp.)
* $27.00 | Aug. 22, 2023

A lady’s companion and her shrewd and curious employer take up sleuthing when a friend of theirs becomes a murder suspect.

When Lady Caroline Morton and her sister, Susan, are left penniless by the death of their father, the Earl of Morton, Caroline becomes the companion to Mrs. Frogerton, whose
money comes from trade and who hopes that the dowry for her beautiful daughter, Dorothy, may be large enough to arrange an aristocratic marriage. Their acquaintance Dr. Harris, who’s taken a job in London, soon becomes a suspect in a murder investigation. Mrs. Frogherton, who’s been attending séances at the home of Madam Lavinia Dubois, convinces the skeptical Caroline to join her at one. Among the guests are a masked young woman; the equally skeptical Professor Brown, who’s doing a study on mesmerism and spiritualism; and others desperate to hear from loved ones. Caroline is shaken when Madam gives her a note with information about her that very few others would know. Dr. Harris offers to accompany her to another séance in order to judge Madam Lavinia’s authenticity; there he meets Brown, who’s a colleague of his. The event is interrupted by an irate Sir Alfred Fielding, who barges in to extract his mother, Lady Fielding. Harris tells Caroline that he needs to speak to Madam Lavinia privately and asks her to accompany him back to her house the next day—and when they arrive, they find the woman dead. Harris rifles through her desk and appropriates some papers, including letters addressed to both himself and Caroline. Provoked by the police, who fasten on Harris as Madam’s most socially acceptable poisoner, the duo manage to fit snooping into their busy social schedule. If Madam was blackmailing some of her clients, the field of suspects is broad indeed.

A charming combination of mystery, Regency romance, and social mores.

MURDER AND MAMON
Mamansala, Mia P.
Berkley (288 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
9780593549162

A pair of new arrivals spell trouble for the indefatigable Filipina foodies of Shady Grove, Illinois.

The first arrival is homegrown: the laundromat Lila Macapagal’s godmothers—Ninang April, Ninang Mae, and Ninang June—are about to open next door to the dry cleaner Ninang June inherited from her late husband. Ultima Bolisay, whose family owns the town’s only laundromat, isn’t happy about the opening, and neither is whoever decorates the Calendar Crew’s establishment with spray-painted injunctions to “MIND YOUR BUSINESS.” (Wonder if these could be the same person.) The other arrival has come from halfway around the world: Ninang April’s niece Divina de los Santos, an art school graduate who’s visiting from the Philippines because she wants to keep up with her relatives, or check out her career prospects, or flirt with the locals, or put some distance between herself and something that happened back home. Almost from the get-go, Lila thinks there’s something off about Divina, but the bad buzz isn’t nearly enough to explain why the visitor is killed one night inside the new laundromat. Afraid that they’ll never be able to open the place, Lila’s godmothers want her to investigate, and when Jonathan Park, the retired police detective whose brother, dentist Jae Park, is Lila’s boyfriend, agrees to work his contacts to help her, she agrees. The mystery, as in Lila’s first three cases, is so consistently upstaged by the frenzy of delectable dishes lovingly prepared and consumed at Tita Rosie’s Kitchen, which Lila’s grandmother owns, and the neighboring Brew-ha Cafe run by Lila and her friends Elena Torres and Adeena Awan, that readers will be doubly surprised at the surprise unmasking.

Sorry, other food cozies. You can’t hold a candle to this mouthwatering franchise.

THE SPANISH DIPLOMAT’S SECRET
March, Nev
Minotaur (320 pp.)
$29.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781250855060

Murder on a trans-Atlantic ship, with a luxe collection of suspects. As his wife, Lady Diana Framji, twirls around the ballroom, former Indian soldier and occasional sleuth James Agnihotri, aka Jim O’Trey, is vomiting his rich dinner over the rail of the HMS Etruria. He’s approached by a concerned military veteran who turns out to be the eponymous diplomat. It’s 1894, and the “floating fortress” has an international guest list on its journey from Boston to Liverpool. James senses mystery and tension beneath the surface of the passengers, even Diana. His suspicions are confirmed when, shortly after he receives a note from the Spanish gentleman, who identifies himself as J. Nepomuceno and requests a meeting, the man is found garroted in his stateroom. Fearing that the ship will be detained in Liverpool until the killer is found, Capt. Hawley requests Jim’s assistance in solving the crime. The flow of the investigation and the circle of suspects have a classic feel right down to the characters’ names, from stewardess Edna Pickle and Dr. Witherspoon to guests Evangeline Pontin, Beau Lattibeaudiere, and Palmer Bly, and waiflike maid Dora Zu. March’s gift for elevated language nicely supports the period setting, and this third book in the series advances the core relationship between newlyweds Diana and James. Along the way to solving the intricate mystery, they banter like a shipboard Nick and Nora, and he eventually learns the source of her initial unease.

Familiar mystery tropes are skillfully woven into an entertaining vintage whodunit.
**MURDER AT THE ELMS**
*Maxwell, Alyssa*
Kensington (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 22, 2023
9781496736192

In 1901, an intrepid reporter confronts another case of murder among Newport’s wealthy denizens.

Although they call them cottages, wealthy socialites have built fabulous mansions they use just for Rhode Island’s summer season. Emma Cross, now Mrs. Derrick Andrews, has worked as a reporter for years, using her elite background to gain entree to society events. Though she’s inherited some money from the Vanderbilt side of her family and married a wealthy man, she still enjoys solving crimes and writing them up for the local newspaper, the *Newport Messenger*. Her first story after returning from her honeymoon is about a labor strike at The Elms, a new mansion built by Edward and Minnie Berwind (who are real historical figures). Everyone on their staff except for Ines the maid is demanding more time off. Refusing to meet their demands, Berwind fires them. A musical at The Elms to which Emma and Derrick have been invited is interrupted by the discovery of Ines’ body in the mansion’s coal tunnel. The maid, who was strangled, had certainly made enemies by her refusal to strike, but Emma thinks there may be more nefarious forces at work. A more shocking development for Rex Morton, one of the Berwinds’ guests, is that an extremely valuable necklace he owns has gone missing. Everyone wonders whether Ines and another missing servant also found strangled stole it. After alternating between snooping and soothing the wealthy guests, Emma discovers a number of secrets that make them all suspects and put her in danger.

**Combining mystery with real-life personalities from the Gilded Age makes for an entertaining and informative read.**

**MURDER OFF STAGE**
*Mile, Mary*
Severn House (224 pp.)
$31.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781448311798

Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford give full rein to the sleuthing sideline of the former vaudevillian who works for them.

Jessie Beckett has gone by many names in her career and made many friends. One of them is Adele Astaire, soon to leave for London with her brother, Fredly First, though, Adele invites Jessie to join her in watching a Pulitzer Prize–winning Broadway play. When leading man Allen Crenshaw is shot dead in front of a horrified crowd, Adele is more than willing to help Jessie do a little sleuthing, especially since it’s clear that newly minted Detective Benjamin Quinn isn’t up to the job and since Jessie’s own experiences helping LA detective Carl Delaney have proved her adept at gathering information. The gun used in the scene was supposed to contain blanks. So did actress Norah Rose change out the bullets to kill the leading man who’d recently dumped her? As a well-known lady’s man, Crenshaw had plenty of enemies, beginning with his wife, and a bit of digging turns up even more suspects. Quinn, who’s enamored of Adele, is more than happy to let Jessie investigate. New troubles arise when Jessie’s boyfriend breaks out of prison and shows up in New York, where Murder Inc. offers him a job in Cuba and he asks her to join him. Next to arrive is Delaney, an altogether better bet as a lover and a significant help in solving the twisty case.

**Movie stars, historical detail, and a clever mystery combine for a fun read.**

**RUSTED SOULS**
*Nickson, Chris*
Severn House (224 pp.)
$31.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781448311798

The 11th and final installment of Nickson’s Tom Harper series ties up all the loose ends and breaks your heart.

Harper is about to retire from the Leeds City Police, which he’s served for many years. He lives in a suburban house he bought after his wife, Annabelle, was diagnosed with dementia and could no longer run the Victoria public house; his daughter, Mary, who’s run a highly successful secretarial business since losing her fiance in the First World War, lives there with her parents, as does Annabelle’s nurse, Julia. The last few weeks before Harper’s retirement are filled with difficult and dangerous cases. Powerful Alderman Ernest Thompson, who’s being blackmailed over some letters he foolishly sent to the much younger Charlotte Radcliffe, asks Harper to recover them without publicity. As difficult as that case turns out to be, the problems caused by the group of former soldiers robbing jewelry stores are more serious, for they’ve carefully planned each robbery and gotten away clean in a matter of minutes until one of them kills a bystander. Harper, who uses a small group of trusted allies to investigate the blackmail, has trouble keeping things quiet when some of the young men in thrall to Charlotte start to turn up dead in what look like accidents. On top of that, the police expect a gang of female shoplifters and pickpockets to descend on Leeds, as they already have on several other cities. Despite all these trials and tribulations, dealing with Annabelle’s descent into her illness troubles Harper the most.

**An excellent procedural paints a painfully accurate portrait of dealing with dementia.**
Lee shares with her aunt. Lee’s human interest story about the Halloween festival is on track. In Perry’s tale, TV station program flake is found dead with a half-eaten candy corn cupcake by his side, rumors run wild, and Mrs. Claus herself as the sleuth who uncovers a murderous plot. A baking contest featuring candy corn causes a run on the product as bakers practice for a chance to win. When star baker Chestnut leaves the Silver Bell Bakery to open his own shop, taking Wink Jollyflake with him, the owner of Silver Bell is furious. After Jollyflake is found dead with a half-eaten candy corn cupcake by his side, rumors run wild, and Mrs. Claus decides that investigating herself is the only way to find the killer and keep Santaland’s Halloween festival on track. In Perry’s tale, TV station program director and part-time reporter Lee Barrett and her police-man boyfriend live in witchy Salem, Massachusetts, where the owner of the Pretty Party Bakery has gone missing, and his cat, Cupcake, has to be rescued from a tree in front of the house where she shares with her aunt. Lee’s human interest story about the cat plunges her into an investigation of the missing man, who has plenty of enemies despite his famously yummy triple-layer cupcakes.

Three different takes on Halloween and cupcakes that range from the historical to the fanciful.

A trio of Halloween-themed stories all featuring deadly cupcakes. O’Connor’s American heroine Tara Meehan’s search for Halloween decorations for her architectural salvage shop in Galway leads her to a curiosity shop, where she buys a painting that might provide a motive for murder. When Tara finds the shop owner dead, possibly poisoned by a Halloween cupcake, she’s both witness and suspect and must turn sleuth to extricate herself from a dangerous situation before she can enjoy an Irish Halloween. Ireland spins a Halloween fantasy set in Santaland, with Mrs. Claus herself as the sleuth who uncovers a murderous plot. A baking contest featuring candy corn causes a run on the product as bakers practice for a chance to win. When star baker Chestnut leaves the Silver Bell Bakery to open his own shop, taking Wink Jollyflake with him, the owner of Silver Bell is furious. After Jollyflake is found dead with a half-eaten candy corn cupcake by his side, rumors run wild, and Mrs. Claus decides that investigating herself is the only way to find the killer and keep Santaland’s Halloween festival on track. In Perry’s tale, TV station program director and part-time reporter Lee Barrett and her police-man boyfriend live in witchy Salem, Massachusetts, where the owner of the Pretty Party Bakery has gone missing, and his cat, Cupcake, has to be rescued from a tree in front of the house where she shares with her aunt. Lee’s human interest story about the cat plunges her into an investigation of the missing man, who has plenty of enemies despite his famously yummy triple-layer cupcakes.

HALLOWEEN CUPCAKE MURDER
O’Connor, Carlene, Carol J. Perry & Liz Ireland
Kensington (320 pp.)
$27.00 | Aug. 22, 2023
9781496740267

MR CAMPION’S MEMORY
Ripley, Mike
Severn House (224 pp.)
$31.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781448311088

Albert Campion’s nephew takes a moment at his father’s funeral to ask his uncle for help at the beginning of what turns out to be the most complex case Ripley has yet given him. Since Campion was never close to his younger brother, Baden, it’s no great breach of etiquette for Christopher Campion to ask what memories he can dredge up from 40 years ago. But Campion puts him off till they can have a quiet lunch together. That’s when he learns that his own name appears on a list of names headed “1932” and compiled by journalist David Duffy shortly before he was shot to death in his car. Duffy, whom Christopher had shown around McIntyre Tyres in his capacity as Sir Lachlan McIntyre’s PR flak, is also interested in Mary Gould, Henry Gould, Walter Lillman, someone identified only as “N.H.,” and one “L. McIntyre.” In the end, it turns out that Campion really does know what holds all these people together, but since he can’t remember very much about them to begin with, he uses his Scotland Yard connections to converse with McIntyre and several lesser lights. Interspersed chapters hearkening back to the crucial year of 1932 show a much younger Campion laboring to discover why the “gypsy” Shadrach Lee took the trouble to return a silver tankard Lady Cassandra Drinkwater had lost when her late second husband, the wastrel Maj. Edward Gideon, sold it, and a great many other family heirlooms, to cover his gambling debts. As present-day Campion recalls more and more of the past, the plot thickens in utterly unexpected ways; the only development that’s remotely predictable is the identification of Duffy’s killer.

NOW YOU SEE IT
Perry, Carol J.
Kensington (320 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Sept. 26, 2023
9781496743640

A mysterious death that’s connected to a newly minted museum has an amateur investigator wondering about a motive for murder.

The former Lee Kowalski, married and widowed as Lee Barrett, is settling into her newlyweds life as Lee Mondello, wife of Salem, Massachusetts, Det. Pete Mondello. Apart from changing her name, the biggest shift in Lee’s life is moving from the home she’d shared with her beloved Aunt Ibby into a home she shares with her husband that’s thankfully on the same block. The proximity allows the family’s shared feline, O’Ryan, to bestow his presence on both abodes, surely as God intended. Not only is Lee a woman of many names, she’s also a woman of many jobs. WICH-TV station manager Bruce Doan has cast her in the role of program director, field reporter, and, now, after a recent meeting, historical documentary executive director. While it’s a lot to take on, Lee’s never said no to a challenge, and she’s eager to begin Doan’s proposed project of documenting the inception of the Salem International Museum project, which Doan anticipates should be done in three weeks. Lee’s eager to dig in and learn about the “Seafaring New England” exhibit, but by the time she’s scheduled to film, a bigger museum story has broken. One of the men driving an armored car with museum artifacts is found dead under a leaf pile under what Pete calls definitely suspicious circumstances. Lee loops her historical project into this bigger story; but she’d never get anywhere investigating without the help of savvy O’Ryan—at least, according to him.

Smart humans and a smarter cat in a cozy that’s all about the characters doing the investigating.

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Smart humans and a smarter cat in a cozy that’s all about the characters doing the investigating.
A handsome demonstration that age-appropriate memory loss needn't keep a beloved franchise character down.

**MURDER AT MIDNIGHT**  
*Schellman, Katharine*  
Crooked Lane (320 pp.)  
$28.99 | Sept. 19, 2023  
9781639104321

Who slew the lowlife lothario? Widow and sometime sleuth Lily Adler is in Hertfordshire to attend a gathering celebrating Christmas 1816, hosted by her former brother-in-law Sir John Adler and his mother, Lady Adler, who makes no secret of her wish that Lily would marry the courtly Matthew Spencer, who's also in attendance. While not anxious to remarry, Lily admires him and does not dismiss the idea. Her failure to object may surprise series fans, since the gathering also includes Capt. Jack Hartley, a supporting character in Lily's earlier mysteries. Dashing Jack, the closest friend of Lily's husband, Freddy, has been her confidant ever since Freddy's death. The large gathering is abuzz at a scandal involving Jack's sister, Amelia, and a reported indiscretion in the garden during a dance at the vicar's home. Amelia's complete silence on the matter does nothing to still the wagging tongues. The gentleman in question is also a guest who, after heavy snow requires everyone to spend the night, suffers the destiny foreshadowed in Schellman's title, transforming Sir John instantly from genial host to stern investigator. In his capacity as a magistrate, he assigns Amelia to his protective care. Convinced of Amelia's innocence, Lily begins her own investigation as discreetly as possible. After presenting a dauntingly large cast in her opening chapters, Schellman adroitly thickens the plot with juicy secrets and sinister backstories. The subplot of Lily's two suitors provides a blithe contrast to the dark mystery.

**THE SUNSET YEARS OF AGNES SHARP**  
*Swann, Leonie*  
Soho Crime (360 pp.)  
$27.95 | Aug. 29, 2023  
9781641294331

Swann follows up her tour de force *Three Bags Full* (2007) with a very English detective story in which the human characters are nearly as marginalized as the sheep who solved their shepherd's murder.

Agnes Sharp has never wanted to go gently into that good night. To serve her neighbors and keep her own social instincts humming, she's opened her home, Sunset Hall, first to Lillith Wright, then to an ever growing list of pensioners: blind former spy Bernadette; frequently addled Marshall; Winston, who uses a wheelchair; Hettie the tortoise; and Edwina, who practices yoga a great deal more mindfully than she bakes rock-hard biscuits. When the police visit to tell the residents about the fatal shooting of neighboring Mildred Puck, Agnes' overwhelming reaction is relief, because now she and her housemates can drag Lillith's corpse out of hiding and persuade Inspector Locke and Sgt. Tom Wink that both old ladies were shot by the same person. To Agnes' consternation, it turns out that they were indeed both shot by the same gun, that whoever killed them isn't finished, and that Marshall's introduced Nathan, his grandson, into the household without authorization. Agnes' memories of neighborhood dramas going back generations spark new directions for her sleuthing even as she wonders how reliable they are. Rooting the rhythms of her plot in all-too-real problems of aging—failures in mobility and memory, imprudent placements in eldercare facilities, hallucinations and confabulations, and the crowning indignity of being disbeliefed or dismissed—Swann creates a world so witty and playful that readers may need to keep reminding themselves that there really is a murderer out there, or in here.

**An antic, moving celebration of life’s final chapters.**

**THE MYSTERIOUS BOOKSHOP PRESENTS THE BEST MYSTERY STORIES OF THE YEAR 2023**  
Ed. by Towles, Amor  
Mysterious Press (500 pp.)  
$28.95 | Sept. 19, 2023  
9781616364488

Variety is the keynote for these 21 recent reprints and one century-old bonus story.

Both editor Towles and series editor Otto Penzler emphasize the central importance of dead bodies in mystery fiction, ignoring the fact that two of the stories they've chosen end with the entire cast still alive. Aaron Philip Clark, Tom Larsen, Michael Mallory, and Ashley Lister choose characters or settings—an undocumented mother helpless to get justice for her son's death, a corrupt Ecuadorian cop, a house cat fitted with a camera that records a murder in progress, a prostitute who shot the trafficker/witness she was hired to entertain—that provide welcome originality, and Lou Manfredo, Annie Reed, Anna Round, and Jessi Lewis showcase elegiac moments that are variously open-ended, the inconclusiveness of the last two especially effective. Most of the remaining stories tick the boxes for established but diverse subgenres. Victor Kreuter and Joseph S. Walker follow hit men who come out of retirement for one last score, Joslyn Chase's reopening of a cold case is an expertly compressed procedural. Andrew Child's latest Jack Reacher adventure is interesting mainly for its uncertainty about which minor details will provide springboards for action. Jeffery Deaver's cat-and-mouse game between a U.S. marshal and an explosively violent woman is notable for one of Deaver's trademark surprises halfway through. Derrick Belanger pens...
a deft Sherlock-ian pastiche; Kerry Hammond introduces a
darkly witty twist to her homage to Miss Marple; Sean McClus-
key salutes the more hard-boiled criminals Parker and Keller in
his tale of a no-holds-barred attorney seeking his wealthy cli-
ent’s kidnapped daughter. The best of these traditional stories
is Brendan DuBois’ predictable but perfectly turned account of
a wealthy fugitive who’s blackmailed by his gardener.

Edith Wharton’s 1926 “A Bottle of Perrier” sets a high bar
for everything that precedes it. Good thing it comes last.

**MRS. MORRIS AND THE WOLFMAN**

*Wilton, Traci*
Kensington (304 pp.)
$8.99 paper  |  Aug. 22, 2023
9781496741370

A Massachusetts B&B owner and her
resident ghost extend their history of
involvement in murders.

Grieving widow Charlene Morris, who
left Chicago to open a B&B in ghost-rid-
den Salem, has built a wonderful new life
with the help of handsome detective Sam Holden; Avery Shriver,
a teen who’s overcome many obstacles and is like a daughter to
her; and Dr. Jack Strathmore, the attractive spirit who haunts
her house. Charlene and Avery are attending the grand reopen-
ing of the Spellbound Movie Theatre to see a double bill of
classic Wolf Man films. Darren Shultz has poured plenty of
the fortune he’s made in the seasoned salt business into the
historic building in his wife Elise’s hometown, where her sister
Patty’s bakery will supply soft pretzels for the enterprise. It’s
bad enough when Elise apparently chokes to death on specialty
salted popcorn during the screening; it’s even worse when it
turns out that she was poisoned, marking Darren as the natural
suspect. Despite their recent disagreements over having chil-
dren and Elise’s suspicion that Darren had been cheating with
his creative muse, Klara Maxwell, Charlene doesn’t believe that
Darren killed his wife. Despite Sam’s reluctance to see Char-
lene involved in yet another murder case, he realizes that she
can extract much more information from suspects than he can.
With help from Jack, Avery, and Avery’s boyfriend, Seth, who
runs the popcorn booth, Charlene begins to turn up other pos-
sible candidates and a lot of dangerous secrets from the past.

A tasty tale for those who like their mysteries with a dash
of paranormal fantasy.

**THE HEXOLOGISTS**

*Bancroft, Josiah*
Orbit (368 pp.)
$18.99 paper  |  Sept. 26, 2023
9780316443302

Married couple Isolde and Warren Wilby, Hexologists and private investiga-
tors, must solve a royal mystery before
the kingdom collapses into chaos in the
first book in a new series.

When the royal secretary interrupts
the Wilbies’ teatime because the king is asking to be baked
alive into a cake, it’s just a normal day for the magical investi-
gators. It seems a blackmailer’s claim of an illegitimate heir is
creating a power vacuum, which means Luthland’s vulnerable will suffer all the
more. When a forest golem breaks down the cellar door and
heads straight for the royal secretary, that seals the deal: The
Wilbies take the case. Magic exists in the Wilbies’ world, one
strikingly similar to London during the Industrial Revolution,
and Iz is a student of hexegy—the casting of hexes. With Iz’s
powers and Warren’s social skills, as well as a large cast of side
characters that includes a librarian, a foodie dragon who lives
inside a magic carpet bag full of relics, and an alcoholic imp, the
mystery unravels into stranger and stranger revelations. If the
Hexologists can’t solve the case quickly, it could tear the king-
dom apart—literally and figuratively. While the book gets off to
a promising start, with action and intrigue bathed in delightfully
wry humor, the language soon begins to feel like it’s had a wres-
tling match with a thesaurus. The pacing and clarity sometimes
suffer from this cleverness, though the main characters are lik-
able and what you’d expect from a quick-quipping husband-and-
wife investigative team. They aren’t unique, but they are fun.
If Bancroft had spent more time developing them instead of
jumping from one side character to another and given them real
obstacles instead of a too-convenient history/tool/hex to solve
every problem that arises, this book could have been top-notch.
As it stands, this magical tale—ultimately about classism and
justice—should still find an audience in need of a chuckle and a
mystery to solve.

Characters and humor make this magic-meets-steampunk
novel worth checking out despite its shortcomings.
SWORD CATCHER
Clare, Cassandra
Del Rey (624 pp.)
$27.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780525619994

YA giant Clare makes her adult debut with a whirlwind epic fantasy featuring secret plots, ancient magic, and hidden identities.

The nobility of Castellane know Kel only as Prince Conor’s aristocratic cousin and closest confidant, but a select few know the truth: Kel is an orphan plucked from obscurity because he bears a passing resemblance to Conor, allowing him to take the prince’s place at public events when the palace head of security deems it too risky for the prince himself. But when Conor becomes old enough to consider marriage, Kel learns that it will take more than hidden daggers to protect his charge. On the other side of Castellane society is Lin, a young woman who is a member of the Ashkar, a small community that’s forbidden from living outside their walled community. The Ashkar are the only people who can still use magic, and even though using or even learning about most kinds of magic is banned, they are still feared and discriminated against by the rest of the world. Lin has worked hard to be allowed to study medicine even though she’s a woman, but when her medical talents aren’t enough to help heal her best friend, she wonders if the answer lies in the study of forbidden magic. The tangle of political disputes and shadowy plots that leads to Kel and Lin crossing paths is not only thick enough to make the several hundred pages fly by, it will leave readers eager for a series full of twists and turns. Clare expertly balances the needs of a satisfying plot with dropping tantalizing hints of what’s to come in future installments. Her worldbuilding is instantly immersive, and the many characters are all detailed and memorable, so swapping between storylines flows easily for the reader.

A wonderfully enjoyable series opener.

THE POMEGRANATE GATE
Kaplan, Ariel
Erewhon (576 pp.)
$26.95 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781645660576

This debut fantasy follows two young Jews escaping the Inquisition who discover their connection to another world. In a region resembling Renaissance-era Spain—to the extent that it includes Christians, Muslims, and Jews, and the works of medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides—the Inquisition is coming, and Jews must flee or convert. Naftaly Cresques, a bad tailor tormented by true visions and odd dreams of familiar-seeming places populated by square-pupiled inhabitants, is among the refugees. Strong-willed fellow refugee Elena Peres soon drags Naftaly into the search for her lost granddaughter, Toba. Toba is a strangely weak and strangely gifted young woman—she cannot run or shout but can simultaneously translate a book into Latin with one hand and Arabic with the other—who has disappeared into a burst of light within a pomegranate grove. She has been transported to the realm of the square-pupiled people, the magical, long-lived race known as the Maziks, who are still suffering the effects of a brutal political coup and spiritual upheaval centuries before. As Toba explores her own mysterious connection to the Maziks and struggles for control of her newly discovered magical gifts, Naftaly faces deadly challenges both on the road and in his dreams, and both become entangled with the Maziks’ dangerous intrigues. It is perhaps a bit confusing that the mortal world of the book, which specifically names the languages, religions, and politics of our own history, is set entirely in imaginary lands. On the other hand, a great deal of Jewish-inspired fantasy tends to employ a coded version of Judaism, and some might find it refreshing to read a book with clearly identified Jewish protagonists and that directly draws on Jewish rituals and cultural instead of cloaking them in author-invented terms. It is also refreshing that although the introductions of Naftaly and Toba initially suggest to the experienced reader of traditional fantasy novels that they are destined to become a couple, that expectation is shattered fairly definitively. The worldbuilding is intricate and takes up most of the plot, which unfortunately causes the pacing to drag somewhat. The climax is exciting, but it’s clear that the book is mainly a setup for actions that will take place in future volumes, which makes this installment an intriguing tease but not entirely satisfying in and of itself.

A unique take on Jewish history and legend, with the prospect that it will pay off further in later books.

THE BLUE, BEAUTIFUL WORLD
Lord, Karen
Del Rey (256 pp.)
$28.00 | Aug. 29, 2023
9780593598436

A tale of hidden aliens and first contact on an Earth in crisis.

In the near future, Owen (famous enough for one name only) is the biggest pop star in the world. Owen’s overwhelming appeal is something more than just charisma, though, as it’s slowly revealed that he and members of his entourage are visitors from another planet, watching as Earth struggles with climate change and population collapse. Virtual reality is everywhere, both as entertainment and as thin fabric masks people use to disguise their identities (alien and human alike). More than a decade later, Kanoa Havili is a student representing the Federated States of Polynesia in Havana at a World Council Global Government Project, akin to a Model U.N. With his fellow students from around the planet, they’re given
a challenge to solve—what if an extraterrestrial civilization came to Earth?—but in the midst of working this out, it’s revealed that everything they’ve been studying is real. Now Kanoo and friends have to navigate a first-contact situation with a powerful ally on their side: Owen. Unfortunately, other than a thin character list buried at the back, readers are given no indication that this book takes place in the larger universe of Lord’s Cygnus Beta series, and as a result, the book reads like overly long fan fiction of a show you’ve never heard of. This wouldn’t be an issue if it were better written, with some deft recapping woven into the narrative, but instead, readers have to try to piece together who’s an alien, who’s not, and who all these other civilizations are. Meanwhile, the book is glutted with secondary characters, adding little to the story besides confusion, and offers some cringey adolescent sentences like “His look varied from the delicate, waiflike freshness of a teen idol to the grizzled, whipcord-and-washboard toughness of a decades-seasoned rock star…” or “The salt breeze in intermittent puffs like shy kisses, telling a lie of warmth that the sea would soon dispel.”

An intergalactic fumble.

**THE PHOENIX KING**

Verma, Aparna
Orbit (416 pp.)
$18.99 paper | Aug. 29, 2023
9780316522779

The time of succession has come for King Leo, monarch of the desert kingdom of Ravence. With the neighboring Jantari threatening war and the radical group the Arohassin plotting regicide, the Ravence heir, Elena, will come into a lot of responsibility. Fortunately, Elena shows much promise; she has political acumen, dazzling wit, an unshakeable love for her people and the peoples’ adoration in return. On nearly all accounts she is ready to assume the throne; she need only learn the magic of holding fire without burning to prove she is worthy of it. But her father will not teach her and might not have plans to step down after all, as he is shaken by the return of the Phoenix’s prophet, who will destroy everything in the desert and all the nonbelievers. As if that’s not enough for Elena to navigate and King Leo to ponder, enter ambitious political player Samson and retired Arohassin assassin Yassen, who each have motives of their own. The various points of view make it hard to know who is really pulling the strings, though one thing is clear: There is power in the burning flames of the desert fire and in the secrets held dear. This desert world is well developed, with the intricacies of a society including religion, culture, and race, and the mythology of a phoenix rising supporting the themes of sacrifice, forgiveness, and resilience throughout each character’s point of view. The story is at its best when characters are faced with the edges of identity, colliding loyalties, and the unpredictable landscape of life.

**Settle into the morally gray areas of a king’s broken heart, an assassin’s twisted mind, and a prophecy of destruction.**

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**ROMANCE**

**WRECK THE HALLS**

Bailey, Tessa
Avon/HarperCollins (368 pp.)
$30.00 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780063308299

The adult children of two rock stars attempt to reunite their mothers’ band. Octavia Dawkins and Trina Gallard headlined the band Steel Birds in the 1990s. When they were pregnant at the same time, they had an epic fight that destroyed both the band and their friendship. Octavia’s son, Beat, and Trina’s daughter, Melody, grew up in the spotlight, but Beat was fawned over by the press, while Melody’s awkward teenage years made her the object of derision and disdain. Thirty years after the band’s dramatic and mysterious breakup, its biggest hit is experiencing a resurgence of popularity. Beat and Melody agree to appear on a livestreamed reality show in which they’ll try to broker a reunion, hopefully to culminate in their mothers’ appearing on stage together on Christmas Eve. Beat plans to use the money to pay off a blackmailer threatening to reveal a shameful family secret, while Melody hopes to shake up her strained relationship with her mother. The palpable, intense chemistry between Beat and Melody turns them into instant celebrities, leading fans to embrace their on-camera romance with even more intense fervor than the possible Steel Birds reunion. Bailey’s novel delivers madcap, humorous adventures, including a delightful reunion for Trina and Octavia. However, as characters, Beat and Melody seem out of sync with the plot. Both are bitterly aware of the cruelty of fame, so it’s hard to believe they would willingly subject themselves to the kind of scrutiny required by an all-day livestream. An uncomfortable subplot links traumatic experiences during Beat’s teenage years to his sexual proclivities as an adult. Eventually, everything is tied up with a bow, but the easy resolutions for so many long-standing feuds and family dramas feel pat and unearned.

**Much like the holiday itself, this Christmas romance has its ups and downs.**

**EVERY DUKE HAS HIS DAY**

Enoch, Suzanne
St. Martin’s Griffin (320 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
9781250842541

A not-so-old duke learns new tricks. Elizabeth Dockering, Bitsy to her friends, may be the happiest woman in London. She’s the diamond of her second London Season, with multiple suitors, a full dance card, and at least another...
Though this Regency rom-com does center around a pair of dognappings and a bit of suspense, it never gets dark—the story is far too sweet for that. Switching among several points of view creates additional depth and also allows Enoch to incorporate a charming B-plot romance set on the working-class side of town. Though it’s a relatively chaste tale, readers will believe in the straightforward attraction between Bitsy and Michael and enjoy the moments of levity throughout.

A well-crafted historical romance about dogs and the people who love them.

YOU, AGAIN
Goldbeck, Kate
Dial Press (448 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
9780593448120

Opposites become enemies and then friends and finally lovers in this delightful, trope-filled contemporary romance debut.

Aspiring (and failing) comedian Arianna Sloane doesn’t do commitment. In fact, she actively avoids it. She has a strict rule when it comes to her hookups to never stay the night. Josh Kestenberg is in love with love, a chef with grand professional ambitions who also dreams of settling down and serving his eventual soul mate breakfast in bed. Ari and Josh are like oil and water, and it’s dislike at first sight. Underscoring their mutual hatred is the bombshell revelation that they’re both sleeping with the same woman, who happens to be Ari’s roommate. Talk about awkward. For years, Ari and Josh keep falling into each other’s orbit, with each meeting more disastrous than the next, until they reunite when they’re both at their lowest. Misery seems to make great company, and instead of bickering, they wind up bonding. Supportive texts turn into late-night phone calls and eventually graduate to cathartic movie marathons. The way their friendship blooms is slow and sweet and subtle, and it makes their inevitable romance happen almost seamlessly. The snarky banter between them eventually softens as Ari and Josh allow themselves to be vulnerable; it’s rare to find such a perfect balance of funny and emotional scenes without either one overpowering the other. Goldbeck is clearly a writer to watch, creating and building characters that feel like people you’ve known and loved rather than caricatures dropped into a scene for the sake of a punchline or plot beat. Ari and Josh are thoughtfully written, layered with histories and memories that have molded their contemporary personalities.

This debut romance ticks all the boxes of a must-read, with plenty of bite giving it edge.

IN CHARM’S WAY
Harper, Lana
Berkley (304 pp.)
$17.00 paper | Aug. 22, 2023
9780593637968

A witch goes to dangerous lengths to regain her memory and agrees to protection from a mysterious newcomer in the magical town of Thistle Grove.

Six months ago, Delilah Harlow was hit with a powerful oblivion spell. Recovery of her memories has been arduous and made worse by the fact that she has to work closely with the witch who cast the spell. As a record keeper of Thistle Grove’s occult history due to her ancestry, Delilah has access to books on many related subjects, including those on baneful magic that should never be used. Desperate to get rid of the fog in her brain, Delilah casts a forbidden spell that has the unexpected consequence of drawing all sorts of wicked and treacherous magical creatures toward her. Monster hunter Catriona Arachne Quinn, half fae, also appears in town and offers to act as a bodyguard to Delilah while they figure out what exactly happened. Sparks fly between the two women and their relationship deepens, but secrets have to be revealed if there’s any hope for healing and happiness. Like the prior books in the series, this story delivers magical charm, evocative prose, and sexy relationship development. The lore continues to build, but the focus is on Delilah’s exquisitely rendered emotional journey as she deals with anger, resentment, and frustration at having to rely on others. Even the romance mostly functions as an element of Delilah’s personal growth, so Cat remains a side character and isn’t as richly defined.

This emotions-driven series continues to captivate.
Alessia was trafficked from Albania and later kidnapped and rescued by Maxim. This book picks up immediately following those events, with Maxim and Alessia at her family’s home in Albania, planning to marry. The plot focuses on domestic matters: planning the wedding ceremony, securing Alessia’s citizenship status, and managing Maxim’s problems with the Trevelthick estate. The emotional arcs are simplistic and repetitive: Over and over again Maxim wonders how to keep his new wife happy, while Alessia worries that she isn’t beautiful enough to satisfy such a renowned playboy. His family and former lovers disapprove of the match and try to disrupt the couple’s happiness with undermining comments and petty schemes. After the pair returns to London, there is very little of interest to fuel the plot other than Alessia’s sudden determination to find one of the younger girls who was trafficked with her. James’ writing is choppy and discordant, shifting rapidly between narrators with only the difference in point of view—Maxim in first person and Alessia in third—to indicate a change in speaker. Maxim’s voice is uncomfortably banal. Upon seeing his bride on their wedding day, he thinks, “Dude, don’t get emotional.” Even James completists looking for magic are bound to be disappointed.

Simple and trite.

**NEW ADULT**

*New Adult*

Timothy Janovsky

Sourcebooks Casablanca (352 pp.)

$16.99 paper | Aug. 15, 2023

9781728264264

When a comedian’s wish fast-forwards him seven years, he discovers that he’s successful but devoid of friends and family.

At 23, Nolan Baker has big plans, and he hopes to reach 30 with all his personal and professional goals fulfilled. At the moment, though, he doesn’t feel like he’s anywhere close. With his sister Cee-Cee’s wedding coming up, Nolan is determined to have something to show for himself, and he finally musters up the courage to ask Drew Techler, his best friend and big crush, to be his date. He vows that once the wedding is over, he’ll take a good hard look at himself and maybe even give up comedy for good. But when he gets a call in the middle of his sister’s wedding inviting him to perform at a famous comedy club in an hour, Nolan prioritizes this sudden opportunity over supporting his family and continuing his date with Drew. Later, he realizes he’s ruined all of his relationships. Desperate to fix things but torn between his shot at stardom and making things right, he grabs a weird set of crystals his sister had given him and visualizes his “ideal future” in which he’s “successful, happy, and universally loved.” When he wakes up, he’s 30 and he’s certainly successful, but he learns that the choice he made during Cee-Cee’s wedding has had long-lasting consequences. He’s a household name, but his family has no desire to connect with him or even take his calls. Nolan’s only hope of making things right is to find Drew, who also wants nothing to do with him. As Nolan tries to win Drew over, he must reckon with the callous mistakes he’s made. His road to redemption is an arduous one as he strives to hold himself accountable, which doesn’t come easily. The romance between Drew and Nolan takes a back seat to Nolan’s introspections, but it still provides a sweet and steamy way of both lightening some of Nolan’s more vulnerable moments and giving him the extra push he needs to dig deeper. Over time, Nolan learns how to feel better about his life without sacrificing the feelings of others.

A hopeful redemption story with a magical time-jump twist that takes its time, for better or worse.

**A WINTER IN NEW YORK**

*Silver, Josie*

Dell (304 pp.)

$11.99 paper | Oct. 3, 2023

9780593722862

A woman uncovers family secrets—and finds love—at a gelato shop in Little Italy.

In 1985 New York City, up-and-coming musician Vivien falls in love with Santo Belotti over two whirlwind days, but she has to leave him behind to embark on a tour with her band. In parting, Santo gives Vivien his family’s secret gelato recipe, which has kept their shop thriving for decades, and she vows to one day return with it. In the present day, Vivien’s 34-year-old daughter, Iris, has just moved to New York with little more than her late mother’s pink melamine bowls and the secret recipe for the gelato they ate from them. Iris, a former chef, takes up a job at a dingy noodle restaurant on Chrystie Street, making fast friends with its owner, Bobby Han. She’s content to keep her life small, sticking close to her tiny apartment over the restaurant. But when Bobby takes her to Little Italy, Iris stumbles upon a door she’s only seen in one of her mother’s photographs—of Santo, the only man she ever loved. The door belongs to Belotti’s gelateria, famous for its vanilla gelato—the same gelato Vivien’s mother made for her. When Iris enters the shop, she meets Santo’s 39-year-old nephew, Gio, and learns that Santo had a stroke and can’t remember the recipe. Now Iris is the only one who can help the Belotti family.
Can she do it without revealing Santo’s secret? Or will her past—and her growing feelings for Gio—get in the way? The Belotti family is full of vibrant characters who are easy to love and fun to read. But the novel drags due to several superfluous plots that do little to advance the main narrative. 

**Like a scoop of gelato on a hot day, this one is sweet but messy.**

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**CLEAT CUTE**  
*Wilsner, Meryl*  
St. Martin’s Griffin (336 pp.)  
$18.00 paper | Sept. 19, 2023  
9781250873309

Attraction sizzles between lesbian soccer players with vastly different personalities.  

Twenty-two-year-old Phoebe Matthews is leaving Indiana for Louisiana because she’s been drafted into the American Women’s Soccer Association to play for the New Orleans Krewe. Not only is this a dream come true, but it also means she gets to play alongside her idol, Grace Henderson, four years her senior and captain of the team. Grace has been playing professionally since she was a teenager and has worked to keep her personal life, including her sexuality, private. She’s initially irked by the habitually late, constantly peppy newcomer, but Phoebe’s charm and flirtation soon win prickly Grace over, even as Grace sullenly deals with an injury. A friends-with-benefits situation emerges since they both want to focus more on soccer than on a relationship, but they come to realize they want to be together both on and off the field. Wilsner follows up *Mistakes Were Made* (2022) with another stand-alone, delightfully steamy Sapphic romance, this time with an enticing sports angle. The opposite temperaments of the captivating couple make for amusing interactions and banter, although sometimes the narrative favors repetition over added depth. Exploration of neurodivergent identities adds more specificity to the leads, but this doesn’t come until near the end of the story, leaving it underbaked. Class differences are deftly handled throughout, the city setting is vibrant, and there are several secondary characters who shine; most importantly, the romantic journey at the center is fun and entertaining.  

**An enjoyably sporty queer romance.**
FEAR IS JUST A WORD
A Missing Daughter, a Violent Cartel, and a Mother’s Quest for Vengeance
Ahmed, Azam
Random House (368 pp.)
$28.00  |  Sept. 26, 2023
9780593448410

A harrowing exposé, years in the making, of the tyranny of the drug cartels in Mexico.

In 2014, writes former New York Times Mexico bureau chief Ahmed, a young woman named Karen Rodríguez disappeared from the streets of a small town in Tamaulipas. The town had once been in the thrall of the Gulf cartel, then fell into the hands of the Zetas, the most violent drug gang in Mexico, whose leaders recruited locals, mostly young, as their couriers and assassins. In one horrific incident that Ahmed recounts, they murdered 72 migrants in one night, burying them in a mass grave on a nearby ranch. Karen wound up buried there, too, with local authorities looking the other way despite the furious intervention of her mother, Miriam, who, one by one, tracked down the killers and attempted to bring them to justice. In some instances, something like justice unfolded. For example, when Mexican marines detained two assassins who had kidnapped and killed local women, they shot one at point-blank range and shot the other in the back after they told her to run. In this powerful narrative, Ahmed shows how the marines are about the only element of the Mexican government that has been remotely effective; police and elected officials are often in the pockets of the cartels, and the bureaucracy is formidable. As Miriam discovered when seeking justice for Karen, “There was an art to the throat-clearing formalism of the government’s legal communications, a vernacular that relied on language so circular and difficult to understand that one got the feeling its entire purpose was to obfuscate.” In fact, it was, and the government’s inaction forced Miriam into vigilantism. Thanks to her mother’s persistence, Karen’s fate is known, but the cartels continue to work largely unimpeded, having amassed a count of victims in Tamaulipas of “more than ten thousand.”

A dispiriting yet necessary study of how a criminal enterprise can swallow a nation whole.
This August marks the 50th anniversary of hip-hop, one of America’s most significant native musical genres. According to the 50th anniversary website, at a house party in the Bronx in 1973, “DJ Kool Herc plays two copies of the same record, a technique known as the merry-go-round where one moves back and forth, from one record to the next, looping the percussion portions of each track to keep the beat alive. And amongst this community of dancers, artists, musicians and poets...Hip-Hop is born.” I’m no expert, but I do enjoy a wide variety of hip-hop music. Here are six of my favorite books on the subject in the last several years.

Who better to start us off than Jay-Z, cultural icon and arguably the best rapper of all time? In *Decoded* (2010), he set the bar sky-high for any other rapper seeking to write a book. Our starred review called it “classic,” and the critic noted the author’s potent “two-pronged attack, in which narrative chapters alternate with in-depth explanations of the lyrics to his favorite compositions.” Jay-Z’s acumen in the studio and on stage translate effortlessly to the page; those seeking gossip about later personal issues should look elsewhere, but his portrait of the genre and his place within it is indelible.

Even before Jay-Z rocketed to fame, the West Coast scene was percolating with the rise of Dr. Dre and company. Ben Westhoff created a memorable tapestry of their intersecting lives and careers in *Original Gangstas: The Untold Story of Dr. Dre, Eazy-E, Ice Cube, Tupac Shakur, and the Birth of West Coast Rap* (2016), which our starred review called “an elaborately detailed, darkly surprising, definitive history of the LA gangsta rap era.”

Another giant in the rap world is Raekwon, a member of the Wu-Tang Clan (one of my personal favorites). His book, *From Staircase to Stage: The Story of Raekwon and the Wu-Tang Clan* (2021), chronicled his life and the trajectory of Wu-Tang from the streets of Staten Island to global stardom. “The Wu-Tang Clan has always cultivated an air of mystery, and Raekwon is one of the most secretive of the Staten Island rappers,” noted our reviewer, “so it’s refreshing to see how forthcoming he is in his first book.”

Less well known but just as influential is J Dilla, one of the most innovative beat-makers in the game until his death in 2006. Dan Charnas masterfully captured his artistic process in *Dilla Time: The Life and Afterlife of the Hip-Hop Producer Who Invented Rhythm* (2022), which our starred review called “a wide-ranging biography that fully captures the subject’s ingenuity, originality, and musical genius.”

One of the most recognizable elements of a rapper’s creative process is the use of sampling, a subject incisively analyzed by Nate Patrin in *Bring That Beat Back: How Sampling Built Hip-Hop* (2020). The author dug deep in the crates, focusing on four sampling wizards: Grandmaster Flash, Prince Paul, Dr. Dre, and Madlib. According to our starred review, “No one wants a dry hip-hop book, and Patrin’s work is thoroughly engaging from first needle drop to last.”

Rounding the survey out is Shea Serrano’s *Hip-Hop (and Other Things): A Collection of Questions Asked, Answered, Illustrated* (2021). The book, featuring illustrations by Arturo Torres, is “a compelling mix of history, memoir, criticism, and creative writing,” wrote our reviewer. “Even when a particular chapter doesn’t quite grab you, the warm, creative illustrations—e.g., 50 Cent and Eminem playing Skee-Ball or Nas styled as Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator*—sure will.”

One final note: Hip-hop fans should keep an eye out for Staci Robinson’s *Tupac Shakur: The Authorized Biography*, which will be published by Crown on Oct. 24. The review appears on p. 95.
A guide to being an uncompromising feminist in today’s world.

In her latest work, British Australian writer and scholar Ahmed, author of Living a Feminist Life, offers a guide to thriving as a feminist. A feminist killjoy, also known as a “buzzkill, miserabilist, party pooper, wet blanket, dampener, and spoilsport,” is someone who speaks out and calls for change in response to sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or racist comments. “My aim,” she writes, “is not to rescue us from the feminist killjoy but to give her a voice,” and she hopes to help those “fighting against inequalities and injustices of many kinds.” Throughout, Ahmed shares her experiences as a queer female feminist of color as well as stories that others have shared with her, with a particular focus on the responses and types of push back commonly encountered. As the author points out, as feminist killjoys, “we learn about the world from what comes back at us because of what we say or do.” Ahmed also references and analyzes literature and films that have inspired her and help illustrate her points. Among the survival tips she shares with fellow feminist killjoys are surrounding yourself with like-minded individuals, knowing that you are never always responsible for how you are received, and remembering that there is only so much you can do. As a supplement, Ahmed also includes her collection of killjoy maxims, recommended further reading, and reading group discussion questions for the book. The author notes that she was strongly influenced by Black writer and feminist Audre Lorde and references her works extensively throughout the guide. Although Ahmed makes strong and relatable points, her writing is wordy and repetitive at times. Regardless, feminist and social activists are certain to find the book encouraging.

A good reminder that the work of activists is often challenging yet important.

Amos Oz

Writer, Activist, Icon

Alter, Robert

Yale Univ. (200 pp.)

$26.00 | Sept. 26, 2023

A succinct introduction to the acclaimed Israeli writer. Alter, a scholar of Hebrew and comparative literature offers an insightful, empathetic biography of writer and political activist Amos Oz (1939-2018), author of a dozen novels, several volumes of short fiction, three books for younger readers, and many works of nonfiction. Born in Jerusalem, the young Amos Klausner witnessed much violence after the U.N. decision to partition Israel and Palestine in 1947. His childhood was blighted by his mother’s descent into mental illness, culminating in her suicide when he was 12. The emotional wounds from that trauma, Alter asserts, “festered all his life.” For two years after his mother’s death, he lived with his increasingly morose father, but that relationship became so untenable that Amos separated from him at the age of 14. Rejecting his family’s right-wing Zionism, he joined a kibbutz. Although as a young boy he was not robust or athletic, by adolescence, he had become “extraordinarily
good-looking” and “intellectually brilliant”—though not as muscular as he wished. Along with many other kibbutzniks who took a Hebraic surname, he changed the European Klausner to Oz, meaning strength in Hebrew. Alter offers sensitive readings of Oz’s fiction, which is deeply rooted in Israeli culture, society, and clashing ideologies. Oz was a staunch proponent of the two-state solution to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even after he and his family moved from their kibbutz to a home in the desert, Oz evinced “unflagging loyalty” to the kibbutz ideal. Alter’s friendship with Oz began in 1970 when he came to San Francisco on a book tour. A natural performer, Oz seemed buoyed by his audience’s attention. Many of his lectures argued for “the existential necessity for pluralism in Israel’s national life.” Alter deals judiciously with Oz’s negative critics, gossip, and his estrangement from one of his daughters.

A nuanced portrait of a complex man.

MISBELIEF
What Makes Rational People Believe Irrational Things
Ariely, Dan
Harper/HarperCollins (304 pp.)
$32.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
978006280427

The well-known psychologist and behavioral economist explores the rabbit holes that lead to conspiracy theories and other brands of irrational thought.

Duke psychology professor Ariely, the author of Predictably Irrational, Payoff, and other books, begins by chronicling how he was accused of being a shill for big pharma and the “Deep State” for supporting Covid-19 vaccination. Why him? The conspiratorial echo chamber, he notes, searches high and low for heretics, aided by “technology, politics, [and] economics.” The technology is beyond individual control, the politics and economics thorny, and the battle against what Ariely characterizes as misbelief, “a distorted lens through which people begin to view the world,” is endless. Too many people are not just suckers for misinformation; they go out of their way to perpetuate it. As Ariely explains, it’s easy for a person to become ostracized by peers and family for believing that the Illuminati or lizard people control the Earth and, once ostracized, to double down, feeling persecuted and isolated, in a kind of rolling martyr complex. It’s difficult to reason with someone battered by precarity, stress, and loneliness—and if nothing else, holding outlandish ideas will earn people a place in a community thanks to, yes, technology. Still, the author urges us to try the best we can. “Providing reassurance to someone in stressful circumstances can make a big difference,” he writes, and introducing talking points designed to increase “intellectual humility” or the ability to admit that it’s possible that one is wrong, may help, too. Empathetic but not overly soft, Ariely counsels readers to try to understand why ostracism won’t do the trick, why social roles help drive extreme emotions and polarization, and why dealing with the “funnel of misbelief” is a proposition both staggeringly challenging and wholly necessary.

For those inclined to engage, a useful handbook for dealing with the pizza-and-pedophilia devotee of the family.

KIND OF A BIG DEAL
How Anchorman Stayed Classy and Became the Most Iconic Comedy of the Twenty-First Century
Austerlitz, Saul
Dutton (320 pp.)
$29.00 | Aug. 22, 2023
9780593186848

The story behind one of the most beloved comedies of the past couple decades. Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy may be known for its catchphrases, sight gags, and wildly over-the-top plot, but this well-crafted tale reveals its unexpected feminist roots and satiric look at the changing business of news. Austerlitz, an adjunct professor of writing and comedy at NYU and author of numerous books about comedies on TV and film, assembles an impressive amount of research and reporting about the 2004 movie into an exhaustive, yet fast-paced text about how it was made and why. His use of an omniscient narrator places Anchorman in the context of not just Will Ferrell and director Adam McKay’s work—as well as how it boosted the careers of Steve Carell and Paul Rudd—but also the discrimination against women in the workplace and the shifting priorities of local news. It’s a heady combination, but Austerlitz pulls it off with style. He also offers revelations about the alternate version of Anchorman that got its own release, called Wake Up, Ron Burgundy, which featured an entire plot about a counterculture group of activists played by Chuck D and comedian Maya Rudolph. No matter how small the movie detail, the author provides some kind of insight that places it into the broader themes he wants to tackle. Take his explanation of the movie’s use of the Starland Vocal Band’s hit “Afternoon Delight.” As he writes, “the song is a paean to love by a sensitive but cloddish white guy, and as such is the ideal vehicle for Ron’s ode to love, which feels romantic while also being nothing of the sort.” Austerlitz also has no problem questioning the sexist jokes that don’t seem so funny anymore or why many of the jokes poking fun at homosexuality were always problematic.

This surprising history doesn’t just stay classy; it reveals how remarkably deep the Ferrell comedy really was.
“A journey through the early-19th-century cultural and political visions that "shaped the volatile new nation."”

Distinguished historian Ayers, a winner of the Bancroft and Lincoln prizes and recipient of a National Humanities Medal, looks to “evoke the nation’s highest ideals of equality and mutual respect in the face of the nation's failings.” He draws on an extensive array of journalists, orators, composers, novelists, naturalists, painters, entertainers, poets, sculptors, and composers who, in different ways, addressed the moral and political tensions attendant to social justice. The history unfolds in chronological segments, with each chapter ranging across themes and the visionaries who embraced them. In a typical chapter, Ayers explores immigration, the California Gold Rush, women's rights, spiritualism, polygenesis, American literature, and the Greek Slave, a famous statue by Hiram Powers. Included in the chapter are biographical sketches of Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Louis Agassiz, Susan Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, and Margaret Fuller, among others. The book includes not only people familiar to us from general histories of the period—e.g., Henry David Thoreau, Sojourner Truth, Andrew Jackson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Andrew Jackson, Dorothea Dix, John Chapman (aka Johnny Appleseed)—but also historical figures that may be unfamiliar to general readers, including Black abolitionist and writer Maria Stewart, who “urged her fellow Black Americans to prepare for God’s deliverance”; “self-taught portrait painter” George Catlin; Native American novelist Yellow Bird; and popular writer Lydia Marie Francis, author of *The Frugal Housewife*, a highly influential book that went through 33 editions. While Ayers’ inquisitive meandering makes for pleasurable reading, his claim that “key elements of national life crystallized” during these decades, a claim that would have connected his historical sketches, is largely undeveloped. Clear throughout, though, is his impassioned commitment to racial, gender, and religious tolerance.

A richly illustrative defense of the role of ideas in the crafting of America’s national character.
up his hands in despair. Baker blames much of our current crisis on “the rapid advance in progressive ideologies in American institutions in the last thirty years or so.” Perhaps his greatest anger is directed at his own profession, journalism, which—with the exception of his WSJ—has dropped all pretense of objectivity. “Taking their cue from Karl Marx,” news organizations refuse to merely report the world but work actively to change it. Baker also excoriates American universities, a conservative bugbear long dominated by liberals who shout down guest speakers and harass nonconformist professors. Least effective is the author’s chapter on the medical profession, an uncomfortably Trumpian attack on pandemic-era public health measures. He mostly denounces quarantines as hysterical fearmongering, and he maintains that vaccines, although modestly effective, have been oversold and should be voluntary. Since he blames America’s “cultural revolution” on a powerful, isolated cabal and opposes violence, his conclusion is short on specifics. He places his trust in the blameless, salt-of-the-earth American citizenry who “believe in traditional American values and ideals, put American...interests ahead of global concerns, and favor tough immigration restrictions and the reassertion of American sovereignty.” Although Baker believes in climate change, he also argues that the matter is overblown and that “climate extremism” is the new global religion, “a temporal canon, with its own moral and doctrinal heft.”

A polemic that will arouse conservatives and irritate liberals.

SURE, I’LL JOIN YOUR CULT
A Memoir of Mental Illness and the Quest To Belong Anywhere
Bamford, Maria
Gallery Books/Simon & Schuster (288 pp.)
$28.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781982168568

The star of Netflix’s Lady Dynamite examines her life in comedy, dealing with mental illness, and finding a way to belong.

Beginning with an anecdote about attending an event in her 20s with a friend that shifts from friendly to an aggressive sales pitch for a self-help seminar, comedian Bamford notes, “I am very fond of suddenly adopting a new set of ideals in order to receive welcome from any rigid group of weirdos. If these people wanted a piece of me so badly, I must have been okay. (I am not ok).” Throughout, the author plays delightful tribute to the For Dummies book series, using a stop-sign image and the comic sans font for material she dubs “the creepy stuff.” In a compelling, hilarious, sometimes-harrowing voice, Bamford chronicles her childhood, involvement with both recovery and self-improvement programs—including Suzuki violin lessons as a child and an introduction to Dale Carnegie’s “How To Win Friends and Influence People” seminars at age 11—and struggles with mental illness. Although the book works quite well as a memoir, the author also includes helpful tips on how best to succeed with 12-step programs (while poking fun at them at the same time), a critique of the effectiveness of treatment for mental health problems in America, and an amusing anecdote about how she dealt with her sudden and unexpected fame as the star of a series of commercials for Target (“a great character for progressives who shop at Target, because it’s darkly funny in a Portland-y kind of way”). Bamford creates an effective mix of introduction (or reintroduction) to a fascinating comedian, a guide to the self-help industry, and an encouragingly light-hearted, respectful assessment of mental health, reminding readers that they are not alone.

Laugh-out-loud funny, weird, and touching—a great example of what a celebrity memoir can bring to readers.

FAIR PLAY
How Sports Shape the Gender Debates
Barnes, Katie
St. Martin’s (304 pp.)
$29.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781250276629

A sports journalist’s careful study of both women’s sports and exclusionary practices facing transgender athletes. Sports, Barnes explains in their significant debut book, have become a “primary battleground” for a number of culture debates and policy proposals impacting the transgender community, especially transgender youth. Expanding on years of reporting for ESPN from the nexus of sports and gender identity, the author seizes a lightning rod of an issue and effectively imparts clarity and nuance. Barnes astutely positions today’s deliberations and controversies within the history of Title IX and women’s sports programs, enriching this context with research on the science of hormones, fallouts among seemingly obvious allies in the space of women’s sports advocacy, personal stories of transgender athletes’ competing at various levels, and the author’s own experience as a nonbinary former athlete with a deep love for women’s sports. The book is a solid resource for those seeking to understand or discuss sensational news headlines and reactive legislation, providing a foundation built from informative and detailed explanations of relevant topics, including the difference between using testosterone to medically transition and using it for competitive advantage, endogenous puberty, and the distinctions drawn and restrictions imposed by governing bodies like the NCAA and the International Olympic Committee. The heart of the narrative involves questions Barnes raises about the very idea of sex-segregated sports, what qualities are prized in athletic competition, and their personal, thoughtful ideas for a possible path forward. The author is clear in their desire to investigate all the complexities of the issue and dismiss ill-informed arguments. Their attempt to distill truth and instill comfort beyond traditional
gender definitions results in a powerful treatise on what current outrage, particularly about transgender girl and women athletes, says about how we think about sports as a whole.

Enlightened and empathetic—required reading for anyone weighing in on gender and sports.

THEY KILLED FREDDIE GRAY
The Anatomy of a Police Brutality Cover-Up
Barron, Justine
Arcade (368 pp.)
$32.50 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781950994250

An examination of a system that allowed malign police officers to walk free after murdering a suspect.

As with the case of George Floyd five years later, Freddie Carlos Gray Jr. was the victim of a judicial killing. Arrested by Baltimore police officers for possessing what they called an illegal weapon, he died of injuries after being in custody for less than an hour. According to investigative reporter Barron, Baltimore city authorities conspired to cover up the facts of the case, which included Gray’s being shackled and handcuffed and then bounced around unrestrained on a “rough ride” in the back of a police van, which may have resulted in the spinal injury that led to his death. Working through the discovery file, Barron flags numerous instances of misconduct coupled with ineptitude, willful obfuscation, and sometimes-inexplicable decisions. Maryland State Attorney Marilyn Mosby, for example, initially filed charges against six Baltimore officers that specified that the supposedly illegal knife was actually legal—therefore, “the arrest wasn’t legal and so constituted assault.” Yet as the proceedings moved forward, she dropped the charge, apparently acceding to an opposing attorney’s demand that the legality of the knife be excluded. Media reports, Barron adds, tended to uncritically repeat the police account of the incident, by which “Gray caused his own death by banging his head repeatedly against the door and walls of the van. The
Baltimore Sun, “the paper of record in the Gray case,” was particularly loyal to the police account. Meanwhile, notes the author, the U.S. Department of Justice appears to have suppressed or at least not presented eyewitness accounts that indicated that excessive force before the ride began may have been the true cause of death. In the end, whether by design or indifference, Barron ably demonstrates, the system definitively failed Freddie Gray. Rabia Chaudry provides the foreword.

Complex, dense in detail, and sharply argued: a firm indictment of injustice committed on the street and in the courtroom.

THE BURNING OF THE WORLD
The Great Chicago Fire and the War for a City’s Soul
Berg, Scott W.
Pantheon (464 pp.)
$32.00 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780804197847

A complex, capably narrated history of the 1871 fire that remade Chicago.

As architecture scholar Berg, author of Grand Avenues and 38 Nooses, observes, the fire of Oct. 8, 1871, did not occur in isolation. The weather had been unusually hot and dry, and “between October 2 and October 7, the city’s 193 firemen had been summoned to twenty-eight fires” whose causes were various, from carelessly discarded cigarettes to grease spills and oil-soaked rags that spontaneously burst into flames, and the fires burned mostly in places newly crowded in the immigration boom. A cow was almost certainly not the cause of the infamous blaze, though the fire that sprang forth that night sparked somewhere in the neighborhood of Irish immigrant Kate Leary’s home. As Berg notes, “almost all the houses in the West Division were made of pine-wood…a cheap and speedy way to build” but one that created tinderboxes. The fire had numerous knock-on effects, notes Berg, “almost all the houses in the West Division were made of pine-wood…a cheap and speedy way to build” but one that created tinderboxes. The fire had numerous knock-on effects, and the fires burned mostly in places newly crowded in the immigration boom. A cow was almost certainly not the cause of the infamous blaze, though the fire that sprang forth that night sparked somewhere in the neighborhood of Irish immigrant Kate Leary’s home. As Berg notes, “almost all the houses in the West Division were made of pine-wood…a cheap and speedy way to build” but one that created tinderboxes. The fire had numerous knock-on effects, as the author shows. Some concerned Leary herself, smeared in calumniating press; one cause of the blame, it seems, was that her home was spared while so many were not, but another was the fact that she was an Irish immigrant in a time of growing anti-immigrant sentiment and Know-Nothing political activism. One of its chief exponents was Joseph Medill, a newspaper magnate who was devoted to Republican politics and anti-Catholic vituperation. Other players in the drama that Berg lays out, in which powerful economic forces contested to rebuild Chicago in their own image, include merchant Marshall Field and Wilbur Storey, another newspaper publisher whose “reporters were instructed never, ever to let the absence of facts get in their way.” In the end, their remaking of Chicago helped shape the form of the modern city—architecturally stunning but also sharply segregated by class and race.

A strong contribution to the history of not just the fire, but urban America generally.

IF WE BURN
The Mass Protest Decade and the Missing Revolution
Bevins, Vincent
PublicAffairs (352 pp.)
$30.00 | Oct. 3, 2023
9781541788978

A former journalist in Brazil and Southeast Asia for the Washington Post, was intimately involved in the Brazilian street protests in 2013, among other events, and he spent four years interviewing people around the world to get a deeper understanding of this “mass protest decade,” beginning in Tunisia in 2011. The author seeks to reveal why the demands were simply repudiated or worse—e.g., military crackdown in Egypt or the election of right-wing leader Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in 2018. Much has been written about the role of social media in spurring a global democratic movement, and there was the tremendous role of Al Jazeera in reporting on the Arab Spring. However, in Libya, Syria, Bahrain, and elsewhere, things went very differently, as Bevins amply demonstrates. Despite initial encouragement in Hong Kong, the crackdown by China has been nearly complete. In Ukraine, the so-called Orange Revolution was successful in kicking the Soviet-backed leader out of Kyiv; yet Russia later invaded. Chile has been perhaps the lone success story. In 2021, Gabriel Boric, “the leader of the 2011 student protests who entered congressional politics in 2013 and signed the ‘peace accord’ in 2019, was elected president” at age 35, famously declaring, “If Chile was the cradle of neoliberalism, it will also be its grave.” Particularly incisive is the author’s questioning of protest leaders and other relevant figures about what they would have done differently, in hindsight. Bevins is correct about how little the media understand the Global South, and he shows how “the horizontally structured, digitally coordinated, leaderless mass protest is fundamentally illegible.”

Questions remain, but this insightful study should prove valuable to future activists across the globe.

EVE
How the Female Body Drove 200 Million Years of Human Evolution
Bohannon, Cat
Knopf (624 pp.)
$35.00 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780385350549

A capacious investigation of women throughout time.

Bohannon, who holds a doctorate in the study of the evolution of narrative and cognition, makes an
engaging book debut with a sweeping history of the development of women's bodies over the past 200 million years. Calling evolution “a complicated narrative, with a lot of whimsy and accident,” the author creates a jaunty, digressive, and often whimsical tale examining the origins of some defining features of womanhood: the ability to produce milk; gestate offspring in the womb; facilitate childbirth; experience menopause, which remains “one of the biggest mysteries in modern biology”; and forge “distinctive, complex, bizarre, and overpowering love bonds.” Bohannon considers how bipedalism, the use of tools, increased brain size, and language related particularly to females. Mammalian milk, she notes, originated more than 200 million years ago in a mammal the size of a field mouse. Placental mammals evolved 67 million to 63 million years ago, this time in a squirrel-like creature, the first to grow eggs inside her body, rather than drop them in a nest. Changes in seeing and hearing resulted from the development of primates, 66 million to 63 million years ago. “Primate Eves” lived in tree canopies for tens of millions of years before diverging to become bipedal, sometime between 5 million and 13 million years ago, a stance that affected pregnancy and childbirth. Bohannon makes a case for females being the first to use tools—“a set of behaviors...to change their relationship with the world around them”—some 2.5 million to 1.8 million years ago, arguing against the idea that innovation has “been driven by groups of men solving man-problems.” Combing scientific literature, the author finds no difference between the brains of men and women. Many species inhabit Bohannon's fascinating chronicle, as she compares human evolution and life cycle to that of other creatures, great and small.

Prodigious research informs a spirited history of humanity.
Susan Casey is a champion of the deep ocean—revealing its natural wonders, its importance to the planet’s health, and its vulnerability to potential exploiters. The bestselling author of three previous books about the marine world, Casey worked her many contacts to gain entree to the most hostile environment on Earth for humans, one that can only be reached with cutting-edge technology and unlimited funds.

After years of research, Casey was able to dive in a manned submersible to one of the deepest spots on Earth. But her connections also gave her a front-row seat to the destruction of the Titan, the OceanGate submersible craft that imploded during a June 18 dive to explore the wreck of the Titanic. All five people onboard were killed.

Her new book, The Underworld: Journeys to the Depths of the Ocean (Doubleday, Aug. 1), shows off Casey’s superior writing and reporting skills. A high-energy, mile-a-minute talker with a passion for her subject, Casey spoke with Kirkus about the book by telephone from her home in New York. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

You knew people involved in the Titan tragedy. Give us your take on it.

I wrote the book proposal for The Underworld in 2018, and at the time I lived in Hawaii and was looking for a way to get into this environment. OceanGate was putting out a lot of statements saying [they were] going to do cutting-edge submersibles and allow people to come into the deep ocean environment. I reached out to the company and spoke to a PR person and some of the operations team.

I didn’t know too much about submersibles at that time. But I had another person that I was spending time with during my reporting, a submersible pilot for two of these subs, the Pisces 4 and the Pisces 5—they’re at the University of Hawaii’s undersea research lab. He was an experienced pilot; he’s a character in the book. I said, “I’m thinking about going out with these OceanGate people,” and he just stopped and said, “No, you aren’t.”

Once I found out about OceanGate, I backed away fast. There was a whistleblower, David Lochridge, the director of marine operations. He had produced a 10-page report, which I read. It was exactly the kind of detailed report that you would want your director of marine operations to make, 14 pages of very specific problems. [OceanGate owner] Stockton Rush’s response was to fire him on the spot, to give him 10 minutes to clear out his desk. Then, four days later, there comes a letter from OceanGate’s lawyers, basically threatening Lochridge. I won’t go into all the details, but suffice it to say, I don’t know how we could have actually come up and said, this guy’s going to kill somebody, before it actually happened.

You’re saying that you don’t know how it could have been stopped?

I don’t know how it could have been stopped. He had his sub registered in the Bahamas, he had it leaving from Canada, sailing directly into international waters. One of the men that I knew and admired and write about in The Underworld, Paul-Henri Nargeolet, was killed. Nobody could fig-
ure out what he was doing there; all I can say is he was a man who loved the ocean, and he loved that wreck [the Titanic]. I think that, unfortunately, he gave a sense of legitimacy to a rogue operation. This is a fledgling industry; I think it's really important that we do go down there and explore the deep. To the extent this gives people the idea that this can't be done safely or that it's always a crapshoot, that is really unfortunate, because it's not true.

**What kind of person is attracted to this kind of exploration?**

To quote Don Walsh, one of the best submersible pilots: It's curious people. It's curious people who act on their curiosity.

**It struck me that another key element is the willingness to tolerate risk.**

Every submersible operation I observed or was part of [involved] machines that have been rigorously tested, checked, built, and adhere to the rules of physics, and so they're overbuilt. It's far more dangerous to get in your car than it is to dive in a submersible. The people that I spent time with in the ocean are risk analysts, not risk junkies. And there's a certain amount of humility in that mindset, because the deep ocean doesn't negotiate. If you want to go down there, there's a very clear protocol of things that have to happen before you can do it safely, and everybody does those things. Except for OceanGate.

**I want to touch on the sheer wonder of what you experienced, which is vividly conveyed in the book. What was your favorite weird creature?**

More than a single weird creature, it was more like an overall experience of this realm with glowing, shimmering, twinkling creatures that live entirely in the dark and communicate with light. There's a moment that really sticks in my mind, when we flashed the lights of the sub and all the creatures flashed back, and you saw that the water was just absolutely filled with life. And by the way, they're also the biological carbon pump, one of the main mechanisms to absorb our excess heat and carbon dioxide. They move up the water column at night, they eat phytoplankton that has carbon from the sunlight, and they swim back down and excrete it. It's a way of getting carbon from above and sequestering it below. It's like the world's largest animal migration, every single day.

**You describe several dire threats to the health of the deep ocean. Which one worries you the most at this point?**

Deep sea mining will be the most destructive thing that humans could ever do, on an order of magnitude. I don't like the fact that there's plastic embedded in the creatures of the ocean, but the deep sea mining freaks me out.

**You're addressing the proposal to mine manganese-rich nodules from the deep ocean floor.**

There's no sense of how that ecosystem could ever repair itself. Those manganese nodules take a million years to grow a millimeter or something. They're not rocks, they're more like trees in a forest. There are animals living in them, on them, and under them in this particular area they're going to mine first. They've found that 50% of the sea creatures that are there are there because of the nodules. It's like a reservoir of genomic innovation, a DNA database for the Earth going back hundreds of millions of years.

And they're just going to rip up those sediments and all the microbial life within them. They're going to be sucked up a pipe. It's like something out of Avatar, you know? Scientists have been racing to find out what's down there, and even after several years of studying it, they've only managed to sample about 0.01% of it. But approximately 90% of the animals they have found are new species. I felt like I was almost going to have a nervous breakdown when I was writing that chapter.

I really hope that wisdom will prevail. A lot of countries have come out and said that at the least we should have a moratorium [until] we understand what we're about to do. Scientists have recommended 10 to 30 years of further study before we even consider it. So far, those voices have not prevailed.

**Hopefully your book will get the word out.**

If I could hope for one thing, it would be that. I really hope my book will introduce this sort of magical realm and enchant people so that they want to care and that they want to protect it. It's just so magnificent.

Mary Ann Gwinn is a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist in Seattle. The Underworld received a starred review in the May 15, 2023, issue.
“A nimble, eminently readable tribute to a pair of literary giants who weren’t shy of calling themselves such.”

MAESTROS & MONSTERS

Days & Nights With Susan Sontag & George Steiner

Boyers, Robert
Mandel Vilar Press (256 pp.)
$24.95 paper | Sept. 26, 2023
9781942134886

Ruminations of two preternaturally smart contributors to the literary journal Salmagundi by its founding editor.

“I never doubted she was one of the coolest persons I had ever known. That was one reason I was so disappointed on those occasions when she exhibited a side of herself that was decidedly unappealing.” So writes Boyers in this memoir, at once high-minded and gossipy, of time spent with Susan Sontag and George Steiner, two intellectuals who were very much alike and, of course, couldn’t stand each other. Sontag, who occupies the first half of the book, had plenty of unappealing moments, such as when she terrorized a young reporter who had the gall to suggest an interview but had not mastered Sontag’s oeuvre or when Sontag got herself and Boyers ejected from a Manhattan cab by upbraiding its driver for the route he chose. “Few people were prepared to tell Susan to fuck off when she was behaving badly,” he writes. Steiner was one of them, albeit in a superarch manner. Imperious and demanding, Steiner, a noted critic, had the temerity to dress down T.S. Eliot for “neglecting to address the implications of the Holocaust” in his book Notes Towards the Definition of Culture. Academics tended to dismiss Steiner as glib and, even worse, “journalistic,” but a riveting lecture on Shakespeare that Boyers attended in Geneva showed just how deeply versed Steiner was in literature and a dozen other disciplines. The same was true of Sontag, who, with Steiner, represented a kind of criticism that was thorough, immersive, and completely uninterested in being politically correct—and yet that was progressivist and nonelitist at the same time. “Contrary, polarizing, sometimes abrasive, both could seem at times unlovable,” Boyers writes, and yet he clearly loves both of them as literary and intellectual exemplars—and ornery people, too.

A nimble, eminently readable tribute to a pair of literary giants who weren’t shy of calling themselves such.

BUILD THE LIFE YOU WANT

The Art and Science of Getting Happier

Brooks, Arthur C. & Oprah Winfrey
Portfolio (272 pp.)
$27.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780593545409

An accessible road map to greater fulfillment, connection, and magnanimity.

During the 2020 pandemic, Brooks, a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School and the Harvard Business School, began a column in the Atlantic, “How To Build a Life,” offering practical wisdom and tools for a purpose-driven, satisfying life. A fan of Brooks’ work, Winfrey writes, “This man was singing my song.” Over the course of this collaboration, Brooks presents “clear, science-based information about how your happiness works and then instructions on how to use this information in your life.” Winfrey contributes intermittent, brief notes about experiences and opinions—e.g., “It’s about happier—a relative, contextualized, fluid condition, not some perfect fixed ideal... Happier is not a state of being, but a state of doing—not a thing you wait around and hope for, but an achievable change you actively work toward.” After defining happiness (“a combination of enjoyment, satisfaction, and purpose”), the authors focus on the benefits of and skills required for emotional self-management (“metacognition, emotional substitution, and adopting an outward focus”). Winfrey suggests writing down words to that effect and taping them to your refrigerator: “Your emotions are only signals. And you get to decide how you’ll respond to them.” Brooks delineates simple, actionable steps such as keeping a journal. “Spend more time enjoying things that amaze you,” he writes, emphasizing how to consciously cultivate gratitude, humor, hope, and compassion. An example of his advice includes, “Unfollow people you don’t know... whose posts you simply look at because they have what you want.” He posits that family, friendship, work, and faith “are the pillars on which a good life is based,” and he focuses the final four chapters on each of these. Brooks is masterful at synthesizing enormous quantities of research into a simple and supportive text.

A quick read, this hopeful book will benefit readers searching for enriched well-being.

BLACK LOVE LETTERS

Ed. by Brown, Cole & Natalie Johnson
Get Lifted Books/Zando (240 pp.)
$24.00 | Oct. 24, 2023
97816138931201

Black Americans declare their love.

This anthology brings together dozens of love letters by prominent Black Americans. The entries, interspersed with illustrations, address an eclectic mix of topics arranged under five categories: Care, Awe, Loss, Ambivalence, and Transformation. In their introduction, editors Brown and Johnson note the book’s inspiration in the witnessing of violence directed at Black America. Reckonings with outrage and grief, they explain, remain an urgent task and a precondition of creating and sustaining loving bonds. The editors seek to create “a site for our people to come together on the deepest, strongest emotion we share” and thus open “the possibility for shared deliverance” and “carve out a space for healing, together.” This aim is powerfully realized in many of the letters, which offer often poignant portrayals of where redemptive love has and might yet be found. Among the most memorable are Joy Reid’s “A Love Letter to My Hair,” a sensitive articulation.
of a hard-won sense of self-love; Morgan Jerkins’ “Dear Egypt,” an exploration of a lifelong passion for an ancient world; and VJ Jenkins’ “Pops and Dad,” an affirmation that it “is beautiful to be Black, to be a man, and to be gay.” Tracey Michae’l Lewis-Giggetts’ “Home: A Reckoning” is particularly thoughtful and incisive in its examination of a profound attachment, “in the best and worst ways,” to Louisville, Kentucky. Most of the pieces pair personal recollections with incisive cultural commentary. The cumulative effect of these letters is to set forth a panorama of opportunities for maintaining the ties that matter most, especially in the face of a cultural milieu that continues to produce virulent forms of love’s opposite. Other contributors include Nadia Owusu, Jamila Woods, Ben Crump, Eric Michael Dyson, Kwame Dawes, Jenna Wortham, and Imani Perry.

A wide-ranging collection of testaments to what moves the heart.

FAMILY REINS
The Extraordinary Rise and Epic Fall of an American Dynasty
Busch, Billy
Blackstone (242 pp.)
$27.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9788200798827

In which a family that drinks together sinks together.

For generations, the Busch family was synonymous with mass-produced beer, courtesy of an empire that began with a St. Louis brewery that churned out a popular lager. “We’re the poster children of the American dream,” writes the descendant author, “that not-so-outdated belief that hard work, entrepreneurship, grit, and a positive can-do attitude can make anything possible.” Corporate intrigue and familial back-stabbing helped, too, as Busch reveals when writing of how an older sibling deposed his father
returns to Marshall, beginning with her childhood in the Bronx and ending with her 2018 death from “complications related to diabetes.” Consequently, the book feels more like a biography rather than a pure history of the film, and the sections about the nuts-and-bolts of the movie more like a list of trivia than a true narrative. Still, the author’s playful tone and narratorial asides make this a charming read.

An uneven but often entertaining look at a memorable movie and the unique woman who directed it.

**JOHNNY CASH**
*The Life in Lyrics*
Cash, Johnny with Mark Stielper & John Carter Cash
Voracious/Little, Brown (384 pp.)
$55.00 | Nov. 14, 2023
9780316503105

A lavishly illustrated biography of the iconic country singer, with his lyrics as the focal point.

John R. Cash (1932-2003) was born in rural Arkansas in the depths of the Depression. The child of poor sharecroppers, he was also the grandson of “circuit-riding Missionary Baptist preachers.” Stielper, who has been covering Cash for 40 years, argues that these roots are evident in both the sympathy for underdogs and the spiritual aspiration that are constant themes in Cash’s music. After graduating from high school, Cash spent four years in the Air Force, stationed in Germany. After his discharge, he married his first wife and moved to Memphis, where he worked as an appliance salesman. At the time, he was busy writing songs, and he managed to convince Sam Phillips, the legendary owner of Sun Records, to let him record some of them. Eventually, he wrote more than 600, and this book includes the lyrics to 125, chosen “to explore Cash’s range as a poet and a storyteller.” Stielper succinctly covers the singer’s career, including his marriage to June Carter, his TV show and prison performances, and his numerous recordings. Cash’s son, John Carter, provides personal insights into his father’s character and intriguing analyses of his songs. Fleshing out the text are numerous photos of Cash, in performance or in more casual settings, along with handwritten lyric sheets, meditations, letters, and other documents. Many of the photos are very similar, though die-hard Cash fans may not consider this a shortcoming. Regardless, it’s the lyrics—some universally familiar, some fairly obscure—that are the true stars of the book. It’s easy to hear Cash’s voice in them, even for those readers who may not have heard him sing, and all readers will finish the book with a deeper understanding of his art.

Invaluable insight into one of the major figures in American music.
A chronicle of the long struggle for Black civil rights in the century before the Voting Rights Act was enacted.

Distinguished historian Chafe is self-aware enough to recognize that “the struggle for freedom has been carried out primarily by Black Americans, with only occasional assistance from whites.” Whites have been allies and supporters, to be sure, but it was institutions and people within the Black community who carried most of the burden—and indeed, who evolved those institutions as instruments of struggle, whether the Black church or even street gangs. In many cases, Chafe concludes, in his lucid narrative, whites have become allies largely for political expediency. For example, a reluctant John F. Kennedy heeded the Civil Rights Movement because he needed Black votes, while Franklin Roosevelt enforced fair-hiring laws “only because he could not afford to face 50,000-100,000 Black protestors on the streets of Washington as he tried to mobilize support for American intervention in World War II.” Even Harry Truman, who talked a good game about civil rights, “impressed supporters…with his endorsement of FEPC [i.e., fair employment] legislation, but he did nothing to persuade recalcitrant Southern senators to vote for the bill.” Far more common than white alliance was white resistance to any advances in civil rights. As Chafe notes, when World War I ended and Black veterans returned home with the thought that they may have earned equal treatment for their service, they met a wave of lynchings committed and abetted by whites who saw their military service “as a threat to the racial status quo.” Given on-paper advances since the 1960s, Chafe concludes, one might be tempted to think that civil rights is a done deal. However—and here is an opening for true, steadfast white allies—he urges that “until economic progress goes hand in hand with equal political rights, racial discrimination will continue to be a dominant reality in America.”

An evenhanded, wide-ranging contribution to the literature of civil rights.
A spirited saga of glitz and greed.

ECONOMICS IN AMERICA
An Immigrant Economist Explores the Land of Inequality
Deaton, Angus
Princeton Univ. (280 pp.)
$24.95 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780691247625

A Nobel laureate reports on U.S. economic policy and the state of Anglo-American economics.

A professor of economics emeritus at Princeton and author of Death of Despair and the Future of Capitalism, Deaton gathers essays he wrote for Britain’s Royal Economic Society over the last 25 years. One set of essays addresses substantive concerns, including health care policy, inflation and its measurement, global poverty, pensions, wealth and income inequality, and class and generational social disparities. The author casts doubt on the magic of the “free” market and claims that economic thinking is helpful but insufficient given the extent to which it is ignored by policymakers and/or used simply to justify politically determined decisions. The other essays address the economic discipline: professional organizations, journals, core disagreements, and the Nobel Prize. Deaton boldly asks why economists fail to deliver economic policy that reduces inequalities. “We have certainly made too little progress on central policy questions that ought to be amenable to scientific inquiry,” he writes. Internal disagreements, a failure of economists to recognize the political nature of advice-giving, the resistance of elected officials to issues of inequality, and the privileging of capital over labor in conventional economic wisdom stifle economic advice. Deaton bemoans American capitalism with its “government-enabled rent seeking and the destruction supported by the ideology of market fundamentalism.” However, he refuses to abandon mainstream economics, noting that we “need to put the power of competition back in the service of the middle and working classes.” To do so, the discipline must reconnect with its “proper basis, which is the study of human welfare.” Written for non-economists to help them understand “how my profession works,” the book is insufficiently attentive to the differences among and within the field’s academic, policy, and business realms.

HOW ELITES ATE THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT
deBoer, Fredrik
Simon & Schuster (256 pp.)
$29.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781668016015

A wide-ranging critique of leftist politics as not being left enough.

Continuing his examination of progressive reform movements begun with The Cult of Smart, Marxist analyst deBoer takes on a left wing that, like all political movements, is subject to “the inertia of established systems.” The great moment for the left, he suggests, ought to have been the summer of 2020, when the murder of George Floyd and the accumulated crimes of Donald Trump should have led to more than a minor upheaval. In Minneapolis, he writes, first came the call from the city council to abolish the police, then make reforms, then cut the budget; the grace note was “an increase in funding to the very department it had recently set about to dissolve.” What happened? The author answers with the observation that it is largely those who can afford it who populate the ranks of the progressive movement, and they find other things to do after a while, even as those who stand to benefit most from progressive reform “lack the cultural capital and economic stability to have a presence in our national media and politics.” The resulting “elite capture” explains why the Democratic Party is so ineffectual in truly representing minority and working-class constituents. Dispirited, deBoer writes, “no great American revolution is coming in the early twenty-first century.”

Accommodation to gradualism was once counted heresy among doctrinaire Marxists, but deBoer holds that it’s likely the only truly available path toward even small-scale gains. Meanwhile, he scourges nonprofits for diluting the tax base. It would be better, he argues, to tax those who can afford it rather than allowing deductible donations and “reducing the availability of public funds for public uses.” Usefully, the author also argues that identity politics centering on difference will never build a left movement, which instead must find common cause against conservatism and fascism. Deliberately provocative, with much for left-inclined activists to ponder.
A Cuban essayist, critic, and art curator reflects on various aspects of the Cuban socialist revolution, subsequent capitalist experiments, and ongoing tensions with the U.S.

In these brief, pointed essays published in Spanish-language periodicals since the 1990s, de la Nuez, who left Cuba in 1991 and lives in Barcelona, shows how Cuba managed to weather its socialist revolution, despite the fall of the Soviet Union, and has not embraced democracy since the death of its seminal founder, Fidel Castro, and retirement of his brother, Raúl, in 2021. Instead, the author argues that Cuba has embraced “an ecstasy of exceptionality” and has chosen “to go it alone.” He looks at some of the aspects of this exceptionalism through the last three decades, mostly in the world of arts and culture. These include the parade of intellectuals through Cuba since the 1960s, “ever ready to give theoretical support to the so-called Cuban way”; the cunning “iconocacy” employed by Fidel in pictures and movies to spread the Cuban mystique (“Castro never needed a spin doctor”); and a “post-communist” New Left that has forgotten the countervailing narratives.

Trenchant observations on the enduring Cuban mystique.

“Fascists and communists both believed...that the individuals who made up the elites needed to be eliminated by force,” writes Finkelstein. His mother’s side of the family was afflicted first by the former, forced into exile from Germany in the rise to power of a Nazi Party that paterfamilias Alfred Wiener foresaw after returning home from World War I. His father’s side of the family, meanwhile, was similarly exiled from their home on “one of Łódź’s most prestigious and expensive streets, forced to establish the lifesaving War Refugee Board. Finkelstein’s text, richly detailed and full of explorations of little-known corners of history, closes with an unlikely denouement given the slaughter and a moving homage to the will to endure.”

An excellent contribution to the literature of the Shoah and a moving homage to the will to endure.

Behind the scenes of the creation of a single dish at a fine dining restaurant.

Friedman, producer and host of the podcast Andrew Talks to Chefs and author of Chefs, Drugs and Rock & Roll and Knives at Dawn, offers a lively look into what goes into the production of one meal, on one day, in one restaurant. He chose Chicago’s Wherewithall, a sleek 50-seat venue noted for its weekly seven-course tasting menu, focusing on the meat course, which, during his visit in July 2021, was a dry-aged strip loin with tomato and sorrel. At Wherewithall, he observes, “the food, like the food at most restaurants, is the creative, technical, and physical work product” not only of the owners and chef de cuisine, “but also of their sous chef and cooks, dishwashing team, and servers. From beyond the...
restaurant, it contains the labor of farmers, farmhands, producers, delivery people, packers, and too many others to list in full.” Besides spending a week on site, examining every facet of menu planning, cooking, and serving, Friedman scoured the Midwest, visiting the area farms whose products shape each week’s menu. Wherewithall serves only seasonal produce from suppliers such as Nichols Farm & Orchard, which grew the tomatoes; the Slagel Family Farm, which furnished the beef; Butternut Sustainable Farm, which supplied the sorrel; and the 29-acre Smits Farm, a purveyor of fresh herbs and other items. The author rode along with the delivery company that transported produce from farm to restaurant kitchen, and he spoke to the documented workers at the vineyard from which the restaurant buys its wines. Friedman profiles many of the hardworking staff who make the restaurant’s success possible, including owners Beverly Kim and Johnny Clark, who came from vastly different restaurant experiences; chef de cuisine Tayler Ploshehanski, who deftly manages the complexities of the kitchen; server Nooshâ Elami, who has developed an intuitive sense of what patrons know about food; and dishwasher Blanca Vásquez, “one of the unseen heroes” of the restaurant.

An entertaining, eye-opening investigation.

THE MYTH THAT MADE US
How False Beliefs About Racism and Meritocracy Broke Our Economy (and How To Fix It)
Fuhrer, Jeff
MIT Press (384 pp.)
$32.95 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780262048392

An exposed of the many barriers marginalized people face in gaining access to the so-called American dream.

“We claim that we live in a land of opportunity, when in fact we have systematically denied opportunity for centuries,” writes Fuhrer, a foundation fellow at the Eastern Bank Foundation. The myth of the title is less a single yarn than the tangled mass of threads that comprise systemic racism in economic life — though if it were to be reduced to a single falsehood, it’s that each of us has the same opportunities to work and grow rich. It should be no surprise that the playing field is anything but level and that “the array of policies that were designed to build wealth for white families” is largely unavailable to anyone else. For individuals, the inequalities begin in childhood, with a huge differential in the accessibility of pediatric health care and educational and social support systems for early childhood development to minority and white populations. One of many hurdles, writes Fuhrer, is that the years of early childhood care tend to be the years of lowest earning, which means that the ability to borrow funds is constricted and the need for assistance greatest. A free-marketer fundamentalist may be shocked by Fuhrer’s program of remedies. Apart from increasing access to day care programs, for example, he recommends installing “school-to-work educational programs” that would serve as pipelines by which individuals with the necessary skills are steered from community college or trade school to jobs, with the costs borne by taxpayers and industry alike. He also recommends raising the minimum wage and, to make that possible, giving large tax breaks to the small businesses that might otherwise be harmed by the cost burden. Following Fuhrer’s tally sheet will surely make a libertarian blanch, but it’s an interesting back-of-the-envelope exercise in balancing costs and return on investment.

A thoughtful call for equality of economic opportunity, both provocative and, in the end, eminently practical.

THE UPSTAIRS DELICATESSEN
On Eating, Reading, Reading About Eating, & Eating While Reading
Garner, Dwight
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (256 pp.)
$27.00 | Oct. 24, 2023
9780374603427

The longtime critic for the New York Times follows Garner’s Quotations with a more specialized sequel of the culinary sort, featuring plenty of literary insight.

“Reading and eating like Krazy and Ignatz, Sturm Und Drang, prosciutto and melon, Simon and Schuster, and radishes and butter, have always, for me, simply gone together,” writes Garner. “The book you’re holding is a product of these combined gluttonies.” Whether nestled at home with a magazine and a sandwich or stretched out on the floor of a local bookstore that allowed customers to peruse with a six-pack of beer in tow, the author has plotted a course through life that has included many of these mutual indulgences. An omnidirectionally hungry human being,” Garner has always paid attention to what has entered and exited the mouths and minds of writers. The narrative passes seamlessly between quotes and stories of literary and cultural greats, and this undeniably enjoyable wander through digestive habit has absurd and hilarious heights. One particular highlight is a brief tangent on Mario Puzo, of Godfather fame, leaving a Swiss “fat farm,” taking a cab 300 miles, and breaking his fast with a Parisian pizza. Chapters proceed through the major and minor meals of the day and can blend at times into a culinary reverie. Garner’s wit and dexterity with a quote will keep any reader with something tasty to eat or drink in hand captivated at least until they run out of snacks. The author offers something to sate any hunger for culinary minutiae. “I read,” he notes, “out of an accelerated sense of what Tina Brown, in her Vanity Fair Diaries, called ‘observation greed.’ I’ve looked to novels and memoirs and biographies and diaries and cookbooks and books of letters for advice about how to live, the way cannibals ate the brains of brilliant captives, seeking to grow brilliant themselves.”

A wonderful mix of culinary memoir, literary reference, how-to in indulgence. Grab some snacks and dig in.
Garner empathizes with their challenge: to weigh contradictory evidence withheld; the demeanors of the lawyers and judges; and the testimony of scores of witnesses, including medical and psychological experts, various police officers and emergency personnel, and the accused's wife, friends, and co-workers. In the first trial, 40 witnesses testified for the Crown and five for the defense. The lawyers were a study in contrasts: Farquharson was defended by the verbose Peter Morrissey, "big, fair, and bluff," who could cause jurors' eyes to glaze over with his chilling, sometimes-numbing account of the courtroom proceedings; the evidence presented to the juries and the evidence withheld; the demeanors of the lawyers and judges; and the testimony of scores of witnesses, including medical and psychological experts, various police officers and emergency personnel, and the accused's wife, friends, and co-workers. In the first trial, 40 witnesses testified for the Crown and five for the defense. The lawyers were a study in contrasts: Farquharson was defended by the verbose Peter Morrissey, “big, fair, and bluff,” who could cause jurors’ eyes to glaze over with his incessant examination of minutiae; the Crown’s representative was Jeremy Rapke, who swooped like a falcon “into the muck” of testimony to draw blood. Although not serving on the jury, Garner empathizes with their challenge: to weigh contradictory evidence, tease truth from lies, and test what they hear against what they believe. They learned that Farquharson’s marriage had ended, his wife was living with another man, and, Garner reports, “the general feeling was that a man like Farquharson could not tolerate the loss of control he experienced” because of both occurrences. Was he depressed and suicidal? Did he seek revenge against his wife? Or, as he adamantly maintained, had he blacked out because of a coughing fit and lost control of the car? Garner captures the breathless suspense during the wait for the jury to return; the blow of the decision and sentencing; and her own unsettled response to the shattering experience of contemplating an unthinkable crime.

A stark account of the harrowing aftermath of a horrific crime.

In 2005, Robert Farquharson went to trial for causing the deaths of his three young children when he drove off a road in rural Australia, plunging his car, with the children strapped inside, into a dam. Novelist, screenwriter, and journalist Garner attended that trial—and retrial in 2010—and she creates a chilling, sometimes-numbing account of the courtroom proceedings; the evidence presented to the juries and the evidence withheld; the demeanors of the lawyers and judges; and the testimony of scores of witnesses, including medical and psychological experts, various police officers and emergency personnel, and the accused’s wife, friends, and co-workers. In the first trial, 40 witnesses testified for the Crown and five for the defense. The lawyers were a study in contrasts: Farquharson was defended by the verbose Peter Morrissey, “big, fair, and bluff,” who could cause jurors’ eyes to glaze over with his incessant examination of minutiae; the Crown’s representative was Jeremy Rapke, who swooped like a falcon “into the muck” of testimony to draw blood. Although not serving on the jury, Garner empathizes with their challenge: to weigh contradictory evidence, tease truth from lies, and test what they hear against what they believe. They learned that Farquharson’s marriage had ended, his wife was living with another man, and, Garner reports, “the general feeling was that a man like Farquharson could not tolerate the loss of control he experienced” because of both occurrences. Was he depressed and suicidal? Did he seek revenge against his wife? Or, as he adamantly maintained, had he blacked out because of a coughing fit and lost control of the car? Garner captures the breathless suspense during the wait for the jury to return; the blow of the decision and sentencing; and her own unsettled response to the shattering experience of contemplating an unthinkable crime.

A sensitive rendering of a legal drama.
Reevaluation. The author is willing to discuss some of his own setbacks and struggles, which gives the text added authenticity. He emphasizes that the book is not a self-help manual, but readers will find plenty of practical lessons and inspiring examples.

Writing with authority and clarity, Grant examines how talents can be discovered, developed, and turned into achievement.

Gupta, a former senior reporter at Jezebel who had the distinction of incurring Donald Trump’s wrath thanks to a probing interview she did with a defensive, elusive Ivanka, grew up as one of “the new model minority”: immigrants from India who are highly educated, wealthy, and endlessly hardworking. That success, she holds, is a result of a “thrice-filtered and stratified” selection process whereby the most privileged in India leave for better opportunities abroad. The author’s father moved from India to Canada to the U.S. following an arranged marriage, and there he began a successful career in medicine. Alternately emotionally distant and full of self-doubt, he often demeaned Gupta’s mother, a modern example of “how women’s voices…were appropriated by both the British colonizers and Indian men in power during the struggle for control.” Addressing much of her narrative to her mother in the second person, Gupta recounts the pressures of being brought up with aspirational expectations of perfection that she came to resist, if mostly innocently: “Papa cast my rebellion as typical American teen behavior. But, Mummy, real rebels would have laughed at me.” The friction among parents and daughter grows ever more grinding as the author proceeds into young adulthood, yielding both tragedy and a rupture within a seemingly ironclad nuclear South Asian family. Gupta does not often become overwrought, though there are moments. More notable is her difficulty in understanding the motives of her driven father and a mother of whom, she admits in direct address, “I never asked you what hopes and dreams buoyed you amid the all-consuming loneliness and grief of leaving your family and your country behind. I had just assumed that the West, the land of opportunity, was so obviously the best place to live.”

In relentlessly grim, unsparing prose, Gupta offers proof of Tolstoy’s observation that each unhappy family is uniquely so.
A deeply reported story of aspiration and desperation among an immigrant Hmong community in California’s Central Valley.

Agricultural journalist and photographer Hamilton’s protagonist, Ia, was born with the name Ai, meaning small, in 1964, when Laos was descending into civil war. An aid worker decided that “what sounded like I’ couldn’t possibly be a person’s name,” rendering her name as the Hmong word meaning bitterness. When the Communists seized power in 1975, most of her Hmong community fled to Thailand. The Hmong remained in a refugee camp for years, long enough to experience what Hamilton calls “an additional layer of punishment”—namely, the loss of their self-reliant lives as farmers. Their economy was converted to artisanal craftwork in which the women, now doing needlework, were the breadwinners while the men were barely employed and “no longer essential.” Ia, now a mother several times over, took her chances and traveled to America, settling in Fresno in a time when “Americans’ sympathy for those displaced by the wars in Southeast Asia grew thinner by the year.” While navigating a corrupt system of patronage, Ia did something marvelous: She planted a kind of rice highly prized by Southeast Asian connoisseurs as well as Hmong people, selling it for many times the price of ordinary varieties, and created a small agricultural economy that reached back to the old country. “The rice was a medium for memory,” writes the author, “a spiritual bridge on which her heart could walk across all that longing and return to when she was with them both in person.” Though it brought money and self-sufficiency, Ia’s small—and, given climate change, always endangered—farm could not always lift her from the spiritual malaise of exile, even with her mother’s encouraging admonition in the face of hardship: “Next year you can start all over again.”

A sensitive and carefully written story that sympathetically depicts the hard lives of refugees in a strange land.

In his simultaneously humorous and heartbreaking debut book, journalist and cultural critic Harriot offers an impressively researched and thoughtful exploration of the African diaspora over the past 500 years. The author weaves humor and wit with history and advocacy, and he takes readers on countless edifying twists and turns that debunk myths or clarify accepted terms and conditions. Harriot is adept at reframing conventional history, showing us how the slave trade was human trafficking, plantations were “forced labor enterprises,” Jim Crow was American apartheid, and lynching was “serial killers and ethnic cleansers. Though pertinent historical names and events come to the forefront, forgotten players and details receive equal attention. “The Emancipation Proclamation couldn’t free the slaves,” he writes. “Black people freed themselves. And in doing so, they defeated the Confederacy and freed America from its most undemocratic institution.” Harriot also injects appropriate modern analogies—e.g., regarding W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, “this beef was bigger than Jay-Z vs. Nas; shadier than Michael Jackson vs. Prince; more contentious than sugar vs. salt in grits.” After noting Ida B. Wells’ “allergy to white nonsense and patriarchy,” the author later devotes an entire chapter to the women who started and contributed to the Civil Rights Movement. In a nod to family, the book is also seasoned with stories from Harriot’s own life and family history, including the “Top-Secret Recipe for Aunt Phyllis’s Fried Chicken.” An uncle even steps in to share some of the narrating duties. Each chapter concludes with an amusing yet informative quiz, and the text includes a wide variety of digestive asides and illuminating sidebar passages—e.g., “The Difference Between Soul Food and Southern Cuisine,” “The Real Wakanda.” Fagbamiye’s illustrations complement the text well.

Fresh eyes and bold, entertaining language combine in this authoritative, essential work of U.S. history.

A history of the difficult work of wresting Wall Street into regulatory compliance over the course of Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency.

It was among the greatest accomplishments of Roosevelt’s New Deal that agencies such as the Securities and Exchange Commission succeeded in “clearing out the vicious jungle that was the nation’s financial landscape in the 1920s and replacing it with a well-tended terrain where ordinary Americans could save and invest with confidence,” writes Henriques, a George Polk Award winner and the author of The Wizard of Lies and A First-Class Catastrophe. Before the SEC came along, Wall Street
was an arena for insider trading and self-dealing, where private investors mostly worked at a large scale and smallholders in the financial arena were frequently victimized by those larger players. While serving as New York’s governor, Roosevelt made tentative steps to regulate the financial industry, and he rejected Robert Moses for the role of czar. It was Roosevelt’s lieutenant governor, a scion of the Lehman dynasty, who put Moses in the job, and Moses successfully articulated “the folly of trusting bankers to police themselves.” Even after the SEC was established, Henriques observes, the financial markets were occasionally roiled by downturns, though honest ones that largely reflected the business cycle rather than the vast Ponzi scheme that manifested itself in the meltdown of the first years of the Great Depression. Some of the practices that the SEC attempted to curb are back in full force, including short selling. Even if the Chicago School acolytes urge that the government has no business in the marketplace, the “rich man’s panics” of old are fewer than before, with a scaffolding of “safeguards against market rigging” in place—at least for the moment.

Defenders of regulatory watchfulness will find much ammunition for argument in this readable history.

EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF AND GOD AGAINST ALL
A Memoir
Herzog, Werner
Trans. by Michael Hofmann
Penguin Press (368 pp.)
$30.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780593490297

Herzog in all his extravagant, perspicacious glory.

Now 80, the acclaimed director, documentarian, and author, a “product of my mistakes and misjudgments,” recalls his “archaic,” poverty-stricken early years in the Bavarian Alps on the edge of a war before digressing into the making of The Wild Blue Yonder, “a completely fantastical science fiction film.” Throughout, Herzog is witty and captivating as he recollects all those recurring tropes in my films,” he notes, “that are almost as esoteric,” he writes near the conclusion of the book, which ends midsentence.

Fans and neophytes alike will relish the opportunity to delve deeply into Herzog’s fascinating mind.

HUMANIZING IMMIGRATION
How To Transform Our Racist and Unjust System
Hing, Bill Ong
Beacon Press (272 pp.)
$27.95 | Oct. 24, 2023
9780807008027

A professor of immigration law with five decades of experience offers some fixes for a broken system.

Arguing from the outset that U.S. immigration laws are fundamentally racist and unjust, Hing, the author of Deporting Our Souls and American Presidents, Depor tations, and Human Rights Violations: From Carter to Trump, presents ample evidence of their sometimes Kafkaesque, frequently wantonly cruel applications. In service of his argument, he looks at five different types of immigration dysfunction, illustrating each with stories of individuals affected. He leads with the detention of minors at the southern border, plunging readers into the shocking conditions endured by children, some as young as toddlers, held for days in overcrowded rooms and given insufficient nutrition. He then turns to the deportation of permanent residents for aggravated felony convictions, a category of infractions that includes crimes U.S. citizens experience as misdemeanors; the inconsistency—all too often based in racism—of application of prosecutorial discretion; the difficulties faced by asylum seekers; and the general chaos of the immigration court system. Throughout, Hing writes with emotion but fixes for a broken system.

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A powerful, cogent indictment.
HOLLYWOOD AND THE MOVIES OF THE FIFTIES
The Collapse of the Studio System, the Thrill of Cinerama, and the Invasion of the Ultimate Body Snatcher—Television
Hirsch, Foster
Knopf (656 pp.)
$40.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780307958921

A personal, wide-screen approach to the best and worst of times for movies.

Threatened by TV and the beginning of the end of the studio system, the 1950s was the “most turbulent decade in the history of the American filmmaking industry”—at least until 2020, writes film scholar Hirsch, author of Otto Preminger and A Method to Their Madness, among other books. In this dauntingly lavish book, which will impress film buffs but perhaps overwhelm general readers, the author neatly plumbs a wide range of topics. He profiles the ups and downs of some of the major studios, from the powerful Louis B. Mayer’s MGM (called an “industrial compound” by Elia Kazan) to Mary Pickford and Charles Chaplin’s United Artists, which “nurtured” Stanley Kubrick. Hirsch deftly discusses many of the studios’ films and the actors and directors who worked for them. Hollywood hoped its new “intoxicating visual and aural pleasures” would encourage viewership: Cinerama, touted by the “intrepid world traveler” Lowell Thomas, 3-D, CinemaScope, VistaVision, and Todd-AO. Hirsch is a “cheerleader” for all of them. “In the race for survival,” he writes, “new content was as necessary as new formats,” and he surveys the studio’s high and low offerings, from fancy upmarket “art” fare to the explosion of exploitation fare (“even the detritus of the 1950s is of greater interest than the ephemera of other periods”) to “thoughtful, well-meaning, and non-exploitative” race films (Black, Asian, American Indian, etc.) and those dealing with antisemitism and homosexuality. Hirsch shows how the films from this era were multifaceted and engaged with the political and social issues of the time. He zeroes in on the careers of famous actors as they navigated the changing scene, from the older ones to the up-and-coming “Method-trained” ones. The author concludes with an insightful overview of the strong noir films of the decade, science-fiction films that featured Cold War political allegories, animated films, documentaries, and the fading musicals, epics, and overwrought melodramas.

A rich, expansive, and penetrating work of film and social history.

PAX

War and Peace in Rome’s Golden Age
Holland, Tom
Basic Books (480 pp.)
$32.00 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780465093533

The third in the author’s series about the Roman world, following Rubicon and Dynasty.

That the two centuries before Emperor Marcus Aurelius’ death in 180 C.E. represented a golden age is not a unanimous opinion among scholars, but it continues to produce histories of this age. This is a fine addition, although Holland confines the narrative to the era’s second half. The author opens in 68 C.E., the last year of Nero’s reign. Nearly a century had passed since Caesar’s adopted son, Octavian, had won a brutal civil war, renamed himself Augustus, and began his long reign. Most popular historians classify Rome’s emperors as either good or bad, with Nero among the bad. Holland delivers a vivid account of his grotesqueries but emphasizes that he was the last of the Augustine dynasty and had not named a successor. Accustomed to a well-ordered government, citizens were shocked at events over the following catastrophic “year of the four emperors,” during which a bloody civil war produced three who died after ruling for a few months, although the winner, Vespasian, turned out well. His son, Titus, died after only two years, but Titus’ younger brother, Domitian, reigned for 15 before being murdered in 96 C.E. Although once dubbed a bad emperor, modern scholars have reconsidered, and Holland presents a mildly approving portrait. More significantly, his successors were the five hallowed “good” emperors who ruled for more than 80 years. Edward Gibbon famously described this time as “the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous.” After the obligatory account of Vesuvius’ destruction of Pompeii, Holland takes up the story of the good emperors. It’s a tale with no shortage of bloodshed, but it was largely confined to the frontiers except for the stubborn Judean uprising. The author includes a helpful timeline and a 10-page dramatis personae.

A capably rendered history of Rome’s more-or-less golden age.
IRA HAYES
Akimel O’odham Warrior,
World War II Hero,
and Legend
Holm, Tom
Twelve (320 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781538709504

Searching study of the psychically scarred Native American Marine Corps hero made famous for raising the American flag on Iwo Jima.

“He received more press than Geronimo, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Cochise, and Tecumseh combined.” So writes Holm, a Marine combat veteran of Vietnam and retired professor of American Indian studies, of Ira Hayes (1923-1955), caught both in Joe Rosenthal’s iconic photograph and its replication in the Marine Corps War Memorial in Washington, D.C. Hayes was also caught in the maze depicted in the iconography of his Akimel O’odham people, its middle-way ideals disrupted by war; that maze found him suffering horribly from PTSD and the self-medication of alcohol. Although the Akimel O’odham were considered “a peaceful people,” largely because they did not rise up against the American conquerors of their homeland, they had a tradition of warfare. However, writes the author “the Akimel O’odham way of war was a complex amalgamation of preparatory rituals, limited aggression, the ceremonial expungement of the pollution of death, healing, and the celebration of the return of the relatives who took part in the conflict.” Thrust instead into boot camp, jungle warfare, the horrific battle for Iwo Jima, and unwoined fame for anchoring the six-man chain that raised the American flag over Mount Suribachi, Hayes returned to poverty on a reservation just a generation away from a horrible famine wrought by water-greedy white farmers in the Arizona desert. Hayes would say “that he wished the picture had never been taken,” and after the war, adrift, he was at home nowhere. Holm argues that the “drunken Indian” image so often presented in popular culture is both false and demeaning. Some of his assertions are obvious—e.g., war is formative, scarring, and hellish—but he convincingly depicts Hayes as a gentle, unwilling “victim of circumstance” who coped with his troubled life the best he could.

A strong contribution to the literature of World War II, Native American warriors, and the unseen wounds of war.

LOVE IN A TIME OF HATE
Art and Passion in the Shadow of War
Illies, Florian
Trans. by Simon Pare
Riverhead (368 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780593713938

A kaleidoscopic view of a fevered decade.

In a narrative constructed as a collage of terse vignettes, German editor and art historian Illies, author of 1913: The Year Before the Storm, draws from memoirs, letters, biographies, and histories to create an intimate portrait of 10 turbulent years, from 1929 to 1939, when the hedonism of the Jazz Age gave way to the terror of fascism and war. The text, related in the present tense, creates a sense of immediacy and tension as it chronicles the love affairs, betrayals, madness, and inspiration that roiled the lives of artists, their models and muses, poets, novelists, philosophers, and performers who were living and working in Europe, particularly Germany and France. These include some of the 20th century’s most notable cultural figures: Thomas Mann, his wife, Katia, and their children; Vladimir Nabokov and the dazzling Véra; Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir; Henry Miller, his wife, June, and his lover Anais Nin; Picasso, his wife, Olga, and his mistress Marie-Thérèse Walter, who had become his main model. Once Hitler became the German chancellor on Jan. 30, 1933, an exodus began. Jews, communists, homosexuals, and men in love with the wrong women were forced into exile or sent to concentration camps. Threatened with persecution, many others fled. George Grosz became the first emigrant of 1933 when, on Jan. 12, he and his wife sailed for New York, where Grosz had been offered a job at the Art Students League. Erich Maria Remarque left Germany for Switzerland the day before Hitler seized power. Some headed for the south of France; Walter Benjamin chose to go to Ibiza. Hermann Hesse and his wife settled in Lugano; Brecht lived nearby. Illies vividly captures his subjects’ disorientation, dizziness, fear, and desperation. In December, Paul Klee and his wife, Lily, left Germany, never to return. “It was a bad year,” Lily wrote. “I look back on it with horror.”

A dramatic, richly detailed cultural history.

DIFFER WE MUST
How Lincoln Succeeded in a Divided America
Inskeep, Steve
Penguin Press (352 pp.)
$30.00 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780593297865

A satisfying new look at one of the most written-about political figures in American history.

Inskeep, longtime co-host of NPR’s Morning Edition and author of Imperfect Union and Jacksonland,
emphasizes that Lincoln is a “Christlike” figure in the popular mind but also mostly admired by scholars who, when they point out a flaw, tend to blame it on “politics.” Never a respected vocation, the American politician today seems to have reached a nadir as “the province of money, power, cynicism, and lies.” The brutal truth is that no one wins election in a democracy without appealing to a great many people, many of whom hold unsavory opinions. After a chapter on Lincoln’s early life, the author moves on to his encounters with various individuals that “show a master politician’s practical and moral choices, along with his sometimes mysterious character.” During the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, Lincoln never denied Douglas’ assertion that African Americans were subhuman (an opinion then shared by most Illinois voters), but he maintained that this was a distraction from the real issue: the spread of slavery. Sen. William Seward was the front-runner in the 1860 Republican convention, and his manager, Thurlow Weed, was the nation’s most powerful political boss. Both were furious at their defeat, but Lincoln won them over. Once elected, he chose his Cabinet with little regard for competence but rather to please a cross section of influential Republicans. When many proved difficult, he managed them, like good politicians do. His first commander in chief, Gen. George McClellan, despised him and displayed a maddening reluctance to fight. Still, almost everyone admires soldiers more than politicians, and McClellan’s dismissal was overwhelmingly unpopular in the Army and controversial among civilians—though most scholars agree that it was the right move. Some characters do not fit the mold, but few readers will complain. Lincoln’s barber, an immigrant from Haiti, prospered in the tiny Illinois Black community, and Lincoln’s wife, Mary Todd, seemed immune to his political skills.

An admirable addition to Lincolniana.

white male world of stand-up comedy. When Jamie Foxx told her she hadn’t “lived long enough” to know how to tell jokes, Jones quit comedy and took a government job where she was passed around from manager to manager “like a joint.” Six years later, Jones finally took to the stage again while also learning to heal from pain through a newfound faith. A visit to New York opened her eyes to the possibilities—and respect—available to women comics while preparing her for what was to come almost 15 years later: a six-year stint with SNL, which taught her the meaning of telling her truth as a comedian of her own—rather than someone else’s—making. This refreshingly uncensored book will appeal to Jones’ many fans and to anyone who appreciates the struggles Black female comics face on the road to success.

Refreshingly candid, gritty, and real.

Kurzweil continues to expand the possibilities of the graphic memoir with an exploration of her patrilineal ancestors, an Austrian conductor and pianist who narrowly escaped Nazi-controlled Vienna, and her father, an early innovator in artificial intelligence research, New Yorker cartoonist Kurzweil, author of Flying Couch, navigates the complexities of recollecting and framing pieces of her family history. Pages expand with maximalist detail that reflects a true-to-life experience of digging into the past, where insights are dispersed between various family memories and physical artifacts often nestled in dusty storage facilities. Stunningly re-created archival materials, from newspaper clippings to handwritten letters, lend visceral impact to each discovery. The story of the Kurzweil family’s innate connection to the vanguard of technology also breaches questions of collective memory and the ways in which technology might become a new conduit for the voices of the past. When do our loved ones really pass into the beyond? Is it when they die or when those who remain no longer remember them? How much can we learn from what remains of our ancestors? An AI chatbot trained on the correspondences of her late grandfather becomes a sometimes-inadequate interlocutor for Kurzweil as she reflects on her own influences and navigates her family’s desire to maintain a connection with the past. Nonetheless, these interactions bear fruit as new questions arise. Couched in the casual conversations among family and the genuine desire to connect and preserve specific memories, these inquiries avoid becoming overburdened by stodgy philosophical ramblings or overly enamored techno-proselytizing. The deeply personal and sometimes frenetic energy of the book delivers an intimate and cohesive vision of the past as well as life lived in the influence of parents and ancestors.

Intimate reflections and powerful visual elements combine in an exemplary work of graphic nonfiction.
A Harvard sociologist examines how inequality plays out in categorizing people in such a way as to render some voiceless—and effectively invisible.

Lamont, the author of How Professors Think and The Dignity of Working Men, is a longtime student of inequality and marginalization, and she shows how both have helped promote “some of the factors driving the far right and white nationalism.” Attitudes toward marginalized communities are malleable, notes the author, precisely because they are artificial constructs. For example, “in 1973...90 percent of Americans disapproved of homosexual relations, but by 2019 that number had fallen to 21 percent.” Much of society seemed to say, “we see you; we value you, and we invite you to take a seat at the table alongside us.” Now, with economic precarity and the feeling of so many middle-class Americans that they are losing ground to people they perceive to be less worthy, such a declaration is more needed than ever to destigmatize poor, immigrant, and outlier communities—and, she adds, for those in more comfortable circumstances to try to stop denigrating those who are struggling, regardless of political affiliation. “All of these—narratives, stigmas, stereotypes, and social hierarchies—are produced by human beings and thus changeable,” writes Lamont. Although the prescription is doubtless one that many people on all sides will find difficult, the author believes “we can all cultivate a wider range of friends and relationships across class and racial boundaries,” which may help reduce automatic, negative reactions to those who are “perceived as the losers of the system.” There’s no Pollyannaism in Lamont’s decidedly left-leaning program, though more traditional doctors may not be quick to endorse her view that “in some sense, health may be only a thought away.” Regardless, a reminder to keep tabs on how we feel and what cues we respond to isn’t out of place, and Lamont is both lucid and encouraging.

A thoughtful recipe for building social justice by being less judgmental.

**Seeing Others**

*How Recognition Works—and How it Can Heal a Divided World*

Lamont, Michèle
One Signal/Atria (272 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781982153786

**The Mindful Body**

*Thinking Our Way to Chronic Health*

Langer, Ellen J.
Ballantine (288 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780593497944

Thought-provoking exploration of the mind-body connection and its relationship to health.

Langer, a professor of psychology who was the first women to be tenured at Harvard, opens with mention of an experiment in which several elderly men roomed together in housing “that was retrofitted to suggest that time had gone backward twenty years.” The men quickly began to behave as if they were 20 years younger: “Their vision, hearing, strength, and even objective appearance improved.” Received medical wisdom has no room for such “miracles,” relying instead on hard measures that are, Langer holds, sometimes arbitrary and probabilistic. For example, there’s not much difference between A1C counts of 5.7 and 5.8, but one is held to be normal and the other prediabetic. Furthermore, telling someone they are prediabetic often leads to diabetes owing to the way people are inclined to read medical judgments as infallible and fixed. “Labels aren’t just labels,” Langer writes. “They also can change how we behave.” That behavior involves decision-making, a fraught venture: Will we decide correctly in making a medical decision such as whether and when to get that hip replaced? The thing to do, the author suggests, is to allow the possibility of uncertainty and become mindful about how we “take these probabilities and convert them into absolutes, making it hard for us to question basic assumptions.” Devotees and practitioners of integrative medicine will be on top of some of Langer’s thinking already, though more traditional doctors may not be quick to endorse her view that “in some sense, health may be only a thought away.” Regardless, a reminder to keep tabs on how we feel and what cues we respond to isn’t out of place, and Langer is both lucid and encouraging.

A readable primer on how to navigate emotions and, in the bargain, become a more discerning medical consumer.

**Trail of the Lost**

*The Relentless Search To Bring Home the Missing Hikers of the Pacific Crest Trail*

Lankford, Andrea
Hachette (352 pp.)
$30.00 | Aug. 22, 2023
9780306831959

A former park ranger chronicles her attempts to find missing hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail.

**The Mindful Body**

*Thinking Our Way to Chronic Health*

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A readable primer on how to navigate emotions and, in the bargain, become a more discerning medical consumer.
Lankford spent 12 years as a National Park Service ranger specializing in rescue missions and investigations of missing hikers in some of the most scenic and remote places in the U.S. Eventual disillusionment with bureaucracy led her to quit. However, 20 years later, compelled by three separate cases of missing PCT hikers, she found herself unable to turn away despite the nearly impossible challenge. In one case, she entered a pursuit where “even after fifty professional searchers—some with dogs, some from the air—searched the area for five days, they found no sign of the missing hiker.” Still, with the help of unlikely allies, including a government mapmaker who tracked potential terrorist activity, a retired pharmacy manager, and the mother of a missing hiker, Lankford canvassed countless miles of wilderness and maintained charts of relevant data. “The American wilderness is still vast and treacherous,” she reminds us, while the clues were sparse and haunting: unreliable sightings months after disappearance, a blue backpack left trailside, a dog-eared copy of Herman Hesse’s Siddhartha in a hiker free box. While looking for the missing hikers, the author was forced to contend with gunprotected illegal pot farms, a cult, exposed cliff sides, temperature extremes, poisonous snakes, and wild animals of all kinds. Off-trail, the pursuit involved examining information for reliability, skimming drone footage (called “squinting”), and the intricacies of missing persons groups on Facebook. In a book that is part true crime, part wilderness cautionary tale, Lankford follows the lost hikers with intensity and compassion. The narrative is paced well, and the author ably demonstrates the hardships of uncertainty and fear in the wake of the unknown. Most of all, she showcases the group’s grit and determination in the pursuit of answers.

A gut-wrenching and compelling investigation of long-distance treks gone wrong.

THE GIRL WHO SURVIVED AUSCHWITZ
Leibovits, Sara & Eti Elboim
Trans. by Esther Frumkin
Harper360 (336 pp.)
$18.99 paper | Sept. 19, 2023 9780008600280

A Holocaust survivor memoir combined with a daughter’s intimate account of generational trauma.

Leibovits (b. 1928) survived Auschwitz in the final year of the war. In this chilling tale, her daughter, Elboim, narrates her mother’s story and relates how she grew up in Israel under the shadow of a destroyed family. From a tiny community in Czechoslovakia that was annexed by Hungary just before World War II, Leibovits, nee Suri Hershkovits, was 15 when she and her family were rounded up and taken by cattle car to Auschwitz in the spring of 1944. Because it was late in the war, the gruesome gears of extermination were churning, and her mother and brothers were immediately sent to the gas chambers, while her father became a Sonderkommando, chosen to dispose of bodies from the crematorium (he was executed a few months later). Along with several of her compatriots, Leibovits endured unimaginable conditions of grueling labor. “unbearable hunger,” horrendous hygiene, and subsequent ill health. She was able to see her father several times through barbed-wire fences, and he told her to eat everything (kosher or not) to survive. He also sent her notes and small things like makeup, which confounded the girls at first until they realized it helped them look healthier, possibly saving them from being selected for death. Leibovits and Elboim describe these details with intentional specificity as a testament and record for future generations. Interspersed throughout are the poignant, often heartbreaking reflections of Elboim, who expresses the deep sorrow she had to embrace as a child of her haunted mother. “I suppose that every Holocaust survivor is like a charred log that will never really stop burning,” she writes. “But every survivor had his or her own fate, during the Holocaust and afterwards, and no survivor is like any other.”

A moving account that concludes with a sense of triumph over evil and darkness.

THE NIGHT PARADE
A Speculative Memoir
Lin, Jami Nakamura
Illus. by Cori Nakamura Lin
Mariner Books (272 pp.)
$30.00 | Oct. 24, 2023 9780062421234

Lin uses mythology from her Taiwanese and Japanese heritage to make sense of mental illness, cancer, and pregnancy loss.

When the author was 17, she was hospitalized for a psychiatric condition doctors would diagnose as bipolar disorder. She recalls her week in the psychiatric unit, which she refers to as “Upstairs,” as a relief, remembering, “I did not feel the need to prove I was sick, like I did with people outside who thought my illness was an attention grab or an evasion of responsibility.” Among the other patients, Lin felt a sense of community, finally finding young women who could relate to her experience—something she missed later in life when, pregnant, she realized she didn’t know any other “bipolar parents.” Her hospitalization marked another important milestone: the day when her father, finally recognizing the depth of her teenage distress, asked her, “Do you need help?”—and finally the author was able to answer, “yes.” The memory became particularly poignant when, after a miscarriage, Lin gave birth to a daughter weeks before her father died from cancer. To make sense of these interwoven stories, Lin relies on Asian mythology, using the legend of the “woman of bone” who preys on her ex-lovers to describe her feelings around her miscarriage or using the baku, “swallower of nightmares,” to explain how she felt about her father’s death. Throughout this inventive narrative, Lin takes calculated literary risks, ranging from the unknown. Most of all, she showcases the group’s grit and determination in the pursuit of answers.

A moving account that concludes with a sense of triumph over evil and darkness.
from the use of epistolary forms to experiments with point of view. These risks pay off mightily, coming together in a vulnerable, insightful, and refreshingly original meditation on survival, illness, and grief.

A stunning memoir about the stories that make us who we are.

END CREDITS

How I Broke Up With Hollywood
Lin, Patty
Zibby Books (300 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Aug. 29, 2023
9781958506066

A former TV writer recounts her years working in the business.

“Ever since I retired from television at the ripe age of thirty-eight,” writes the author, “people have asked me: ‘Why would you quit such a cool career?’ Lin, a former staff writer and producer for shows like Friends, Freaks and Geeks, and Desperate Housewives, shares her mostly negative experiences in ‘an unhealthy culture filled with damaged people who both perpetrated abuse and accepted it.’ With a few exceptions, notably her stint on Freaks and Geeks, the author’s tenure as a TV writer was unsatisfying. ‘On my first day as a television writer,’ she writes, ‘my boss used me to fuck over one of the other writers.’ Years later, her outlook remained unchanged: ‘I’d been through some harrowing shit in my career,’ Lin acknowledges she was paid well while exposing the countless unsavory aspects of the entertainment industry.

We all became worker bees,” she notes, “writing disembodied scenes that would get stitched together into a Frankenstein of a script.” When she attained the level of producer, she had “to deal with problems I used to be sheltered from. And by problems, I mean actors.” The author effectively illuminates the loneliness she experienced as the only Asian writer in the room, “buckling under the pressure to represent my entire race,” as well as examples of “the culture that allows men to behave badly.” The weakest parts of the narrative focus on Lin’s long-term relationship, which ultimately failed, and include tepid revelations such as, “It takes two to tango.” A year after leaving the industry, she began this book “as a therapeutic exercise.” It’s clear the author’s writing process was cathartic, but her audience may be limited to fellow former TV writers and those interested in the behind-the-scenes goings-on of that world.

There’s nothing groundbreaking here, but the book is heartfelt and candid.
book, the author walks us through the rise of the major platforms, such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, and recounts the eclipse of MySpace and Vine. She identifies “mommy bloggers” as the first group to become influencers and the first to see the potential for monetization of their social media presence. (Readers interested in a more in-depth discussion of this aspect of the online world should turn to Stephanie McNeal’s Swipe Up for More!) The development of simple video editing tools switched the emphasis from written to visual material, and internet-enabled phones meant that social media became ubiquitous. The problem with this book is that Lorenz fails to offer enough novel analysis of the industry. There are already numerous books on influencers, YouTube, online celebrity marketing, and virtually every other aspect of the social media phenomenon. The author’s theme is that while social media has changed the business and cultural landscape by giving power to creative individuals, it has also created a dangerous whirlpool of conflict, exploitation, and disinformation. True enough, but it’s hardly a revolutionary insight. Is she unaware of the widespread view that has taken hold in the past few years that social media is a very mixed blessing? This points to the most surprising aspect of the book: It seems dated and dull. The author’s online followers might like it, but other people will probably be unimpressed. Social media, writes Lorenz, “is often dismissed by traditionalists as a vacant fad, when in fact it is the greatest and most disruptive change in modern capitalism.” If only the text reflected the gravitas of that disruption.

A capable piece of historical research that breaks little new ground.

**OUR FRAGILE MOMENT**

*How Lessons From Earth’s Past Can Help Us Survive the Climate Crisis*

Mann, Michael E.  
PublicAffairs (320 pp.)  
$30.00 | Sept. 26, 2023  
9781541702899

A renowned climatologist and science journalist casts a hard eye on the probability that climate change is irreversible.

There’s good news tucked away inside these data-packed pages: An Earth too hot to sustain life is not likely to come about “in any scenario but total inaction.” The warming trajectory of the planet’s climate is, even by current policies, likely to fall below the worst-case scenarios that have been proposed. Mann, the author of *The Hockey Stick and the Climate Wars* and *The Madhouse Effect*, suggests that planetary homeostasis is such that the climate is likely to even out and return to its old “normal.” The bad news, of course, is that it’s entirely unlikely that the present economy, still heavily reliant on fossil fuels, is going to turn on a dime—not when there are so many dimes to be made in burning them. That economy is the biggest obstacle to battling climate change, and with it comes “a sustained, massive, billions-of-dollars disinformation campaign.” The campaign’s principal and main villain is Rupert Murdoch, whose stranglehold on the U.S. is principally confined to Fox News but who has much stronger control over Australia’s media. Even so, notes the author, Murdoch was unable to undo the Australian government’s pledge to reduce carbon emissions by 43% by 2030, largely because mandatory voting led to greater popular representation. Granted, neither mandatory voting nor gerrymandering, banned in Australia, are likely to take root in the U.S. given right-wing opposition. For all its positive outlook, though, Mann’s argument hinges on probabilities and a historical record that shows plenty of evidence of past catastrophes resulting in massive die-offs, and the overarching answer, on the principle of scientific uncertainty, is that we don’t really know what will happen—unless, that is, we surrender to inertia.

An evenhanded take on a crucial topic. While our goose may not be cooked, it’s still time to reduce the heat.

**HOW FAR TO THE PROMISED LAND**

*One Black Family’s Story of Hope and Survival in the American South*

McCaulley, Esau  
Convergent/Crown (240 pp.)  
$27.00 | Sept. 12, 2023  
9780593241080

Theologian McCaulley recounts a hardscrabble life in the South and the rise of faith in the face of childhood trauma.

As the author, a native of Alabama who grew up in “a neighborhood for people who were broke but not yet on government assistance,” writes, it’s difficult to believe in a God who allows suffering, especially the suffering of children: “Where was God on the slave ship, in the cotton fields, in courtrooms where innocent men and women were condemned to death for crimes they did not commit?” Such questions, in the end, center on the problem of evil, by McCaulley’s account, a constant preoccupation of the Black church. His faith is genuine, not motivated by the fact that, he writes, there are three paths out of poverty for someone who grew up in his circumstances: sports, the church, or dealing drugs. The author had no interest in the third option, recognizing that no drug dealers in the neighborhood lived beyond a certain young age. He chose football instead, which won him a scholarship to a university whose “spectrum ran from white conservatives to white liberals,” the latter of which thought themselves able to speak about how to repair the Black world without interacting with any Black people. Still, college allowed McCaulley to leave a home marked by addiction, imprisonment, and danger—one reason kids played sports in that neighborhood, he says, was to have a place of safety from street life until the adults got home from work—to a place that, once an injury sidelined him, allowed him to “search for a positive vision of my life that included more than being different from my father.” He clearly found it, along with marital
happiness and professional fulfillment, even while fully recognizing from experience that “the path to the promised land is not always clear.”

A thoughtfully written book that offers heartfelt, empathetic lessons without preaching to the choir.

**HELL IF WE DON’T CHANGE OUR WAYS**
*Means, Brittany*
Zibby Books (352 pp.)
$27.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
978985282894

A potent reflection on emerging from a nomadic youth marked by trauma into an adulthood containing stability and tenderness.

Means’ childhood was punctuated by drives with her mother, journeys between places that were not quite homes and that took them out of and into abusive situations. The author’s devotion to her mother is the centrifugal force of this exceptionally crafted memoir. The author chronicles her mother’s favorite songs, quirks, chain-smoking, and days full of sleep, and she investigates the deleterious effects of her family’s Pentecostal traditions. “The only thing I dreaded more than being alive was going to hell,” writes Means, who writes vividly about “the barn,” which her grandparents built to accommodate their hoarding, and her half brother’s movement in and out of their lives. The author’s recollections of her youth tumble out in a series of artful vignettes, some almost hypnotic, revealing tumultuous relationships, addictions, and abuse just as a child might come to understand them, gradually and in retrospect, rather than immediately or chronologically. The countless blows—physical, psychological, and spiritual—that Means endured at the hands of people (including her mother) who were supposed to care for her are not easy to read about, but her reckoning with both the events and what they mean for her own, emerging identity is honest, graceful, and disarming. “When you can’t tell your own account, can’t exorcize it, it can get stuck inside you,” she writes. As Means brings hazy memories into focus for herself and readers, she constructs a method of thinking about, owning, and releasing her past as well as a fresh way of writing about personal trauma that both acknowledges victimhood and resists the simplicity of sensationalism and pity. This book is an outstanding debut that finds resolution while also leaving plenty of intriguing themes to explore in her future work.

A harrowing and soulful memoir to be read, savored, and reread.

**GLOSSY**
*Ambition, Beauty, and the Inside Story of Emily Weiss’s Glossier*
*Meltzer, Marisa*
One Signal/Atria (288 pp.)
$28.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781982190606

The origin story of beauty brand Glossier and its enterprising founder. Journalist Meltzer, author of *This Is Big and Girl Power*, charts Emily Weiss’ trajectory to industry mogul. The daughter of a shipping-company executive and a stay-at-home mom in upscale suburban Connecticut, Weiss was mature, entrepreneurial, and obsessed with fashion from a young age. In high school, she showed up for an internship at Ralph Lauren in clothes she made herself. This proactive attitude led to a stint at *Teen Vogue*, but even a cameo on MTV’s *The Hills* failed to distract her from her goal of a career in fashion “with longevity.” Her style blog *Into the Gloss* debuted in late 2010. With the help of a venture capitalist, Weiss used the blog as a launching pad for an e-commerce site featuring a few base products for the Glossier line. The line’s social media “voice” became an amalgam of the specific marketing and advertising qualities Weiss wanted to spotlight. After weathering the initial product-line tweaks, she focused on promotion and strategy. Building her customer base, she ushered the luxury beauty “unicorn” to massive success with a clothing line in 2019. Weiss stepped down as CEO in 2022. Meltzer paints her subject as a shrewd, determined entrepreneur and a professional who’s unwilling to discuss the details of her personal life, then or now. The tone of the book is energetic but overly gushing, spotlighting Weiss’ career with a devotee’s applauding admiration. Meltzer regards their ongoing relationship as “warmly professional,” but the text is often overly fawning, taking on the tone of a book-length infomercial. Recounting a meeting with Weiss, the author writes, “Her confidence was striking. She seemed to always know what to say.” Meltzer’s subject is certainly intriguing, but many readers may wish for a more evenhanded approach. Occasionally entertaining but bloated business success story written from the cheering section.

**THE IDENTITY TRAP**
*A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time*
*Mounk, Yascha*
Penguin Press (416 pp.)
$32.00 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780593493182

A passionate book about how the things we have in common are greater than the things that divide us.

Early on Mounk reminds us that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, some health authorities decided...
that the limited supplies of the newly created vaccine should be allocated to people according to race even though it meant that fewer lives would be saved. This led him to the conclusion that the conflict between identity politics—his preferred term is identity synthesis—and liberalism is the critical struggle of our time. Mounk, the author of *The Great Experiment* and *The People vs. Democracy*, should not be dismissed as a reactionary base-ment scribbler. He is a respected academic at John Hopkins University, a contributor to the *Atlantic*, the founder of *Persuasion* magazine, and he has published prolifically about the dangers of far-right extremists and nationalistic demagogues. An unabashed liberal, the author acknowledges the lure of identity politics, with its quasi-religious fervor and Manichaean simplicity. The trap is that by placing group identity at the center of all discourse, it locks in a victim mentality and a pattern of destructive conflict. Mounk also notes that identity politics deliberately ignores the social progress made since the 1960s. For years, identity politics was a marginal academic interest, but with the explosion of social media and the election of Donald Trump, it took it mainstream. It found its way into media organizations, government agencies, corporations, and schools, and its advocates were always ready to shout down and punish anyone who disagreed. For it to spin out of control, Mounk writes, it only requires that good people stay silent. Hardcore proponents and detractors alike may not be won over, but there is a vast middle that can be reached through open debate and plain common sense. This book is a solid launching point for further constructive debate.

A thoughtful deconstruction of identity politics well worth discussing.

**How to Make a Killing**

**Blood, Death and Dollars in American Medicine**

*Muir*, Tom

Norton (288 pp.)

$30.00 | Aug. 1, 2023

9780393866513

A dispiriting look at the replacement of the Hippocratic oath by a PIN number that centers on the big business of kidney dialysis.

Basing his account on interviews with hundreds of constituents of the “dialysis community,” journalist *Muir*, author of *Extra Virginity* and *Crisis of Conscience*, describes a health care industry that is seemingly entirely focused on profit. Most dialysis takes place at clinics where a premium is placed on getting patients in and out quickly, with the withdrawal and reinsertion of blood occurring more rapidly than the body can comfortably accommodate—even though in many instances, “when administered this way, dialysis may shorten patients’ lives by stripping off bodily fluids too fast, triggering sudden drops in blood pressure that can damage the heart, brain, gut, and lungs and lead to stroke, congestive heart failure, and cardiac arrest.” If you complain, you’re likely to be denied care—and, worse, far too many nephrologists are disinclined to fight on behalf of their patients. One nephrologist recounts that a colleague told her he had developed “techniques for goading undesirable patients into acting out, in order to eject them from his facility.” Most of these patients are insured by Medicare or Medicaid, a system that pays less than private insurance. Against the American system of “bazooka dialysis,” most advanced countries use a slower, more frequent program of dialysis. Furthermore, many of them place the locus of dialysis at home, with patients self-administering their care, a method that the American medical system lobbied hard to discourage. Some American physicians are bucking the system, *Muir* writes, and the Trump administration issued an executive order demanding improved care—likely only because, *Muir* ventures, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar’s father “had been on dialysis for several years.” Even so, the system remains a mess, and bad actors are seldom punished.

An indignant, urgent indictment of the for-profit American way of medical care.

**The Sisterhood**

*The Secret History of Women at the CIA*

*Mundy*, Liza

Crown (482 pp.)

$32.50 | Oct. 17, 2023

9780593238172

With painstaking research, an award-winning journalist reveals the crucial roles undertaken by women in the intelligence arena.

The Cold War and, later, the war on terror were conflicts fought in the shadows, a deadly game meant to prevent large-scale conflict. However, there was another battle conducted within the CIA: the struggle of women within the organization who had to fight sexism and discrimination to have their voices heard. *Mundy* covered related ground in her acclaimed 2017 book, *Code Girls*, but this book features a much larger canvas. The story spans seven decades, from the establishment of the CIA to the assassination of Osama bin Laden. Many highly qualified women applied to serve in the fledgling CIA, but those who made it through the grueling selection process usually found themselves shunted into typing and filing jobs. There was a culture of toxic masculinity in the organization, and women were often seen as little more than objects. Nevertheless, some managed to work their ways into field operations. They proved to be remarkably good at the tradecraft of spying, but there was little recognition from superiors. At the same time, women were doing critical tasks in intelligence analysis, and this group stepped into a new role when the threat of terrorism emerged. It required interpreting scraps of information, from financial transactions to the movement of dangerous radicals. Few people in the senior echelons of the CIA, however, were interested in their reports on Islamic militants. After 9/11, there were attempts to elbow the women out of the picture,
but they managed to continue their work, eventually tracking down bin Laden. Mundy is able to keep the sprawling narrative and huge cast on track, drawing on interviews and declassified records. The result is a vivid, compelling, and important book.

Another winner from Mundy, who tells a story that deserves to be told about women who deserve to be remembered.

**THE VICE PRESIDENT’S BLACK WIFE**

*The Untold Life of Julia Chinn*

*Myers, Amrita Chakrabarti*

Ferris and Ferris Books/Univ. of North Carolina (304 pp.)

$30.00 | Oct. 10, 2023

9781469675237

The story of a remarkable woman who experienced freedom and slavery simultaneously.

Myers, a professor of history and gender studies, presents the fascinating story of enslaved mixed-race woman Julia Ann Chinn (c. 1790-1833), who was publicly married to prominent Kentucky politician and decorated War of 1812 veteran Richard Mentor Johnson, who served as vice president in Martin Van Buren’s administration after Chinn’s death. Myers details the bizarre arrangement that never saw Chinn freed and provided opportunities and obstacles alike for her and the two daughters she and Johnson shared. The author uses surviving papers and letters to detail how Johnson, due to extended absences that his political career necessitated, entrusted Chinn to manage his vast and bustling Blue Spring Farm near Georgetown, Kentucky. She also managed the federally funded Choctaw Academy boarding school on the farm’s land and served as hostess for glittering affairs in honor of the likes of the Marquis de Lafayette and James Monroe. Myers delves into the complicated social consequences that the Johnson family faced in matters concerning the local Great Crossing Baptist Church, town functions, and even the graveyard. She discusses how Johnson’s relationship with Chinn—and his refusal to keep it under wraps, as did contemporaries in similar situations—greatly damaged him politically despite his service in Congress. 

Myers acknowledges that researching this book was often frustrating and led to dead ends, yet too often she employs what she calls “informed speculation” concerning the mindsets and motivations of individuals that simply cannot be known. Informed speculation is still speculation, and readers should be trusted to render their own questions or conclusions. Still, Myers has conducted arduous research, and she ably introduces a little-known yet important figure in American history, creating a welcome story of “passing, history, and memory that reveals how we all...continue to feel the effects of slavery.”

A valuable addition to antebellum history.

**ONCE A GIANT**

*A Story of Victory, Tragedy, and Life After Football*

*Myers, Gary*

PublicAffairs (304 pp.)

$29.00 | Sept. 12, 2023

9781541702394

The inside story of one of the 1986 New York Giants.

Myers, the author of *Brady vs. Manning*, has covered the NFL since 1978. He got off to a rocky start when he reported dissent surrounding newly drafted player Lawrence Taylor’s salary, nearly causing Taylor to back out of the deal in solidarity with his fellow players; said the Giants owner to the 27-year-old journalist afterward, “My respect for you as a newspaper man has greatly diminished.” Had Taylor walked, the miracle of 1986 might not have happened. Chalk that up to Taylor, Phil Simms, Mark Bavaro, and a disciplined and talented roster—and, of course, coach Bill Parcells, “who turned around four programs and always departed on his own terms, a rarity in the coaching profession, leaving players and fans wanting more.” There’s celebration in this story but also plenty of cautionary tale. As the author notes, the average career in the NFL is a mere 3.3 years, and until very recently, the NFL did nothing to help players adjust to life beyond the stadium. As a result, many of the players on that storied ’86 team wound up in trouble. After he retired in 1993, Taylor developed a $1,000-per-day crack habit, an addiction so widely known that many voters sought to keep him out of the Hall of Fame. Other players became addicted, too, and often homeless. Several, by the author’s account, admitted to contemplating suicide, one by driving off the old Tappan Zee Bridge across the Hudson River. Fortunately, as Myers writes, most have come out of the depths, some with Parcells’ financial help, even though the Giants alums are now aging and suffer various football-related maladies decades after the fact—a grim but matter-of-fact conclusion to a tale that is seldom happy but that makes for urgent reading.

That cliché about a football team being a family? As Myers shows in this absorbing book, it’s true, dysfunction and all.

**POWER**

*A Woman’s Guide to Living and Leading Without Apology*

*Nekvapil, Kemi*

Penguin Life (388 pp.)

$21.00 paper | Sept. 19, 2023

9780143138020

An Australian career coach offers a set of principles for boosting self-worth and thwarting self-negating thoughts.

“I was born in England to middle-class Nigerian parents in the 1970s,” writes Nekvapil, who was a foster child in five
“A fresh, vibrant, entertaining history.”

THE DICTIONARY PEOPLE

The Unsung Heroes Who Created the Oxford English Dictionary

Ogilvie, Sarah

Knopf (368 pp.)

$28.00 | Oct. 17, 2023

9780593536407

The history of the creation of a dictionary built on a passion for words.

In her last days living in Oxford, before taking a teaching position at Stanford, linguist and lexicographer Ogilvie, who had worked as an editor at the Oxford English Dictionary, discovered six handwritten address books noting the names of more than 5,000 contributors to the project. Beginning in 1879, these men and women, from all over the world, had responded to a plea by the OED’s editor James Murray to submit words and their context for inclusion in the massive dictionary. Based on the information in the address books, which had been carried on by Murray’s successors, Ogilvie spent eight years researching the contributors’ identities, resulting in a fascinating history of a quirky population of individuals, some university educated, some autodidacts, who had in common a love of reading, a keen sensibility, and a desire to be part of a prestigious endeavor. Her lively compendium of dictionary people includes

different white families before she was 18. Many Nigerian families, she writes, fostered their children through white families, hoping to give them “the best opportunities in life.” From an early age, the author had to quash the self-defeating ideas about being a Black woman that society has thrust upon her. Initially trained as an actor, Nekvapil became a bakery entrepreneur before moving to Australia with her husband to start a family. She addresses honestly the kind of prejudice she has had to overcome as a Black woman, rejecting the instinct to apologize or make herself small and invisible. She emphasizes the necessity of shifting the paradigm from thinking that we must have external power over someone else to nurture an internal sense of power, and she sets out five “Power Principles,” which include presence, ownership, wisdom, equality, and responsibility. Considering each of these straightforward principles, Nekvapil offers letters from readers about their own stories. Most helpfully, after each section, the author poses questions that engage readers in active reflection—e.g., “What one action could you take today to practice presence?” “Who or what do you need to see to feel that you belong?” Finally, Nekvapil discusses the benefits of having real power, which could include the power of money, the power to lead, and the power of privilege. The final exercise is putting these many principles into action: “Practice owning your thoughts, your words, your voice, your power.” Influenced by the work of Elizabeth Gilbert, Martha Beck, and others, Nekvapil imparts how not to be afraid of power.

Uplifting advice for fellow seekers encouraged by self-help guidance.

THE DICTIONARY PEOPLE

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an archaeologist living in Calcutta who submitted 5,000 words that she discovered in religious books and travelers’ tales; the inventors of the electric tricycle, the sewage pipe, and indelible green ink for printing money; several men incarcerated in mental institutions, one of whom was a murderer; a pair of lesbian lovers; and suffragists, such as the secretary of the Birmingham Women’s Suffrage Society, whose submissions were drawn not from her political involvement but from her reading in philosophy and religion. Ogilvie’s archival sleuthing unearthed juicy scandals. For example, before becoming a contributor, groundbreaking photographer Eadweard Muybridge murdered his wife’s lover, for which he was acquitted by reason of insanity and justifiable homicide; and surgeon and Arctic explorer Sir John Richardson saw his reputation tarnished by accusations of murder and cannibalism during a failed expedition to find the Northwest Passage. While bringing to life a host of passionate volunteers, Ogilvie also charts decades of social, economic, and cultural change, mapped by words.

A fresh, vibrant, entertaining history.

WHEN YOUR BACK’S AGAINST THE WALL

Fame, Football, and Lessons Learned Through a Lifetime of Adversity

Oher, Michael with Don Yaeger

Avery (224 pp.)

$28.00 | Aug. 8, 2023

9780593339920

The former NFL player and movie subject combines a grim picture of poverty with a program for lifting oneself up.

Oher, the protagonist of Michael Lewis’ book The Blind Side and the 2009 film made from it, aged out of the foster care system and lived for several years on the streets before attending a private school and earning academic and athletic achievements. Both book and movie painted a rather rosier picture of his life than the reality. “Yes, there were the occasional hands held out to give me temporary relief,” writes the author, “but day in and day out it was just me and my own efforts.” He doesn’t mean to be ungrateful, but he suggests that anyone in a similar situation “requires individual lifelong dedication to persistent action in the face of adversity.” In the Memphis community in which he grew up, notes the author, few people seemed interested in getting a job and working one’s way upward. Oher mixes his advice with lessons from his pro football career—which, owing to frequent injury; was short-lived—including the mantra “Be a pro.” Of broader application, since not everyone can sign lucrative contracts with the NFL, are more quotidian cheers: Be positive. Take responsibility for your actions. Learn constantly since knowledge is “the real currency of the world” and allows one “to shape your life the way you want it.” Much of the advice would seem humdrum if Oher weren’t able to back it up with plentiful examples from his own struggles, including the depression

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that followed his forced retirement from football, struggles that he likens to treading water; "what got me through those hard times was dreaming of the day when I could stop treading and just rest."

An extended pep talk best suited for devotees of self-help books.

**ONE FINE DAY**
*Britain’s Empire on the Brink: September 29, 1923*

Parker, Matthew
PublicAffairs (608 pp.)
$35.00 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781541703827

An ambitious history of the beginning of the end of vast dominions of the British Empire on Sept. 29, 1923.

British historian Parker, author of *Battle of Britain, Panama Fever*, and other books, digs into the archives to create a multilayered portrait, with deep contextual background, of the British Empire in 1923. At the time, it covered nearly 14 million square miles, 150 times the size of Great Britain and a quarter of the world’s land area. Four hundred and sixty million people, a fifth of the world’s population, [were] subjects of Britain’s King-Emperor George V. Yet even at its apex, the empire was showing cracks in the facade, whether in Palestine, Cape Town, Nairobi, Rangoon, or Jamaica, as the author illustrates incrementally through newspaper articles, diaries, documents, novels, and other sources. Trade had established British global supremacy, highlighted by the dominance of the British navy, yet World War I had ruptured the old order. Across the empire, the entire social and economic edifice, based largely on race and privilege, was being questioned. Parker astutely examines pieces of the empire in turn, exploring relevant economic, political, social, and racial developments. Australia, for example, where D.H. Lawrence had just published his novel *Kangaroo*, desperately needed to attract new settlers. The author also chronicles the journey of the dissipated Prince of Wales, who was touring multiethnic India followed by Malaya, where rubber was supplanting tin production and the attitude of British “paternalistic trusteeship” was uneasily on display. In addition to social and political figures, Parker investigates the work of authors such as Somerset Maugham, George Orwell, and E.M. Forster, who presented frankly critical depictions of the failing order. The author also introduces the first political movements to challenge the British government in India, Kenya, Nigeria, and the West Indies.

An impressive work of research and synthesis tracing the end of an empire.

**BEFORE THE MOVEMENT**
The Hidden History of Black Civil Rights

Penningroth, Dylan C.
Liveright/Norton (448 pp.)
$35.00 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781324093107

Broad-ranging study showing the many ways in which Black people, enslaved and free, used custom and law to assert their rights in the years before the Civil Rights Movement coalesced.

Penningroth, a Berkeley professor of law and history and author of *The Claims of Kinfolk*, evokes an enslaved ancestor who, after the Battle of Richmond in 1865, ferried Confederate soldiers to safety. He was paid for his services, and though enslaved, everyone involved agreed that he owned the boat he used, a fact of property rights that did not need to be stated because it was locally acknowledged. Basing his narrative on more than 1,400 court cases, the author argues that the usual tropes of civil rights “make Black history almost synonymous with the history of race relations, as if Black lives only matter when white people are somehow in the picture.” In fact, he insists, Black people understood the law: “African Americans had a working knowledge of formal legal rules, theories, and concepts, and...put that knowledge to everyday use.” White people may have been grudging, but in general, they obeyed the formal rules of law. Before emancipation, many of the relevant laws forbade bad behavior on the part of slaveowners, such as manumitting elderly slaves (Penningroth makes careful distinctions between slave and enslaved and between slaver and slaveowner) so that they would become wards of the state. The “certain rights” of enslaved Blacks—including property, which amounted to $8.8 billion in today’s money in Virginia alone—would not be extended until they achieved fully equal rights upon emancipation, whereupon other rights, such as the right to vote and to divorce, came into contest. In a fluent narrative, Penningroth shows how these rights were negotiated and developed in sometimes unlikely contexts, all foregrounding the advances of the 1950s and beyond.

A closely argued addition to our understanding of the origins of the Civil Rights Movement.
BEHIND THE DOOR
The Dark Truths and Untold Stories of the Cecil Hotel
Price, Amy
Morrow/HarperCollins (240 pp.)
$30.00 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780063257658

A jewelry maker and interior designer's account of an unexpected career path that led her to working at a hotel for the down and out.

When Price took a three-day gig redesigning rooms at the Cecil Hotel, she never dreamed it would lead to a 10-year association with what some called the deadliest, most haunted building in Los Angeles. Numerous suicides and unexplained deaths—like that of Elisa Lam, a young woman who died in the hotel water tank—had taken place there, and serial killer Richard Ramirez had once been a patron. In addition to accommodating travelers and other transients, the Cecil also served as a long-term residence for drug dealers and addicts as well as mentally ill people like the Vietnam veteran who never cleaned his room and the woman who never went outside. Price links the fascination she developed for the Cecil—its grand exterior and its foul-smelling, threadbare interiors—with a curiosity born out of a sheltered childhood and "naïve" beliefs that "everyone is created equal." Her interactions with residents and the illegal immigrants who worked at the hotel quickly educated her in the realities of poverty and social injustice. Price climbed the ranks to become the Cecil's ever enthusiastic general manager. Yet from this pinnacle, she witnessed not only the downfall of the Cecil's director of operations, but also the collapse of projects meant to fund a hotel always operating "just above the red." Even after her job ended, problems—including a disparaging Netflix documentary about the hotel—still dogged Price, for whom the Cecil remained a "beautiful disaster" that "change[d] [her] forever.

Price's journey from innocence to worldliness is appealing, but the narrative anecdotes—especially those related to the Cecil—sometimes seem haphazardly connected, while character portraits occasionally come across as underdeveloped. These issues transform an otherwise promising narrative into a less-than-compelling reading experience.

A heartfelt but flawed memoir.

FATHER AND SON
A Memoir
Raban, Jonathan
Knopf (336 pp.)
$28.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780375422454

The late travel writer and playwright interweaves a tale of recovery from a stroke with wartime reminiscences of his father.

Always a lucid, perceptive writer, Raban (1942-2023) sets out by reckoning that a life-transforming medical event was touched off by a lifetime of iffy habits: "Smoking was a key symptom of the life I’d led, my inhibited recklessness, my short horizons, my readiness to take risks without sufficient thought for the likely consequences." Pondering his friends who were also felled by smoking, his thoughts turn to his college-bound daughter and from her to his parents and a father he met only when he was 3 because of the intervention of World War II. Raban examines diaries, photo albums, and a trove of memories to piece together his father's wartime service, about which, in the manner of veterans of horrific combat, his father spoke very little. Evacuated at Dunkirk—a rescue operation somewhat less heroic than the "favorite trope for Conservative politicians" that it would become—the author's father went on to serve in North Africa, Italy, and Palestine, where he spent enough time patrolling the souks that he returned "a man who did his best to avoid all shops except tobacconists’ and those that sold secondhand books." Reaching across the generations helped occupy Raban's mind in recovery, and his experiences as a patient will ring true to anyone who has spent significant time in the hospital. The author did get the approval of his doctor to have a little wine with his meals, whereupon friend Paul Theroux sent him half a case of pinot noir: "Sure that such a quantity of wine would be considered contraband here, I hid it as best I could behind the clothes in the closet." Happily, as Raban regained his health, he arrived at a more complete and understanding portrait of his parents and the privations of war.

A touching farewell from a careful, thoughtful observer of life.

TUPAC SHAKUR
The Authorized Biography
Robinson, Staci
Crown (464 pp.)
$35.00 | Oct. 24, 2023
9781524761042

The long-awaited authorized biography of the iconic rapper.

Robinson, a screenwriter and an executive producer on the FX series Dear Mama: The Saga of Afeni and Tupac Shakur, met Tupac Shakur (1971-1996) while they were both...
in high school in Mill Valley, California, and they remained in contact until Shakur’s murder—just days before Robinson was set to go to work with him. Years later, Shakur’s mother, the activist Afeni Shakur, asked Robinson to write about her son, offering access to his family and personal papers. The numerous pictures of his handwritten lyrics, album track lists, and liner notes alone make this book a must-see for fans, and with the memories of so many from Shakur’s inner circle, the author offers loads of colorful details about his life. He used to listen to Mariah Carey’s “Vision of Love” when he felt sad. He wrote love poems to Jada Pinkett when they were in high school together. He started dating Madonna after they were introduced by Rosie Perez. However, Robinson provides few revelations about who killed Shakur in Las Vegas or why. She offers a bit more about him getting shot in New York and why that event ended his friendship with the Notorious B.I.G. and launched the East Coast–West Coast beef in hip-hop, though nothing definitive on who pulled the trigger. The author is at her best in her descriptions of Shakur’s ambitions, intense work ethic, and dislike of authority, especially police, as well as his family life. The role of preparing food in his home was incredibly meaningful to Tupac,” she writes. “Before [his cousin] Jamala’s arrival at the Calabasas house, he had asked his mother to have home-cooked meals prepared for him at his Wilshire House condo so when he walked in the door, exhausted, the smell of his mother’s cooking would greet him.” This authorized biography of Shakur is intimate and personal, but it could use more gravitas.

A.K.A. LUCY
The Dynamic and Determined Life of Lucille Ball
Royal, Sarah
Running Press (240 pp.)
$28.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780762484263

A substantial tribute to one of the most beloved entertainers of the 20th century.

Pop-culture historian Royal’s picturesque book about Lucille Ball (1911-1989) begins with a reverential foreword by Amy Poehler, who writes that Ball never rested on her laurels; she “was always pushing and learning.” Ball grew up poor in Jamestown, New York. Her father died when she was 3, and her mother remarried a few years later. At age 15, she traveled to New York City’s John Murray Anderson–Robert Milton School of the Theatre, but she failed and ended up back in Jamestown. In 1930, she performed in the Jamestown Players Club production of Within the Law; she earned rave reviews and regained the desire to act again. Working as a Chesterfield cigarette model, she caught the attention of Sylvia Hahlo, a talent agent looking for Goldwyn Girls for Eddie Cantor’s film Roman Scandals. What made her stand out was her ability to be goofy and perform slapstick, which got her more roles in a variety of films until she and Desi Arnaz started producing I Love Lucy in 1951. Throughout the book, Royal commemorates Ball’s immense talent and personal successes and struggles during her tumultuous marriage to Arnaz, but she also shows her business acumen and perfectionism, which stemmed from her severe insecurities. After I Love Lucy and her divorce, Ball never stopped entertaining where and when she could. “I can’t imagine doing nothing,” she said. “If you don’t keep moving, you’re buried.” By the end, Ball had performed in 80 movies, more than 120 radio episodes, and more than 500 TV episodes, and she owned her own production company. Making effective use of such visual elements as photos, timelines, pull quotes, and lists, Royal shows how Ball was not just a Hollywood star, but also a modest, hardworking, kind individual.

A satisfying, brightly colored biography about a comedy legend.
A pleasant book about books with insights into publishing past and the conglomerate stranglehold of the present.

TURNING PAGES

The Adventures and Misadventures of a Publisher
Sargent, John
Arcade (216 pp.)
$26.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781956763850

A former publisher recounts his long career in the book trade.

Descended on his mother’s side from the innovative publisher Frank Nelson Doubleday, Sargent grew up far from the epicenter of publishing culture, in rural Wyoming. The recession he faced when graduating from college led him to a job as a textbook salesman (“Nobody ever dreams of being a textbook salesman”). He then worked his way into a series of progressively more prominent positions, including a stint at the old family business. In this anecdotal memoir, the author recounts plenty of missteps (“I took the Newbery Medal sticker off the jacket of Misty of Chincoteague to save a few bucks”) and an equal number of sometimes qualified successes, as when he unveiled Sarah Ferguson’s Budgie the Little Helicopter on an unsuspecting world. The best parts of the book are sharply drawn portraits of colleagues, authors, and bosses—perhaps none so sharp as that of former Simon & Schuster head and renowned tyrant Dick Snyder, whom Sargent managed to survive even though Snyder once scrawled “I hate Budgie” on a sales memo of Sargent’s. There’s a nice moment when Donald Trump is bested on a deal to print a special edition of Eloise, an unexpectedly growly moment involving Jimmy Carter. There’s also a light-bulbing-on episode starring a then-unknown Jeff Bezos, whose commercial madness definitely had a method, even if one that required no small amount of bullying. Salman Rushdie, Michael Jackson, Bill and Hillary Clinton, Newt Gingrich, Winston Groom, LL Cool J: Luminaries of all stripes populate Sargent’s pages, which lead to a rather grim conclusion: getting fired by a publisher who made Snyder look like a lamb, which occasioned an empathetic note from former FBI head James Comey: “In similar experiences in my life, I found it helpful to occasionally whisper ‘Fuck ‘em’ to myself.”

A pleasant book about books with insights into publishing past and the conglomerate stranglehold of the present.

The famous actor and former governor argues that vision, hard work, and resilience are the answers to social decay. Schwarzenegger, now 75, is a difficult figure to categorize. Many observers see him as a hypermasculine cliché. Others, after his period as governor of California, see him as a chameleon who spoke conservative rhetoric while implementing liberal policies. All these people will be surprised by this book, in which he distills his journey to success into a self-help manual. The book is not an autobiography; he has already written the story of his life in his 2012 book, Total Recall—although he often draws on personal experiences. The author is worried about the growing number of lost, lonely, and depressed people. He emphasizes that success is whatever each person wants it to be, but the common requirements are a clear vision, work ethic, resilience, a capacity for continual learning, and, ultimately, a willingness to use success as a way to help others. As governor, he increased funding for vocational training, and he believes that many people find their life purpose in making and building things. As for goals, he advises against having a Plan B because it often leads to the failure of Plan A. His references to his achievements can seem boastful (a problem that plagued his memoir), although he makes a point of thanking his mentors, Hollywood colleagues, friends, and even his ex-wife, and his accomplishments are hard to deny. Some readers, however, might argue with his view that success is a matter of positive thinking while ignoring structural impediments. In any case, the text is a solid read, and Schwarzenegger does not shy away from using colorful language to get his point across. It might not have all the answers for social recovery, but it is not a bad place to start.

Schwarzenegger unpacks the tools for success with a wry sense of humor and broad view of the world.

ARGUING FOR A BETTER WORLD
How Philosophy Can Help Us Fight for Social Justice
Shahvisi, Arianne
Penguin Press (288 pp.)
$28.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780593655955

A philosophy professor attempts a cooler approach to divisive political questions.

In chapters with intriguing titles like “Can You Be Racist to a White Person?” “Is It Sexist To Say Men Are Trash?” and “Has Political Correctness Gone Too Far?” Shahvisi attempts...
not “to be ‘objective’ or ‘apolitical,’ if such a thing were even possible,” but to “make my reasoning clear enough that those who disagree with me will at least see where we part ways.” For example, the cases she examines to explore the possibility of reverse racism include Abigail Fisher, aka “Becky With the Bad Grades,” who felt that her rejection by the University of Texas was racist because less qualified students of color were admitted; and Amy Cooper, the Central Park dog walker who became one of the original “karens” when she called the police on a Black man who had asked her to leash her dog. The chapter also examines the possibility of sexism against men and ageism against baby boomers. In this case, as in just about all, Shahvisi finds that the real problem is capitalism. “While power and material resources continue to be distributed as they are, there can be no such thing as ‘reverse-oppression.’” If steam is pouring from your ears right now, you probably aren’t going to like her answer to the question, “Do All Lives Matter?” but the path to it is instructive. She identifies three different types of objections to the assertion that Black lives matter, calling them the color-blind response, the “what aboutery” response, and the white supremacist response, breaking each down to discover the assumptions it rests on. Particularly interesting chapters analyze “splaining” of all kinds and investigate the question of whether we should #BelieveW omen, especially considering the ironic statistic that 61% of women report lying. Why? “To get out of having unwanted sex.”

Though conservative readers may part ways with the author, even they may be interested in the cogent analysis she provides.

**FLEE NORTH**
*A Forgotten Hero and the Fight for Freedom in Slavery’s Borderland*

*Shane, Scott*

Celadon Books (352 pp.)

$30.00 | Sept. 19, 2023

9781250843210

A rich history of two men who were active in helping enslaved people escape to Canada in the years before the Civil War.

After buying his freedom, Thomas Smallwood (1801-1883) was a shoemaker who worked out of Washington and Baltimore. “engineering escapes from bondage on an unprecedented scale.” As Shane’s narrative opens, Smallwood loads 15 enslaved people into a wagon and takes to the rutted highway north, managing to evade the white slave patrollers in pursuit. In alliance with Smallwood was a New England abolitionist named Charles Torrey, who was just as daring and who shared Smallwood’s penchant for sending mocking letters to slaveholders after their “chattels” were safely delivered to Canada. Smallwood eventually racked up enough enemies that he had to remain in Canada, where he had a “new house in the very center of Toronto.” He also claimed, with reason, to have been the first to organize these mass escapes of enslaved people, calling himself “general agent of all the branches of the National Underground Railroad, Steam Packet, Canal and Foot-it Company.” (The “underground railway” moniker, Shane reminds readers, derived from the fact that the escapees disappeared so quickly and completely that in 1853 they had boarded a hidden, fast train.) Alas, even in the abolitionist business, the erasure of Black participants is evident: Torrey made the same claim, and the history books document him as a hero who died of tuberculosis while imprisoned after having finally been caught. Both Smallwood and Torrey merit remembrance and honor, for what they did was at the risk of their lives. Along the way, readers will find satisfying the demise of one of their chief tormentors, killed by yellow fever, which ironically “had first traveled to the New World aboard the slave ships from Africa.”

A forgotten chapter in abolitionist history is restored to history in a lively, readable narrative.

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**AGAINST TECHNOABLEISM**
*Rethinking Who Needs Improvement*

*Shew, Ashley*

Norton (192 pp.)

$22.00 | Sept. 19, 2023

9781324036661

A powerful manifesto against ableist thinking.

Many nondisabled people think that disabled people just want to be “normal.” As this brief, outstanding text shows, that’s not only wrong, but cruel. Shew, a professor of science, technology, and society at Virginia Tech, lost a leg to cancer at age 30 and suffered damaged hearing and “chemo brain” from the follow-up treatment. The first lie she heard was how wonderful new high-tech prosthetics were. In reality, the simplest, noncomputerized below-the-knee replacement costs $8,000 to $16,000, and all require a lifetime of return visits, adjustments, and replacements. Private insurance and Medicaid will cover some of the cost but never all, so the poor do without. Shew denounces the stereotypical story of a paraplegic “overcoming” a disability by moving around with the aid of new technology even as walking remains difficult. A wheelchair—the universal icon of disability—that “requires the world to adjust to the disabled person”—is a much better way to get around. Although framed as a denunciation of technoableism, the belief that technical advances will “cure” disability, this book is a more inclusive, intensely squirm-inducing attack on the almost universal conviction that disabled people are broken and require fixing. The author makes a convincing case that their first priority is to get on with their lives and that their leading problem is not technical but social. “The world is set up to exclude disabled people,” writes Shew, and readers who insist they are an exception will crumble before her list of the disability clichés that saturate the media. There are the “pitiable freaks,” in which “disabled people are cast as either objects of curious medical interest or as objects.
of pity and charity”; the “shameful sinners,” a trope that “frames disability as a punishment or penance for some kind of sinful action”, and the “inspirational overcomers,” sometimes known as “inspiration porn” in the disability community.

Essential reading for the disabled and nondisabled alike.

A “supplement” to Sisman’s 2015 biography that focuses on material his subject did not want to see published during his lifetime.

David Cornwell (1931-2020), who took the pen name John le Carré for reasons that are still unknown, was conscientious, hardworking, literate, inventive, witty, and capable of great generosity especially to the women he pursued while married to one of his two legal spouses. Aware but unapologetic about his own failings, he blamed them on a father who had misbehaved shamelessly and a mother who abandoned the family when he was a child, leaving him, as Sisman observes, “with a lifelong mistrust of women” who had even less reason to trust him. Arguing that Cornwell’s serial womanizing was not a distraction from his copious output but an active driver of it, Sisman demonstrates how betrayal was the leitmotif of both the novelist’s life and his art and that however completely he depended on his wives, he depended on a new woman to serve as his inspiration for each book. Anyone familiar with le Carré’s oeuvre will know that that’s an awful lot of women. Of the three affairs Sisman traces in the greatest detail, only one of them—Cornwell’s extended relationship with researcher Sue Dawson—persuasively bears out his first argument, as analogies between Cornwell’s paranoid behavior and le Carré’s obsession with spycraft multiply throughout its course.

Sisman makes a more convincing case for his second argument, tracing the author’s professional decline to his inability to attract muses for the increasingly formulaic novels he continued to write. Sisman’s return to the “secret annexe” of material Cornwell’s son urged him to leave out of his earlier biography is given even greater interest by his unusual candor in considering the ethical implications of his tell-all coda for Cornwell, his many lovers, and biographical projects generally.

A one-of-a-kind revisiting of a wondrously productive life lived at the expense of two wives and many lovers.
All citizens alike, both in and out of uniform, feel the impact of war, and war is an aggregation of hardships. "No one is the same after a sudden conflict between Israel and Palestinian militants, and a year that had started in Gaza with death and destruction was somehow ending with glamour and prestige," she realized that the more she dug into her reporting, "the more I felt a growing sense of unease that I couldn't explain." These divisions deepened during coverage of the Arab Spring movement, and the author vividly captures both its optimism and its many negative elements, including a chilling account of being assaulted by pro-regime thugs during violent counterprotests. These experiences led her to further fulfillment as an Amnesty International representative at the U.N., dealing with crises including the Syrian war and the Trump administration's distracting hostility toward the U.N. The author's writing is clear and passionate, though occasionally repetitive; her personal ups and downs detract from otherwise powerful messaging.

**A solid contribution to current conversations about privilege and consensus-building for international crises.**

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**TAKING SIDES: A Memoir About Love, War, and Changing the World**

*Tadros, Sherine*

$20.00 paper | Oct. 3, 2023

9781957363479

Impassioned recollections of a war correspondent and geopolitical advocate.

"By accepting who I am and recognizing the part of me that longed to dedicate myself to activism," writes Tadros, "I changed my life and found fulfillment." An Egyptian Coptic Christian, she grew up comfortably in Britain after her parents prospered. As she writes, "I only came along after the tough immigrant years were already over." The author opens her memoir in a time of transition, when she was interviewing for a key position at Amnesty International while dealing with heartbreak from her fiancé's abrupt departure. After 9/11, her degree in Middle Eastern studies opened doors for her. "My obsession with the region," she writes, "was proving useful beyond the university circles I was used to." Initially met with British condescension, Tadros was recruited for the startup of Al Jazeera English. "At Al Jazeera, my divided identity—Arab and yet also British—would finally be an asset," she writes. Initially a researcher, she went on air during the part of me that longed to dedicate myself to activism," writes Tadros, "I changed my life and found fulfillment." An Egyptian Coptic Christian, she grew up comfortably in Britain after her parents prospered. As she writes, "I only came along after the tough immigrant years were already over." The author opens her memoir in a time of transition, when she was interviewing for a key position at Amnesty International while dealing with heartbreak from her fiancé's abrupt departure. After 9/11, her degree in Middle Eastern studies opened doors for her. "My obsession with the region," she writes, "was proving useful beyond the university circles I was used to." Initially met with British condescension, Tadros was recruited for the startup of Al Jazeera English. "At Al Jazeera, my divided identity—Arab and yet also British—would finally be an asset," she writes. Initially a researcher, she went on air during

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**BARTLEBY & ME: Reflections of an Old Scrivener**

*Talese, Gay*

Mariner Books (320 pp.)

$28.99 | Sept. 19, 2023

9780358455479

More revelations from the celebrated writer's life.

In 1953, Talese, then 21, began working as a copy boy at the New York Times, earning $38 per week, a job that launched his successful career as a journalist for the Times and other outlets. As the author recounts in his latest memoir, he was interested from the start in writing about characters he likens to Herman Melville's taciturn Bartleby, people who work largely unnoticed: those "on the sidelines of stadiums, individuals who are part of the game but rarely written about." His first published piece—unsigned—was an interview with the electrician in charge of the illuminated sign that flashed news in Times Square. His first byline was for an article about the rolling chairs that transported visitors on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. With the encouragement of editors at the Times, where he spent seven years as a reporter in the news department, and, later, at Esquire, where he contributed features, Talese was most satisfied writing about the "lives of non-newsworthy people," such as Times chief obituary writer Alden Whitman and retired silent-screen star Nita Naldi. But Talese also reprises at length an episode he included in High Notes (2017), detailing his frustrating, convoluted efforts to interview Frank Sinatra for a profile in Esquire. The interview never happened, but the article did: "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold" appeared in April 1966. More in line with Talese's interests was his research for Thy Neighbor's Wife, which immersed him in the world of massage parlors and nudist colonies; The Voyeur's Motel, about a motel owner who spied on his guests; and the life of Nicholas Bartha, a physician who burned down his Upper East Side brownstone...
rather than sell it to remunerate his ex-wife in a divorce settlement. Fans of Talese may already be familiar with many recollections; new readers will discover an astute observer.

Candid testimony from a new-journalism icon.

**A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ABED SALAMA**

**Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy**

Thrall, Nathan
Metropolitan/Henry Holt (272 pp.)
$29.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
9781250854971

A powerful study of how a horrendous school bus accident in Palestinian Jerusalem underscored the oppressiveness of Israeli rule.

In his second book, following *The Only Language They Understand*, Thrall, the former director of the Arab-Israeli Project at the International Crisis Group, clearly delineates how the accident that ended the life of Abed Salama’s 5-year-old son, Milad, resulted from many factors both accidental and systemic. Salama’s family lived in the narrow alleys of Dahiyat a-Salaam, a Palestinian neighborhood in Anata, separated by a high wall from greater Jerusalem, which restricted access to hospitals and schools. In February 2012, Milad’s private elementary school, Nour al-Houda, hired a bus company to take its kindergarten class on a field trip to a theme park on the outskirts of town. However, Thrall notes, “the company sent an illegally registered twenty-seven year old bus to drive on neglected, congested roads, without proper lighting, a police presence, or a barrier between the lanes of oncoming traffic.” Moreover, in the chaos after the accident, the emergency response was delayed, no one knew which hospitals the children had been taken to, and the victims and responders were largely dependent on who had proper identification to reach the Israeli hospital through the roadblocks. In his deeply sensitive account of the families involved, Thrall delves into the history of the two Palestinian intifadas, in 1987 and 2000, and how the Israeli military’s vise grip around the neighborhoods increased, resulting in the massive wall separating Palestinian neighborhoods and Israeli settlements. The driver of the bus was sentenced to 30 months in prison, “a remarkably lenient punishment for an act of gross negligence that killed seven people.” As the author shows, the true roots of the tragedy, in terms of the separation wall, transit permits, ID, and lack of proper Palestinian schools, were never addressed.

“A moving, often maddening portrait of the dire life straits of Palestinians in Israel.”

**JUSTICE IS COMING**

*How Progressives Are Going To Take Over the Country and America Is Going To Love It*

Uygur, Cenk
St. Martin’s (320 pp.)
$30.00 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781250272799

The founder of the Young Turks presents a hopeful thesis that present polarization will resolve itself in a left-leaning democracy.

The Republican Party comes in for heavy shellacking throughout Uygur’s pages. The people who voted for Trump, by that account, didn’t vote for him based on policy issues or a reasoned platform. “They wanted racism, cruelty, and authoritarianism,” writes the author. They certainly got that and more. Yet, Uygur insists, that party is in power despite the fact that it consistently loses the popular vote. Most Americans “are not fundamentally conservative”; they are opposed to social injustice and the authoritarian suppression of civil rights and the right to choose, wholly in favor of the social safety net provided by government programs. Race, greed, and religion on the one hand, social equity on the other: It’s small wonder, Uygur writes, that young voters are so overwhelmingly left-leaning, to the extent that 60% polled on the matter believed socialism to be more humane than capitalism, and that the Republican Party is therefore doing all it can to disenfranchise them. For all their efforts, writes the author, extreme right-wing politicians will not succeed in passing any spectacularly awful laws, such as making Trump president for life or stripping civil rights away from the LGBTQ+ community, despite a certain amount of fearmongering among progressives that they’re plotting to do just such things. (“It’s so easy to scare Democratic voters.”) That’s not to say they won’t try, though Uygur remains firm in his view that progressives will win in the end because they will somehow convince “our conservative brothers and sisters” that progressives love them—and “when you give out love, it doesn’t make you smaller, it makes you larger.” Magical thinking? Perhaps, but it’s a nice thought.

An optimistic prophecy that a saner, more equitable politics will take the place of whatever it is we have now.
SURELY YOU CAN’T
BE SERIOUS

The True Story of Airplane!

Zucker, David, Jim Abrahams &
Jerry Zucker

St. Martin’s (320 pp.)
$35.00 | Oct. 3, 2023
9781250289315

A history of the brains behind a clas-
ic of American comedy.

Acclaimed film directors David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, and
Jerry Zucker deliver an uproarious oral history of the making
of their 1980 film, Airplane! which, in the words of Abrahams,
elevated “stupidity to an art form.” This delightful book, like
Airplane! and many other ZAZ productions, is multilayered,
incisive, and surprising. The authors detail how they created
the sketch comedy outfit Kentucky Fried Theater in Wiscon-
sin before moving the operation to Los Angeles and gaining a
wide following. They also chronicle their forays into filmmak-
ing, including their relationship with director John Landis. Far
from a dull, chronological accounting, the book features scores
of photographs, stills from Airplane! published reviews that
raved and retched over Kentucky Fried Theater, and extensive
thoughts from luminaries such as David Letterman, the cre-
ators of South Park, and other comedians and actors who under-
score the massive significance of Airplane! Perhaps the most
interesting aspect of the book is the career-altering serendipity
that led to the discovery of the straight-laced and largely forgot-
ten airline drama Zero Hour! the structure and spoof of which
became Airplane! (right down to the exclamation point), and
how the young, virtually unknown trio convinced actors like
Robert Stack, Peter Graves, and Lloyd Bridges to keep playing
it straight while uttering ridiculous lines. The authors recount
tales of their adventures with Paramount Studios, how Air-
plane! changed the public perception of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar,
and the lasting fondness for the film’s stars, particularly their
longtime colleague Stephen Stucker. The detailed backstory
of ZAZ’s journey from Milwaukee to Hollywood and the pro-
cess of getting Airplane! to Paramount and in theaters is one of
admirable self-belief and perseverance. While the book’s great-
est appeal will be to film industry and comedy aficionados and
those who understand the social context in which it was made,
anyone who enjoyed the movie will find plenty to love.

A hilarious, well-structured account of and tribute to a sig-
nificant film.
These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

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**LION ON THE INSIDE How One Girl Changed Basketball**
Abdul-Qaadir, Bilgis with Judit Henderson
Illus. by Katherine Ahmed
Kids Can (40 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781525310034
Series: CitizenKid

Love of sports and unwavering faith play starring roles in this true story.

Abdul-Qaadir, a Black athlete and the first Muslim woman to play NCAA Division I basketball while wearing a hijab, shows talent in childhood, dunking the ball in a child-sized hoop at age 3 and playing against boys at 12. Her grandmother is her biggest cheerleader; her mother reminds her to choose her battles. In high school, she’s a star player—but in a playoff game, a referee says she can’t play in her hijab. Her teammates back her up, and she plays, becoming the all-time leading scorer in Massachusetts state history. Abdul-Qaadir plays college basketball and is recognized by President Barack Obama for her accomplishments. She’s ready to play professionally when “it happens again”: She is told she can’t play wearing her hijab. She must choose, and she chooses her faith. By the time Abdul-Qaadir and supporters help convince the International Basketball Federation to change the rules, it’s too late for her own athletic career but not for other girls’. Lingering on key moments, the well-paced, crisp verse highlights Abdul-Qaadir’s strength of character, emphasizing that despite the injustices she faced, she triumphed by living by her principles. Ahmed’s playful images of an active Muslim girl dispel stereotypes with joyful representation. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Stirring and impactful. (more information on Abdul-Qaadir, questions, references) (Picture-book biography. 5-8)
The American Library Association’s annual meeting is one of my favorite events—joy always permeates the air as attendees celebrate the winners of the youth media awards. But at this year’s conference, held in Chicago, Illinois, June 22-27, I also felt unease, sadness, and anger. There’s been a rise in book banning across the country, and librarians and authors alike are dealing with the fallout—even at the conference itself. Several librarians told me they saw a small group of protesters outside the convention center holding signs decrying drag queen story hour (though no such event was scheduled for the conference).

The good news? We’re not giving up without a fight. At a panel on censorship, author and former school librarian Kyle Lukoff (Too Bright To See) expressed disillusionment with well-meaning but ineffective efforts—such as hashtags or tote bags—to combat book banning. “It may be time for sabotage, subterfuge, and deceit,” he said. “I also believe in some cases it might be time to lie to your boss. It might be time to deceive your board. It might be time to surreptitiously remove or include materials.”

Author and former high school English teacher Samira Ahmed (Internment) urged librarians to take political action—by calling school board or other elected officials to express support for freedom of information, by sending them faxes (emails are too easy to ignore, she warned), or by organizing postcard campaigns. How can we encourage community members to vote for school and library board members who oppose banning, asked one audience member? Ahmed emphasized partnering with school unions and other local organizations.

Carol Monroe, a librarian from the Mead Public Library in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, observed that librarians, as government employees, are often hampered in how much campaigning they can do; publishers, however, have more freedom and resources to advocate for change, like the legislation in Illinois that protects school and public libraries from the threat of censorship. “A publisher can push legislation; a publisher can lobby,” Monroe said. She added that laws can make a difference in a way that individual library collection policies cannot. “Policy is internal. A law is external, and you are obligated to follow it.”

Constantly fighting censorship is exhausting—and a burden that falls disproportionately on authors of color. At the Newbery-Caldecott-Legacy Banquet, Freewater author Amina Luqman-Dawson said it rankled a bit that she so often fields questions about book banning; instead of defending her book’s right to exist, she’d rather be celebrating the stories of marginalized people. Her Newbery-winning novel centers on a tightknit community of Black people who have fled slavery—precisely the kind of book that’s coming under fire now by those opposed to honest depictions of our nation’s history. But, as Luqman-Dawson told the audience, “Freewater is exactly the right book for exactly the right time.”

As always, I was stirred by the strong sense of community in the kid lit world. In his speech accepting the Children’s Literature Legacy Award, James E. Ransome told audiences how awestruck Luqman-Dawson had been to meet him; he, in turn, had been just as moved to meet her. Ransome also paid tribute to the late Jerry Pinkney, his mentor and friend, while Doug Salati, accepting the Caldecott Award for Hot Dog, spoke of the late Tomie dePaola’s men-
torship and encouragement. Salati noted how affirming it was to discover that dePaola and many of the children’s authors he idolized were, like him, gay—something he wished he’d known growing up.

One of my favorite parts of the conference is learning about upcoming books, and this year was no exception. I met Laura James; her picture book *My Mother Was a Nanny*, rooted in personal experience, follows a young girl of Caribbean descent whose mother balances many jobs yet still manages to show her daughters that they matter most. I’ve noticed several new picture books that offer loving, joyful portrayals of working-class families—a most welcome development.

At a Penguin panel spotlighting Black illustrators, moderated by librarian Edith Campbell and held at the Epiphany Center for the Arts, Nikkolas Smith spoke about *The Artivist*, his upcoming picture book about a child combining his passion for art with a commitment to social justice. I’m also thrilled that Jack Wong, author of one of my favorite 2023 picture books, *When You Can Swim*, has a new book out this fall: *The Words We Share*. It’s the tale of a child who frequently interprets for her Chinese-speaking father and decides to turn her translation skills into a business.

With the conference behind us, I’m determined to follow the example of the courageous librarians and artists taking stands against censorship. Monroe told me that reviews are immensely helpful in justifying the purchase of books that come under attack, and I’m heartened that at Kirkus we’ve highlighted important yet vulnerable titles. But I want to do more, and I’ve resolved to seek more opportunities to fight back—it’s an obligation that all of us in the kid lit world bear.

Mahnaz Dar is a young readers’ editor.
They are all going on an outing to the swimming pool. Auntie Maggie is the first to dive in, plugging her nose and pointing her toes. Timmy’s about to dive in next when he realizes that he forgot his goggles. He leaps onto Aunt Maggie’s back, keeping his head above the water so his eyes don’t get irritated. Each kid, in turn, realizes they forgot something (except Tummy) and piles onto poor Auntie Maggie. She sinks lower and lower, carrying the weight of each child’s problem. Back at home, Auntie Maggie teaches everyone problem-solving techniques that they can use to become more independent. The presentation is a bit quirky in this tale translated from Spanish, but the art matches the absurdity beautifully. Cluttered with incredible details, each spread is a feast for the eye. Auntie Maggie is eccentric and has fantastical toys all around the house, while the pool scenes are filled with a plethora of characters, each with their own imaginative backstories. Auntie Maggie and most of her family (along with the poolgoers) are light-skinned, except Tammy, who has darker skin. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Informative and fun. (Index) (Informational picture book. 7-11)

**AUNTIE MAGGIE AND HER FIVE NEPHEWS AND NIECES**

*Alonso, Sandra*

Illus. by Enrique Quevedo

Trans. by Jon Brokenbrow

Cuento de Luz (36 pp.)

$18.95 | Oct. 1, 2023

9788418302671

The weight of carrying problems around just might make you sink.

Auntie Maggie has five nieces and nephews, with the delightful names of Timmy, Tammy, Tommy, Tummy, and Temmy. They are all going on an outing to the swimming pool. Auntie Maggie is the first to dive in, plugging her nose and pointing her toes. Timmy’s about to dive in next when he realizes that he forgot his goggles. He leaps onto Aunt Maggie’s back, keeping his head above the water so his eyes don’t get irritated. Each kid, in turn, realizes they forgot something (except Tummy) and piles onto poor Auntie Maggie. She sinks lower and lower, carrying the weight of each child’s problem. Back at home, Auntie Maggie teaches everyone problem-solving techniques that they can use to become more independent. The presentation is a bit quirky in this tale translated from Spanish, but the art matches the absurdity beautifully. Cluttered with incredible details, each spread is a feast for the eye. Auntie Maggie is eccentric and has fantastical toys all around the house, while the pool scenes are filled with a plethora of characters, each with their own imaginative backstories. Auntie Maggie and most of her family (along with the poolgoers) are light-skinned, except Tammy, who has darker skin. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Offbeat and lovely. (Picture book. 4-8)

**THE BRAVEST WARRIOR IN NEFARIA**

*Alsaid, Adi*

Aladdín (304 pp.)

$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023

9781665927758

Bobert is used to being ignored by pretty much all who live in the strange kingdom of Nefaria, until an unexpected adventure thrusts him into the spotlight. In fact, making friends feels impossible to mostly invisible 11-year-old Bobert Bougainvillea. So when he’s presented with the chance to protect popular classmate Candelabra and her friends from a dangerous dare by taking on the challenge himself, he jumps at the opportunity.

As a consequence of using the cursed gumball machine that is rumored to capture anyone who uses it after dark, Bobert finds himself under the control of Matt, an evil but lazy wizard who is plotting to raise a child army to take control of Nefaria. Inventive oddities like singing mountain spiders and the Anti-Beanbag Society’s exploits add charm that keeps the storyline fresh, humorous, and fun as it engages with everyday tween dilemmas. Many readers will be able to relate to the relationship issues explored, both between kids and adults and within peer groups. On his journey to find acceptance and belonging, Bobert comes to understand that others are lonely too, and that “it could break the human spirit.” Gumball machines and beanbags notwithstanding, the Kingdom of Nefaria, which is ruled by a king and a clueless Council of Elders, has a rustic, preindustrial feeling. The racially ambiguous characters are varied in appearance, and one child has two moms.

Fanciful, humorous, and original. (Fantasy. 8-12)

**THE ENCHANTED SYMPHONY**

*Andrews, Julie & Emma Walton Hamilton*

Illus. by Elly MacKay

Abrams (40 pp.)

$19.99 | Sept. 12, 2023

9781419763199

Actor Andrews and her daughter Walton Hamilton pay tribute to the power of music.

The inhabitants of a small village are happy with “simple pleasures” until they commercialize to attract tourists...where—upon a dismal purple mist creeps in and thickens to the point that people stop visiting or even going outside. Then one day little Piccolino, who is helping his father dust the deserted opera house, plinks out a tune on the piano...and notices that the palms in the lobby look fresher. The brown-skinned pair proceed to gather wilting houseplants from all over town, park them in the auditorium seats, and call the orchestra members in for a concert. The plants flourish, the fog lifts, and throngs of villagers are drawn out into the streets by the music to dance and sing. Everyone realizes that “if they remained faithful to all that matters most, nothing could darken their days again.” In a closing note the authors state that they were inspired by an actual concert played in Barcelona in 2020 to an “audience” of plants—a piece of performance art more likely to stimulate discussion than this trite, sugary mess. The illustrations are one bright spot: MacKay places her gracefully posed, diverse figures in luminously hued scenes of narrow streets and neatly kept buildings perched on a steep hill and threaded with musical staves. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Sweet art, cloying storyline. (Picture book. 6-8)
A powerful novel in verse about a girl coping after being ripped from her home. When 11-year-old Laura Rodriguez Colón calls 911 to save her parents from a possible overdose, authorities remove her from her home and place her into the care of Titi Silvia, her estranged aunt. Laura, who is Puerto Rican, resists “this borrowed life,” anxiously awaiting the day her parents will be released from rehab. One day, she rescues a sick, abandoned puppy she names Sparrow, and he helps her feel better about everything. When the social worker informs her that children aren’t allowed to visit the rehab center, Laura hatches a plan to train Sparrow to be a therapy dog and get inside that way. But when her parents leave without completing the program, Laura learns her stay with Titi may become permanent. Laura’s distress increases when her mother shows up at school only to be sent away, leaving Laura torn between life with her aunt and love for her flawed parents. With the help of caring friends and adults, Laura learns that creating a new home doesn’t have to mean discarding the old. The short sections written in accessible free verse create a segmented structure that mirrors Laura’s experiences and drives the storyline. The clear narrative arc and strong symbolic system make the novel cohere, and Laura’s emotional landscape is realistically contradictory. Arango’s writing is a joy to read, combining strong storytelling, compelling characters, and rich language.

Beautifully executed. (author’s note) (Verse fiction. 10-14)
“Fast, imaginative adventures that turn on a dime.”

YAHGZ

The Craynobi Tales
Baltazar, Art
Papercutz (88 pp.)
$14.99 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781545810590

Chronicles of several heroes’ worth of adventures and chaotic mythology.

Two civilizations live on opposite sides of a planet: the Crays and the Yahgeez. Whenever the Yahgeez are invaded by evildoers, they call upon the heroic Crays to save them. Crays look like doodles brought to life, with a total absence of color on their black-bordered bodies and hair. The Yahgeez have green bodies and pink, floppy hair like tropical tree leaves. Tales from the Cray heroes Craybi Craynobi and his friend Weezerd include the discovery of a chosen one who is half Cray and Half Yahgee named Crayski. Weezerd interacts with a magic orb that teaches him about the balance between good and evil. Crayski trains to become a hero alongside the greatest of the Yahgeez, Teh Tati, which is time well spent since Gwash monsters have returned from their exile on an asteroid to wage war. A giant showdown cliffhanger and promise of an eventual trilogy means more breakneck pacing and fantasy action. Pause to take a breath before it all wooshes past like a story written among archetype-blending classmates and acted out during recess. The thick outlines on the illustrations make everything stand out, which could overstimulate or enrapture from scene to scene. Adversaries include a giant green gorilla, gelatinous forms, Orblerx bandits, and a half Cray, half Gwash girl described as “pure vile evil.”

Fast, imaginative adventures that turn on a dime. (Graphic fiction. 7-10)

PEPITA MEETS BEBITA
Behar, Ruth & Gabriel Frye-Behar
Illus. by Maribel Lechuga
Knopf (40 pp.)
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Sept. 12, 2023
9780593566985
9780593566992 PLB

A dog who belongs to an expecting couple adjusts to home life as a new baby arrives.

Pepita, the family pet, is beloved and still so little they call her Bebita (baby girl). But Pepita’s world is changing as her Mami and Papia await the arrival of a baby. Pepita is used to being spoiled “with treats and tummy rubs and my favorite fluffy pillow...But lately, things have been changing.” As the home gets new additions like a crib and gifts from the grandparents, Pepita feels left out, no longer the center of attention. Once the baby arrives, Pepita tries to adjust but is kept up at night by crying and doesn’t get playtime like before. But Pepita’s sweetness shines through as she finds ways to help out and bond with the new baby. “I feel so proud to be the big sister,” she concludes. The book is sprinkled with Spanish phrases, reflecting that Pepita is part of a Latine household; readers unfamiliar with Spanish will find the glossary helpful. Illustrations are warm and cuddly throughout, and the story is highly relatable; soon-to-be big siblings fretting over a new arrival will find it especially comforting. (This book was reviewed digitally)

A heartwarming reminder to embrace change. (Picture book. 4-8)

ALEX WISE VS. THE END OF THE WORLD
Benton-Walker, Terry J.
Labyrinth Road (416 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Sept. 26, 2023
9780593564295
9780593564301 PLB
Series: Alex Wise, 1

Twelve-year-old Alex Wise already knew this would be the worst summer ever—he just didn’t think it would also be his last.

When Mags, his little sister who shares his “dark brown eyes, chestnut skin, and full lips,” gets hurt while under his care, Alex’s mom sends them to their dad’s for the summer. This sucks for two reasons: Alex’s dad has a new family, and Alex is being haunted by Shadow Man, a presence he can’t shake. When Shadow Man abducts Mags, Alex is thrown into a chaotic journey to save his sister and the world, pitted against four murderous Horsemen set on starting an apocalypse. Along the way Alex gets possessed by Orin, a god who is asexual and nonbinary, and is joined in his fight by Loren, his queer BFF, and Liam, a mysterious, magical, teenage guardian. Benton-Walker presents Alex’s inner conflicts over being gay and feeling abandoned by people with such understanding, concern, and affirmation that it’s easy to root for him. However, because the story jumps around without clear transitions, readers rarely get chances to breathe and appreciate the thoughtful queer representation and predominantly Black cast. Even though the writing is compelling, the choppy chapters often build up to plot twists that make the story feel less cohesive instead of providing strong threads to follow through to the end.

A wild, roving, but disjointed ride to the end of the world and beyond. (author’s note) (Fantasy. 9-13)
MELODY QUEEN
Bhandal, Puneet
Lantana (264 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 7, 2023
9781915244284
Series: Bollywood Academy, 2

Boarding school life with a dusting of stardust.
Simi loves everything about music but especially making it. Yet, even at the tender age of 12, her path at Bollywood Academy near Mumbai has already been decided: She’s meant to be acting in Hindi films, a dream that she has inherited from her parents, who are part of Telugu cinema in South India. When the new school year starts, Simi finds herself caught between her own hopes and aspirations and the realities of her parents’ wishes. Even worse, she confronts the gender inequality that exists in the music industry. There’s also the virality of social media, the ardent friendships that are formed in boarding schools, and the petty jealousies and rivalries that manifest in this highly competitive field even if you’re a tweenager—not to mention the razzle-dazzle of stardom—all rolled up in one book. While keeping the spotlight firmly on Simi, the book manages to do justice to all the fairly privileged characters rattling about in a fairly privileged school that’s meant to get them ready to enter an often nepotistic industry, giving each of them space to develop and come into their own without the story feeling too cluttered. The problems facing child actors aside, the book highlights entrenched biases in the film industry while also being a fun, breezy read.

There’ll be no neigh-sayers for this one. (Fiction. 9-13)

IF I WAS A HORSE
Blackall, Sophie
Little, Brown (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780316510981

Oh, to be a horse!
Shakespeare’s Richard III begged for one, going so far as to offer his kingdom. This delightful book proposes the idea—if ever so briefly and if only in the imagination—of being one. Think of what you could try, see, and do—or not do—if you were a horse. What fun! What, ahem, unbridled freedom could be had! Each page in this charmer contains one easy sentence or phrase that expresses an idea about “horsiness,” allowing very young listeners or emergent readers to focus on the clear, simple language and to follow up with their own imaginative responses. The young narrator muses about what life would be like as a horse: galloping all day long, rolling around in the mud, giving a (human) sibling a ride to school, and getting to run around without clothes on (“unless I was in a PARADE”). Grown-ups sharing the book in a one-on-one or group setting should encourage children to engage in rich, speculative conversation about the advantages and disadvantages of being a horse. The colorful, sweet, gently humorous illustrations depicting an unfettered horse running freely and also in cozy, familial, and neighborhood settings were created with watercolor, gouache, pencil, fabric, and wallpaper and assembled digitally. The protagonist’s human family is brown-skinned; other humans are racially diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

There’ll be no neigh-sayers for this one. (Picture book 3-6)

SERWA BOATENG’S GUIDE TO WITCHCRAFT AND MAYHEM
Brown, Roseanne A.
Rick Riordan Presents/Disney (304 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781368066464
Series: Serwa Boateng, 2

When a 12-year-old Slayer-in-training finds herself on the other side of the supernatural divide, her complicated family history might lead to answers—or to the end of everything she loves.
When Ghanaian American Serwa Boating learns she’s half obayifo—a wielder of black magic—after having dedicated herself to the other side of the Akan supernatural spectrum, the prospect of controlling the contradictory forces within her seems impossible. Still, Auntie Effi, who is now Serwa’s only support system, believes that her one-of-a-kind union of black magic and divine wisdom is the key to freeing Serwa’s grandmother, who has been trapped for decades due to tragic events. In this sequel, all the connections that Serwa relied on and all the secrets she learned about magic and mythology are flipped on their heads. When she sets out to gain intel from Declan Amankwah, a young rival Slayer, her realization that she’s been in denial of how cute this boy is further upsets everything, making her allegiances even more complicated. Serwa continues to be a humorous narrator and an accessible guide to life, reluctant middle school crushes, the joys of tasting mumbo sauce for the first time, and return trips to the underworld of Asamando. Joyful, unexpected reunions give Serwa firmer footing for a high-stakes deal with Owuo, the god of death, suggesting a lot more is in store for this headstrong hero.

Family means everything in this thrilling, heart-wrenching sequel. (author’s note, glossary, Adinkra dictionary) (Adventure. 10-13)
THE BEES OF NOTRE-DAME
Browne, Meghan P.  
Illus. by E.B. Goodale  
Random House Studio (40 pp.)  
9780393374566  
9780393374573 PLB

When Notre Dame Cathedral burned in April 2019, the honeybees on the roof above its sacristy survived.

Amid the world’s sorrow at the terrible damage suffered by the storied cathedral, the bees’ survival emerged as a story of hope. Browne treats it likewise, but her text focuses on the ordinary miracles of the honeybee life cycle as the context for the story of the fire. Loving scenes of Paris in springtime preface the bees’ emergence: “Bonjour, les filles!” Sibyle the beekeeper greets them. The bees fly above the city, then return to the “small pine box” where the queen “lays her eggs....in thousands of perfect hexagons waxed by generations of bees that came before her.” With this, Browne cleverly segues to the ancient cathedral and its construction; the parallel is evoked again in firefighters’ efforts “to quench the flames, to save the cathedral. To save the hives.” Goodale’s multimedia illustrations are set on warm, sepia-toned backgrounds; her bees flit among cottony pink and white blossoming trees and around the ornate architectural flourishes of the cathedral. Introduced by a wordless spread dominated by billows of gray smoke, the fire itself occupies just a few pages before scenes of rebuilding. An author’s note provides further information on both the fire and the bees and their keeper, whom Goodale depicts with beige skin. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Emphasizing resilience, this tale effectively captures a fascinating episode in recent history. (cathedral diagrams, recommended reading) (Informational picture book. 5-8)

OF ALL TRIBES
American Indians and Alcatraz
Bruchac, Joseph  
Abrams (356 pp.)  
$19.99 | Sept. 26, 2023  
9781419757198

Alcatraz was not just a prison, but also a place where an idea became an Indigenous movement that persists today.

The latest from Bruchac (Abenaki) focuses on the 1969 Native American occupation of Alcatraz. The book delivers a brief history of the San Francisco Bay Area, beginning with the Ohlone Tribe, the original occupants of the region. It then covers topics including Manifest Destiny, broken treaties, the Indian Removal Act, and the cultural genocide of the boarding schools, setting the stage for tensions leading up to the occupation. Bruchac notes Alcatraz’s use as a prison where Native American men were unjustly imprisoned beginning in the late 19th century and traces Native rights movements leading up to November 1969, when a group of activists, mostly college students and people in their 20s, called the Indians of All Tribes, landed on Alcatraz, demanding its return. One chapter focuses on three leading figures, describing their rise. The closing chapter highlights the inspirational legacy of the Alcatraz occupation for subsequent Indian activists. Including archival photos and writing in an accessible tone, Bruchac strikes an ideal balance between allowing readers to engage with the story while also providing robust facts that make this a title with enough substance to be used as a reference for those seeking more information about this pivotal moment.

A well-balanced, visually appealing, and well-contextualized account. (timeline, author’s note, bibliography, photo credits, index) (Nonfiction. 10-14)

WHAT YOUR RIBBON SKIRT MEANS TO ME
Deb Haaland’s Historic Inauguration
Bunten, Alexis  
Illus. by Nicole Neidhardt  
Christy Ottaviano Books (40 pp.)  
$18.99 | July 25, 2023  
9780316430036

Children gather to watch a historical event, the swearing in of the first Indigenous secretary of the Department of the Interior.

After school, young Pia, whose mother is Anishinaabe and whose father is Chamorro, runs to the Native American center, where Auntie Autumn greets her with “Hersha Tühe,” Ramaytush Ophrune for greetings. Pia and other diverse kids watch on TV as Deb Haaland makes history. Pia notices that “Auntie Deb” is wearing a ribbon skirt, a ceremonial garment that celebrates Indigenous womanhood. That night, the kids and their families attend a celebration in honor of Secretary Haaland, where they make their own ribbon skirts. Bunten (Aleut/Yup’ik) engages readers with lively language (“a parade of beef stew; fry bread, dried buffalo”). Neidhardt’s (Dine’) bold, realistic art radiates with strength, especially when Pia’s grandmother teaches her about the importance of regalia: “You shine with all the strength of our mothers and grandmothers since time immemorial.” Grandma adds that Auntie Deb wore the ribbon skirt for the ancestors and for “all the mothers, aunties, daughters, and grandmothers yet to be born—Native and non-Native,” and Pia realizes the power woven into each ribbon skirt. The colors of the ribbons symbolize connections to the natural world. References to rooreh salad and sage hint at an inclusion of various Indigenous cultures. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A powerful story of intergenerational strength, womanhood, and Native pride. (more information on Deb Haaland, the history and meaning of ribbon skirts, instructions on writing a letter to the government, author’s and illustrator’s notes, sources) (Picture book. 5-9)
“An irresistibly entertaining introduction to astrophysics.”

OLIVER’S GREAT BIG UNIVERSE

Cham, Jorge
Amulet/Abrams (256 pp.)
$15.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781419764080
Series: Oliver’s Great Big Universe, 1

A stellar confluence of comic episodes and cosmic information.

Robotics Ph.D., author, podcaster, and PBS Kids’ show creator Cham offers a straightforward and amusing guide to the universe through the eyes of a middle schooler. Copious cartoon vignettes and graphics ramp up both the instruction and entertainment. Oliver introduces himself as a normal 11-year-old, not always on task or even paying attention. One day in fifth grade, however, he became enthralled and motivated by space and decided to become an astrophysicist. Dr. Howard, the catalyst and his preternaturally patient ongoing mentor, is the scientist husband of his teacher. Folded into the science (along with groanworthy puns, helpfully indexed fart jokes, and bathroom humor) is a storyline about transitioning to middle school, where, happily, Oliver makes a friend in Evie, an artistic girl he creates planet cartoons with—along with the book we’re reading. In addition to brilliantly integrated comic moments—an escaped hamster, a run-in with the principal, a hypothetical chat with an alien—surprising plot twists add narrative pizzazz to a serious raft of data about the universe. Common experiences, like a road trip, sibling dealmaking, and Halloween scares, will make readers chuckle. Terms are defined in the text. A bonus spread supplies especially jaw-dropping data crumbs that will make a big bang in family dinner conversations. Oliver and his family have paper-white skin and black hair; Dr. Howard and Evie read Black, and Mrs. Howard appears white.

Helpful! (Early reader. 4-6)

SEALS ARE JERKS!

Chapman, Jared
Orchard/Scholastic (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781338835687

Lorelei especially loves seals because of their friendship with penguins...or so she believes. The tan-skinned child creates an album filled with photos showing seals’ many great attributes and presents it with great enthusiasm at school. But she is shocked when a penguin in the class (don’t ask) announces that seals eat penguins and therefore are jerks. Lorelei embarks on a fact-finding trip to prove that this loudmouthed penguin is completely wrong. Told in an interwoven mesh of brief narrative text and emotionally charged cartoon illustrations that include colorful pink, green, and orange speech bubbles, the book follows Lorelei to the local zoo and library and then on a plane to Antarctica, where she meets a group of penguins and a seal who tell her the truth. Her exaggerated facial expressions and body language dominate the pages as she becomes overwhelmed by disbelief, disappointment, hopelessness, and anger and responds with huge bursts of temper. But she is also tremendously resourceful and has some hilarious ideas about how to reconcile seals and penguins. (Think peanut butter and jelly.) Lorelei finally grasps that animals cannot change their nature and finds a new perspective and new pages for her album. Observant readers will discover many twists and surprises and will commiserate with and cheer for Lorelei, the penguins, and, yes, even the seal. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Thoroughly delightful. (facts about Antarctica) (Picture book. 4-9)
Paul Bunyan and his big blue ox are usually understood as American mythology, the heroes of tall tales spun by 19th-century lumberjacks, and they are—but their broader truth is more complicated than that. Bunyan didn’t become a household name until the Red River Lumber Company used those stories as a promotional tool, which is where Paul Bunyan: The Invention of an American Legend (TOON Books/Astra Books for Young Readers, Aug. 8) begins.

The core of the book is Noah Van Sciver’s comic about passengers on a stalled train in 1914 Minnesota entertaining each other with tales of legendary lumberjacks and a lumber-company adman joining the fun with the wildest yarns of them all, about Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox. But Van Sciver also notes those stories’ roles in deforestation and the displacement of Native Americans, and the book surrounds his narrative with work from Native creators: an introduction by Lee Francis IV (Pueblo of Laguna), an essay by Dr. Deondra Smiles (Leech Lake band of Ojibwe), and writing and artwork by Marlena Myles (Spirit Lake Dakota). A starred Kirkus review calls the book “an accessible and important reminder of how easily the truth can be co-opted.”

Noah and Myles talked to Kirkus about Paul Bunyan via Zoom from their respective homes in South Carolina and Minnesota.

Noah, you previously drew a book about Johnny Appleseed. Did the Paul Bunyan project come from a similar place?

VAN SCIVER: When [TOON Books’ Editorial Director] Françoise Mouly approached me to do something on an American legend, that was one of the ideas she was interested in. I guess those two projects are related—they’re both about getting behind-the-scenes information on where a legend comes from.

How did you go about researching it?

NVS: There were four of us working on it, just for the cartoon parts! We’re doing it again now for another book—everybody scrambling together as much information as we can and then cross-referencing and comparing notes with each other. I went in blind—which is a good way to do a project like this. When I did Joseph Smith and the Mormons [2022], I went in not knowing anything and drawing as I learned. You make a lot of mistakes that way, but what motivates you to keep going are the discoveries you’re making. I think readers pick up on that momentum.

You focus the story on William B. Laughead, the lumber-company advertising manager whose collections

Marlena Myles
of stories about Paul Bunyan popularized the character in the 1920s. But folktales about Bunyan and other loggers had been circulating for decades by that point, and you work some of those other names into your story too.

NVS: We were just going to tell the story of Paul Bunyan as an advertising tool, a cartoon way to distract from what was really happening. And when we looked into it, we discovered there were all sorts of versions of him beforehand. Paul Bunyan, as we know him, is really an amalgamation of these legends.

What Laughedhead added seems to have been mostly naming the blue ox Babe and creating the way Paul Bunyan is visually represented. As a cartoonist, what do you think of Laughedhead as a visual artist, and how did you develop the look of the character for your own book?

NVS: Laughedhead was a good cartoonist! He had a style that probably would serve him well if he were around today. The scale of Paul Bunyan changes depending on what the story is. Sometimes he’s just above the tree line, sometimes he’s so big that his hand falls down on the ground and that forms the Finger Lakes! He really is a figure for whatever you need to get across. I wanted him to be an idealized version of [the book’s depiction of] Laughedhead—he’s big and muscular, whereas Laughedhead is short and chubby.

What was the process of developing the book like?

NVS: It was really difficult. I think I did four different scripts with thumbnails—I basically drew the book four times. But I was working with Françoise Mouly, who’s one of the greatest editors of all time, and it was such a good learning experience for me. For me, [Mouly’s 1980-1991 comics magazine] RAW is the top of the mountain, so working with Françoise was like a Marvel fanboy working with Stan Lee. She’d take what I did and dissect it—“this is not necessary, let’s go in a different direction here”—and then I’d redraw it based on her edits, and then she’d tighten it up even more. It was a lot of editing, but I’m really proud of it.

How did the additional material in the book come together?

NVS: We had to bring in other people who could give it context that enriches it. They were able to really complete the story and fill in its gaps. American legends are a really important part of America, but we need context for them so people can understand what they’re based on, or what they’re reflecting, instead of just throwing them out. That was an important part of this book: We keep Paul Bunyan, but we let the next generation understand exactly what Paul Bunyan is in a way that my generation didn’t know. We just had the Disney cartoon.

Marlena, how did you decide on your contributions to the book—your map of Dakota landmarks and stories about Little People?

MM: I’ve been creating those land maps to help people see Dakota history here in Minnesota. When some places do land acknowledgements, they like to use my maps—it lets people see a story of the land without even needing to be told a lot about it. Growing up, I always heard Native stories of the Little People, and I thought people should hear the kind of stories that are kind of erased by this other icon. When people see the Paul Bunyan stories along with Native stories, it helps them to build an understanding.

You also have a publishing company of your own, Wíyouŋkihipi Productions.

MM: Our first books are going to the printers in the next couple of weeks. They’re a way for Dakota people to tell our stories, and illustrate our stories, without needing non-Native publishers telling us what they think our culture should be about. I think it’s about time people hear it from us directly. The name Wíyouŋkihipi, in Dakota, translates to “we are capable, we will achieve this, we’ll win this.” We were originally going to publish the first books in fall 2021, but I wanted to schedule them so that people would actually travel and come to events indoors. We believe in something called “Indian time”—things happen when they’re meant to happen and not on our human schedule.

Douglas Wolk is the author of All of the Marvels: A Journey to the Ends of the Biggest Story Ever Told. Paul Bunyan: The Invention of an American Legend received a starred review in the June 15, 2023, issue.
**THE SPIRIT GLASS**

Chokshi, Roshani

Rick Riordan Presents/Disney (320 pp.)
$16.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781368093392

An open heart leads a girl to what she needs in this page-turner embedded in Filipino mythology.

Corazon Lopez comes from a family of babaylans, mortals “who guarded the boundaries between the human world and the realm of spirits.” She must wait until her 12th birthday for her powerful magic to awaken so she can be trained by her aunt Tina. Corazon is especially eager to develop the ability to bring her deceased parents back to life instead of just having weekly dinners with their ghosts. Despite the presence of Saso, her anito or spirit companion who takes the form of a small lizard, and being cared for by Tina’s sentient home, Corazon feels lonely. Things take a turn for the worse when Corazon encounters Flordeliza, a vengeful ghost who steals her soul key, a token of powerful magic gifted to her by her mother that is essential to bringing her parents back. Soon the Library of Mirrors that contains portals to the spirit realms shows warning signs of an imbalance between worlds. Corazon, Saso, and their new ghost friend, Leo, must attempt to surmount daunting obstacles before it’s too late in Chokshi’s action-packed quest that balances tragedy and grief with comical antics. Family secrets, folktales, and the cultural diversity of the Philippines add interest to this story that ends on a hopeful note.

A thrilling tale brimming with magic and love. (author’s note, glossary) (Adventure. 9-12)

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**THE OCTOBER WITCHES**

Claessen, Jennifer

Simon & Schuster (336 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781665940528

Two witch covens vie for power, one hoping to take it all and the other to preserve it.

Told in the first person, present tense by 12-year-old Clem, youngest member of the Merlyn coven, this story loosely recasts the Morgana-Merlin struggle from Arthurian legend. Although they’re related, for centuries the Morgan and Merlyn covens have stayed away from each other, only meeting at midnight each Oct. 1 to access magic from the stars—magic that is available to them only for that month. The covens are different—the Morgans are power hungry while the boisterous Merlyns are home centered. The plot unfolds as a grab bag of ideas is thrown together without coming together to form a cohesive whole. The Merlyns grow a giant pumpkin in the hope of being able to harvest and store their magic after October ends; this upsets the Morgans, leading to a battle. Arthurian legend is revisited via a sword and a cave; a segue compares receiving new magic to the menstrual cycle but is not developed. And the too-much-power-is-bad theme doesn’t lead to fresh insights. The characters feel one-dimensional, with singular defining characteristics hammered home repetitively and without nuance, as with Aunt Prudie’s constantly shouting sentence fragments and Aunt Connie’s continual reminders that time is running out.

Characters read white.

A mishmash of half-developed ideas. (Fantasy. 8-12)

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**THE MEMORY THIEVES**

Clayton, Dhonielle

Illus. by Khadijah Khatib
Henry Holt (416 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781250174970
Series: The Conjureverse, 2

A 12-year-old uses history to prove that her people have always belonged in their magical world.

Ella Durand, a Black girl from New Orleans, and her friends Brigit and Jason return to the Arcanum Training Institute for Marvelous and Uncanny Endeavors with some experience under their belts but even more questions than when they started last year. Ella’s fame among Merrarians has skyrocketed ever since she helped stop the diabolical scheme of the Ace of Anarchy, Gia Trivelino. But Gia is not as down for the count as Ella and most Marvellians would hope—and she has decided that Ella owes her a debt that must be paid. On top of this threat, Masterji Thakur, Ella’s mentor, gave her blueprints showing that Conjurers have long been involved with the school. Ella insists on acquiring solid proof and revealing this truth that the media seems intent on suppressing. But with increased schoolwork, a mystery illness affecting the student body, and secrets she uncovers, Ella faces extra obstacles.

Clayton continues building a world that is intricate, captivating, and sure to satisfy. This novel brings additional cultural diversity to the story as Ella explores her school and becomes involved with more members of the multidimensional cast of characters. References to events from the first book make this accessible to new fans, but readers are best served by having read The Marvellers (2022).

A wonderfully well-developed sequel. (list of Paragons) (Fantasy. 8-12)
“An elegant and inspired fairy tale that feels both familiar and freshly penned.”

**THREE TASKS FOR A DRAGON**

**LOUD AND PROUD**
The Life of Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm
Cline-Ransome, Lesa
Illus. by Kaylani Juanita
Paula Wiseman/Simon & Schuster
(48 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781536229998

A tribute to the first Black woman to serve in Congress.

Brushing most of the biographical specifics into a closing timeline titled “The Chisholm Trail,” Cline-Ransome focuses on her subject’s pugnaciousness—following Shirley Chisholm from a child who was “always small, but she talked big, walked tall, and told just about everyone what to do” through the halls of state and then national government (“There may be some fireworks”) and her “Unbought and Unbossed” run for presidential candidate to retirement from Congress in 1983. Juanita punctuates scenes of Chisholm standing slender and confident in outsized eyeglasses and a crown of lacquered black hair before scowling (white male) opponents and racially diverse cheering crowds amid full-page emblematic outbursts—“What are you doing running for office?” “What does your husband think of all this?” “If you can’t support me, if you can’t endorse me, GET OUT OF MY WAY.” A closing gallery of political successors of color, from Barbara Jordan through Kamala Harris and Ilhan Omar, establishes her legacy, but she remains here no more than a distant, iconic figure. Readers may feel spoiled for choice, as this joins a recent gush of picture-book profiles, at least some of which offer warmer, more nuanced views of Chisholm as a person as well as a role model. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

Readable but limited and likely to be lost in the shuffle.

(author’s note, photo) (Picture-book biography, 6-8)

**THREE TASKS FOR A DRAGON**

Colfer, Eoin
Illus. by P.J. Lynch
Candlewick (112 pp.)
$19.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
9781536229998

A peaceful prince, an aging dragon, and a mysterious maiden forge a unique alliance.

Prince Lir does not possess the power to summon the wolfhounds and is thus unworthy to govern his kingdom. So begins a story of gifts discovered in struggle and friendship forged in adversity. Lir’s stepbrother, Delbayne, who has sinister motives, sends him to fight a dragon, anticipating his demise. Lir is an unlikely questing knight, a bookish young man interested in natural sciences and happy to serve his kingdom humbly in the royal library. Arriving at the dragon’s secluded island, he finds a lethargic beast incapable of flying or breathing fire and drunk on cherry wine made from berries stomped by Cethlenn, a servant girl with a hazy past in the palace kitchens. Adhering to tradition, Lir proposes to perform three tasks to free Cethlenn. Instead of challenging the dragon, Lir endeavors, rather radically, to restore him to health using his scientific skill. Simultaneously, the omniscient narrator slowly unravels Delbayne’s plans for violent attack, which build to an epic, cinematically dramatic battle whose outcome will depend upon the island trio’s nascent trust in one another. Colfer draws out details of kingdom-building in lyrical language while interweaving his characters’ relatable idiosyncrasies, motives, and griefs. Lynch’s sandy orange and misty blue hued watercolor illustrations, replete with detailed dragon profiles and majestic wolfhounds, seamlessly frame the story and bring Colfer’s mostly white-presenting characters fully to life.

An elegant and inspired fairy tale that feels both familiar and freshly penned. *(Fantasy, 8-14)*

**COLONIZATION AND THE WAMPANOAG STORY**

Coombs, Linda
Crown (272 pp.)
$8.99 paper | $12.99 PLB | Sept. 12, 2023
9780593480441 PLB
Series: Race to the Truth

An Indigenous perspective on the impact of European settlement.

Coombs (Aquinnah Wampanoag) uses two distinct voices to share information. The alternating chapters prefaced with “When Life Was Our Own” demonstrate the intergenerational sharing of knowledge about Wampanoag life based on oral traditions and research. Within these narratives, she teaches specific lessons: For example, readers learn how cedar was harvested with respect, “in a way that encouraged the growth of new saplings.” Later, they hear about how a sachem, or tribal leader, would resolve conflicts through a football game in order to avoid fighting. The voice of the remaining chapters “is inclusive of all tribal nations in southern New England,” covering history from the 1400s to the present. These chapters define and explore racism and provide facts about the devastating effects of the Europeans’ presence. Explorers’ 1524 arrival in present-day Rhode Island was followed by the Great Dying that wiped out entire Indigenous villages between 1616 and 1618. Europeans then proceeded to extract profits from natural resources, in contrast to Indigenous beliefs that “only the Creator who made the land could own it.” The epilogue describes the situation for Wampanoag people and other southern New England tribes in their territories today: Text boxes labeled “Let’s Think About This” pose critical thinking questions about the communities’ opposing viewpoints and engage readers. Black-and-white photos and artwork support the text. Together, the two intertwined narratives form a cohesive, engaging whole.

A poignant and powerful look at identity, change, and resilience. *(bibliography, resources, image credits)* *(Nonfiction, 9-14)*
“No need to visit a museum to find an exhibit of best friendship; see it on display right here.”

CORNBREAD & POPPY AT THE MUSEUM

Two witches, short, smiling, light-skinned Miss Hildy, who wears a purple dress, and Miss Hattie, a tall, traditional-looking witch, with a green face and long nose, sporting a black outfit and crooked pointy hat, give strict instructions to Styx, a purple cat, and Scones, a large gingery-looking dog, before leaving the house: “Don’t go touching any of that stuff.” They mean “creepy crystal balls,” “flying brooms,” and “boiling cauldrons and time-twisty clocks.” Do the pets heed these words? Scones immediately picks up an unmentioned “stick” and proceeds to say some magic words like “KA-ZING!” and “KA-ZAP!” As Styx points out that the stick is a wand, Scones transforms the cat into a giraffe. Soon the two are fighting over the stick/wand…and eventually picks up an unmentioned “stick” and proceeds to say some magic words like “KA-ZING!” and “KA-ZAP!” As Styx points out that the stick is a wand, Scones transforms the cat into a giraffe. Soon the two are fighting over the stick/wand…and eventually the wand breaks with a giant “POP!” The two pets then begin to worry and must think of a solution before their witchy owners return. The Seussian situation will amuse young readers while they enjoy the cartoony panels. The instructions are consulted! Poppy's relationship to the founder's family is asserted! Sadly, Cornbread's ignored, his tears causing him to collide with a priceless exhibit. In the end, Poppy makes things right for Cornbread with the donation of a family heirloom. The friends' charming camaraderie shines in this sweet, gently humorous early reader, but some plot details probably won't resonate with readers if they've never visited a museum. The expression *founder's gala* and the details of Poppy's somewhat complicated ancestry may go over younger audiences' heads. However, Cordell's witty, loose pen-and-ink-and-watercolor illustrations are adorable and capture the protagonists' expressiveness perfectly.

No need to visit a museum to find an exhibit of best friendship; see it on display right here. (Early reader. 5-8)

STYX AND SCONES IN THE STICKY WAND

Ready-To-Read Graphics

Level 2

Cooper, Jay

Simon Spotlight (64 pp.)

$17.99 | June 27, 2023

9781665935371

Series: Ready-To-Read Graphics

Pets and witches—two perennial favorites—star in this graphic novel for younger readers.

Two witches, short, smiling, light-skinned Miss Hildy, who wears a purple dress, and Miss Hattie, a tall, traditional-looking witch, with a green face and long nose, sporting a black outfit and crooked pointy hat, give strict instructions to Styx, a purple cat, and Scones, a large gingery-looking dog, before leaving the house: “Don’t go touching any of that stuff.” They mean “creepy crystal balls,” “flying brooms,” and “boiling cauldrons and time-twisty clocks.” Do the pets heed these words? Scones immediately picks up an unmentioned “stick” and proceeds to say some magic words like “KA-ZING!” and “KA-ZAP!” As Styx points out that the stick is a wand, Scones transforms the cat into a giraffe. Soon the two are fighting over the stick/wand…and eventually the wand breaks with a giant “POP!”

The two pets then begin to worry and must think of a solution before their witchy owners return. The Seussian situation will amuse young readers while they enjoy the cartoony panels. The instructions about reading the book at the very beginning are a bit confusing, but kids will figure it out.

Appealing animal interaction with some magic thrown in. (Graphic fiction. 6-8)

CORNBREAD & POPPY AT THE MUSEUM

Cordell, Matthew

Little, Brown (80 pp.)

$15.99 | Sept. 26, 2023

9780316508476

Series: Cornbread and Poppy, 3

The mouse BFFs are back.

After trekking a mountain in *Cornbread & Poppy* (2022) and riding roller coasters in *Cornbread & Poppy at the Carnival* (2022), the murine buddies engage in more low-key pursuits. Cornbread is invited to the Founder's Gala at the Moonville Museum, where a “surprise new exhibit will be revealed.” Guess who's his plus-one? When Cornbread arrives at Poppy's, she explains she's uninterested, and only when Cornbread reluctantly promises outdoorsy Poppy he'll go camping with her does she relent. Cornbread guides underwhelmed Poppy around. Then the new exhibit is unveiled: the personal effects of the museum's founder, including her never-before-seen portrait. Everyone notices Poppy's resemblance to the portrait! Town records are consulted! Poppy's relationship to the founder's family is asserted! Sadly, Cornbread's ignored, his tears causing him to collide with a priceless exhibit. In the end, Poppy makes things right for Cornbread with the donation of a family heirloom. The friends' charming camaraderie shines in this sweet, gently humorous early reader, but some plot details probably won't resonate with readers if they've never visited a museum. The expression *founder's gala* and the details of Poppy's somewhat complicated ancestry may go over younger audiences' heads. However, Cordell's witty, loose pen-and-ink-and-watercolor illustrations are adorable and capture the protagonists' expressiveness perfectly.

No need to visit a museum to find an exhibit of best friendship; see it on display right here. (Early reader. 5-8)

WHICH WAY TO ANYWHERE

Cowell, Cressida

Little, Brown (336 pp.)

$17.99 | Sept. 19, 2023

9780316536394

Series: Which Way to Anywhere, 1

Stepsiblings run into world-hopping, magical trouble in this series opener from *How To Train Your Dragon* author Cowell.

After an in medias res opening teasing dangers about an alien world, the narration flashes back to where it began for two sets of siblings in a blended family. K2 and Izzabird O’Hero only agree with Theo and Mabel Smith, their stepsiblings, on two things—their love for shared half siblings, baby Annipeck and their wish to unblend their blended family. Theo's convinced the O'Herons are witches; Izzabird wishes her relatives would hurry up and teach her their secret Magic. But secrecy is thrown out the window by the arrival of an Otherworlder in the family washing machine—bounty hunter Horizabel Delft. There's also a robot assassin and a dastardly pirate. They're searching for a child with the gift of making Alternative Atlases that show passages between worlds. The child in question? The least stereotypically heroic O'Hero, cautious bully-magnet K2, who has dyslexia and amblyopia. To protect their family, the kids end up venturing to a human-hating world where they must make amends for the O’Herons' mixed legacies and learn what it means to be a family. Cowell throws all sorts of fantastical obstacles in the kids' ways, using action to add tension to the humorous narration that is enhanced by her frequent illustrations. The Smiths are depicted with dark skin and curly hair, and the O’Hero children are pale and freckled.

Wild worldbuilding and the colorful cast will delight. (Fantasy. 8-12)
IT FOUND US
Currie, Lindsay
Sourcebooks Young Readers (288 pp.)
$16.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
978-1728259499

A 12-year-old girl pits her detective skills against a ghost to find a missing boy.

Despite her parents’ warnings against getting involved in the neighbors’ business and refusal to let her start a mystery-themed podcast, Hazel, who is cued white, can’t quell her passion for sleuthing. When Dennison, her older brother, sneaks out to play hide-and-seek in the cemetery, Hazel secretly follows. There, she hears chilling screams and howling—and is horrified when Den’s friend Everett disappears. The police are called, volunteers form a search party, and Hazel begins to investigate herself, leading her and Den to encounter a terrifying ghost with its mouth sewn shut. Who this ghost is and what drives its actions become the focus of Hazel’s investigation. An occasionally flippant tone undercuts genuinely creepy moments, while the mystery elements inconsistently mesh with the paranormal aspects to produce unfounded assumptions about the haunting. Excessive repetition comes across as not trusting readers’ abilities and insights. Hazel’s superior sleuthing abilities feel unsubstantiated when internet searches that should have occurred earlier in the story immediately yield vital clues late in the novel, and another character presents facts about the cemetery that most people in the community would know. The author’s note describes the real historical events behind the haunting.

A muddled mystery combined with horror elements. (Paranormal. 9-13)

HARLEM AT FOUR
Datcher, Michael
Illus. by Frank Morrison
Random House Studio (48 pp.)
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Sept. 19, 2023
978-0593429334
978-0593429341 PLB

An ode to two Harlems.

Datcher attempts to celebrate both the year his daughter Harlem turned 4 and “the magical fourth year of the 1900s,” when Philip A. Payton Jr. founded the Afro-American Realty Company—an act that would make housing more readily available to African Americans moving north during the Great Migration. In Part 1, a Black father narrates, offering a poetic tribute to his confident, creative daughter, Harlem. As the two stroll through the neighborhood she was named for, the narrator mentions historical events and works of art such as John Coltrane’s album A Love Supreme. Father and daughter never appear in Part 2 as readers learn more about Payton and the history of Harlem. While all readers, regardless of their knowledge of Harlem, will be able to enjoy Morrison’s lively, graffiti-inspired illustrations, the same cannot be said of Datcher’s text, which tries to cover too much ground and uses language and phrasing that most children won’t understand. A reference to how the “government sought to cage Black Panther Afeni Shakur” doesn’t elaborate on who Shakur was and will leave young readers confused, as will the highly academic backmatter that expands on the topics mentioned in the text. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Despite vibrant visuals, this tale fails to capture the essence of either its child protagonist or its rich urban setting. (Historical notes, bibliography) (Picture book. 8-12)

ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD
Desnitskaya, Anna
Trans. by Lena Traer
Eerdmans (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
978-0802850128

Series: Stories From Latin America

Finding a friend might be easier than it seems.

Vera lives in Russia, on the eastern coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula; Lucas lives in a small town on the coast of Chile. They reside on opposite edges of the world, in desolate locations by the Pacific Ocean; both long for a friend with whom they can share their days. This uniquely designed work, translated from Russian, allows readers to choose which character’s life to explore first. They can follow Vera on a typical day of playing with Mukha the dog and making a sekretik, a “little secret treasure,” or they can flip the book over to accompany Lucas on a day playing soccer and reading. A yellow line drawing of the friend whom each hopes for accompanies both children throughout the rich, stylized illustrations. For both, the day culminates in a trip to the beach, where they stand at the shore with a flashlight and transmit a greeting in Morse code, hoping to befriend someone beyond the edge of the world. Despite the physical impossibility of their messages reaching anyone, they each receive a response. The book is formatted so that Vera’s and Lucas’ flashlight messages make up the hinge of the book, linking the two stories and forming the beating heart of this sweet, whimsical tale of loneliness and connection against the odds. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Will spark joy and inspire. (International Morse code alphabet) (Picture book. 7-11)
THE LOST KING
Dickson, Benjamin
Illus. by Rachael Smith
Papercutz (112 pp.)
$14.99 | Aug. 22, 2023
9781545809839
Series: The Queen's Favorite Witch, 2

A young witch comes into her own. Dickson knows the appeal of the Elizabethan age as a mystery setting, and his sequel to The Queen's Favorite Witch (2021) is rife with period superstitions and political intrigue. Opening in 1564, this graphic novel finds Daisy, the queen's royal witch, attending to Elizabeth I. The queen's advisers are eager for her to marry, and despite Elizabeth's determination to remain single, a visit from the king of Spain is arranged. When Daisy explores an enchanted palace in search of answers about strange nightmares, she is taken prisoner by the nefarious Massingbyrde. Simon the groom; Daisy's familiar, a rat named Nathaniel; and several talking spiders rescue Daisy, but it turns out Massingbyrde has also captured King Philip of Spain. Though a bit dismayed that she needed to rely on the others, Daisy bravely returns to free the lost king. Simple, flat backgrounds focus attention on the considerable action. Alas, costume authenticity is poor; some historical details are wrong; and it's hard to believe that Daisy didn't know of Anne Boleyn's execution. But that will matter little to many readers. And, adding a deeper dimension, Elizabeth offers Daisy advice on personal growth and the universality of imposter syndrome. Daisy, Simon, and most of the cast are light-skinned, though people of color are also depicted.

Combines chills, thrills, and life lessons. (Biographical info on Elizabeth I) (Graphic fiction. 7-12)

SUSIE KING TAYLOR
Nurse, Teacher & Freedom Fighter
Dunbar, Erica Armstrong & Candace Buford
Aladdin (256 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781665919944

A work of historical fiction inspired by—and presented alongside—a Black woman's firsthand account of her experiences as a Civil War nurse. The story opens in Savannah, Georgia, where Susie Baker lives with her grandmother Dolly, who was born enslaved but now manages her own laundry business. Susie's mother is enslaved on the Grest Farm, but Dolly persuaded Mr. Grest to let Susie and two younger siblings live in the city with her. Susie dreams of freedom and secretly attends a school run by a free Black woman; later she's tutored by Mrs. Beasley, who teaches her about history, civics, and current events, including the debate over abolition. After Susie and her siblings are sent back to the Grest plantation, her uncle and his family decide to run away to join the Union Army. Susie, now 14, joins them. She works with the Union Army, organizing a laundry business and school and becoming one of the first Black nurses. An epilogue touches upon Susie's life after the war, including her move to Boston and her work as an advocate for Black children's education. The confident voice of the first-person narration brings history to life in a thrilling way and will resonate with readers. Taylor's original memoir, published in 1902, is included in full, allowing readers to juxtapose the two texts.

A remarkable true story about harnessing one's inherent dignity in a hostile world. (authors' note, list of troops, list of battles) (Historical fiction/memoir hybrid. 11-16)
“A deeply imaginative journey that puts the ‘cat’ in cathartic.”

NIMBUS

COWGIRLS & DINOSAURS
Big Trouble in Little Spittle
Ebrey, Lucie
Colors by Boya Sun
Razorbill/Penguin (288 pp.)
$22.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
978039315145

Two unlikely girls come together to save their small town from a vengeful bandit.

In a world where dinosaurs and people coexist, the small desert town of Little Spittle is home to Clementine and her sheriff father, who read Black. They are tasked with keeping the good townsfolk safe from harm, including the likes of bandits. Clementine, resourceful and charismatic, nevertheless struggles with imposter syndrome and has difficulty fulfilling her duties as deputy. Brash Abigail, who has tan skin and black hair and eyes, dreams of being appointed deputy and receiving praise for saving everyone from ruin; she is the “cloaked vigilante” known as the Sarsaparilla Kid. However, Abigail and Rootbeer, her trusted dinosaur steed, can’t seem to find a welcome in the many towns they’ve visited. Clementine and Abigail are thrust together when the Scugg brothers and their sister, the Bandit Queen, who appear white, plot to steal the “cloaked vigilante” known as the Sarsaparilla Kid. However, Abigail and Rootbeer, her trusted dinosaur steed, can’t seem to find a welcome in the many towns they’ve visited. Clementine and Abigail are thrust together when the witches read white.

A heartfelt story of self-acceptance wrapped in a side-splitting adventure. (Graphic adventure. 8-12)

NIMBUS
Eldredge, Jan
Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins (336 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780062680372

A loyal black kitten’s boy is under supernatural attack.

Eleven-month-old Nimbus loves Fletcher, the boy who nursed her back to health following life-threatening injuries. When Fletcher becomes curious about a strange jar and opens it, releasing a terrible goblin, loyal Nim protects Fletcher, taking heavy damage in the process. But Fletcher’s aunt, who’s caring for him over spring break, believes Nim attacked Fletcher and dumps her far from home. Rhett, a stylish rat with star quality, befriends injured Nim and leads her to a witch’s house. While the witch cares for Nim, the witch’s cats (maternal Fern, bookish Rochester, standoffish Bianca, and openly hostile Abraxas) teach Nim important cat skills. She also discovers she has a supernatural ability: In destroying one eye of the nightmare demon in the fight to protect Fletcher, Nim gained its “dream sight.” But she also learns it might come back for Fletcher, who no longer has Nim to protect him, posing a time-sensitive, high-stakes threat. Even though the witch’s home is nice and magic itself seems to be telling her to stay put, Nim wants to find a way back to Fletcher. As a hero, Nimbus is as gritty and determined as she is adorable. Tear-jerking moments explore pet abandonment—readers may want their own pets on hand to hug—all the way through the magical, action-packed finale. Fletcher and the witch read white.

A deeply imaginative journey that puts the “cat” in cathartic. (Fantasy. 8-12)

KICKS IN THE SKY
Esperanza, C.G.
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780062976239

Ever wonder how pairs of shoes hanging on power lines got there? This zany, poetic urban tale offers many answers, although “only birds knew” for sure. Neighbors have many theories: The shoes belonged to the deceased whose loved ones hung them there; aliens threw them onto the wires; the shoes indicate the meeting places of goblins and goons. A crew of motorcyclists disturb the pigeons, which flutter around and knock several sneakers onto the street. Danny dons a pair, and though he doesn’t know how to dance, somehow he shuffles all over town; Kris’ power-line kicks give her superhuman running, jumping, and dunking skills; and when Lili finds a pair too big for her feet, she wears one shoe like a helmet and can suddenly perform a host of fancy skateboard tricks. A boy known as pigeon-coop kid sprinkles breadcrumbs from his roof, prompting the birds to knock more shoes down, which gives many more neighborhood children the chance to try out these unusual sneakers. Neon pinks, yellows, oranges, and purples attract the kids to the shoes and draw readers into this fast-paced, entertaining story. The wildly energetic, psychedelic-hued illustrations bring these city scenes to life, and innovative perspectives and angles keep readers guessing what amazing abilities the shoes will bestow next. Most characters are Black or brown. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A strikingly original pourquoi tale in which tennis shoes make life much more interesting. (Picture book. 4-8)
“Is it a real palace?” Liddy wonders. When a heavenly aroma wafts through her bedroom door, she follows it to a grand palace, where two giant chefs are making delectable dim sum. Liddy is tiny in comparison, and when she falls into a bowl of dumpling filling, she is scooped up, folded into a bun, and served to the gigantic Empress herself (cued Asian, like the chefs) in a surreal twist of fate. “STOP! Don’t eat me!” The Empress instead invites Liddy to join her in a meal. Finally, Liddy awakens in her own bed, “hungry for more dim sum.” Liddy’s family then visits the real Dim Sum Palace, which isn’t “a palace at all” and has no Empress, but the food is even more satisfying. Saturated teal, blue, and salmon dominate in Fang’s enticing graphite and digital artwork. Human forms are plump, and both the theme and look are reminiscent of Maurice Sendak’s *In the Night Kitchen*. The spread of the real Dim Sum Palace’s bright orange interior featuring tables full of diverse diners is a delightful touch. Endpapers highlight different types of dim sum. (This book was reviewed digitally)

A real (delicious) trip. (Picture book. 4–7)

SEEK & FIND PICTURE DICTIONARY

Over 500 Pictures To Seek and Find and Over 1,000 Words To Learn!

*Flowerpot Press*  
Illus. by Juan Sebastián Amadeo  
Flowerpot Press (112 pp.)  
$15.99 | Sept. 5, 2023  
9781487277666  
Series: Seek & Find

On a dozen spreads, jam-packed scenes depict words all beginning with the same letter.

Subsequent pages of clear print, with some pictures, provide parts of speech, simple pronunciation, and very brief definitions for most of the items and activities depicted. Despite the usually serviceable definitions, this book has several shortcomings as a dictionary. The target reader’s age is unclear: The word *chord*, as in both geometry and music, but a clam is a “shelled creature” rather than a “mollusk” (though *mollusk* appears elsewhere, as do *vertebrates* and *invertebrate*). The definitions of *even* and *odd* don’t mention numbers. The meaning for *eclipse* describes only a lunar eclipse. The primary definition of *continue* is to prolong, without interruption, not, as here, “to go on after something has stopped.” *Fre* is labeled as both adjective and verb, but only the adjective meanings are given. And more. But brightly colored mosaiclike illustrations fit an astounding number of people, things, and amusing actions into one compact space: an airport terminal, a street, a classroom, a seaside, a park, a castle, a kitchen, a store, etc. Humans of various skin tones, and other creatures, busy themselves in these entertaining scenes. (This book was reviewed digitally)

Despite some missteps, sharp-eyed readers will find absorbing word-recall practice here. (Informational picture book. 5–7)

**WHEN THE FOG ROLLS IN**

*Fong, Pam*  
Greenwillow Books (32 pp.)  
$19.99 | Oct. 10, 2023  
9780063136540

Unexpectedly separated from its colony, a puffin finds itself alone and directionless as a dense fog rolls in. Even mundane things seem frightening in the fog. As the puffin encounters obstacles both real and imagined, it nevertheless perseveres until it eventually finds its way back to safety and familiarity. This sparsely worded, slightly didactic story does not have a traditional narrative arc; instead, the narrator directly addresses readers, offering life lessons about persisting in the face of challenges: “If you want to escape the fog, the best way to go is directly through it.” While this creates a bit of distance from the protagonist, young readers will still be able to empathize with the puffin’s vulnerable condition. Given the foggy setting, the palette is necessarily muted, but despite the general haziness, there are still discoveries to be made for shrewd viewers, like realizing that what looks like a menacing creature is actually a harmless tree. Though the idea of fog as a metaphor for life’s uncertainties might go over the heads of younger readers, the book provides an effective jumping-off point for discussions about fear, anxiety, and obstacles. (This book was reviewed digitally)

A simple but poignant tale about navigating difficulties with courage and patience. (Picture book. 3–6)

**ALL THE SMALL WONDERFUL THINGS**

*Foster, Kate*  
Candlewick (240 pp.)  
$17.99 | Sept. 26, 2023  
9781536225808

Alex is a “good boy.” He wants to train his cockapoo, Kevin; finish Map Five in
The Walking School Bus
Friedland, Aaron & Ndileka Mandela
Illus. by Andrew Jackson Obol
Greystone Kids (48 pp.)
$18.95 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781771644693

Shaka is determined to find a safe way to get to school for all the kids in his Xhosa community.

Shaka and his little sister, Nandi, were lucky that their father could walk them to school every day, but unfortunately, a work opportunity in a mine far away means their dad will be unavailable for the foreseeable future. The danger of going alone is illustrated by shadowy figures hiding beneath a key bridge along their path, but co-author Friedland’s note and an afterword from Julian Lennon, founder of the White Feather Foundation, emphasize serious unspoken threats faced by children, “girls in particular,” throughout the world from India to Uganda. Importantly, Shaka and Nandi’s rural South African village is depicted as brightly communal and as loving as the supportive Mama who assures the brainstorming siblings that they “will find another way.” A toy school bus they find one day offers 11-year-old in a world full of loud nonautistic people who have bizarre ideas about what’s rude. Alex can recognize when one of his classmates is uninterested in his OrbsWorld stories, but his autism classes never taught him how to make them be interested—so were they really that helpful? Some classmates are nice and seem to like him, so maybe they’ll help with his friendship plan. Everything builds up to a well-earned, deeply satisfying conclusion. This charming, empathetic story centers the engaging voice of a boy who has a strong set of strategies for doing his best.

Dogs and friends are terrific helpers in a confusing, neurotypical world. (Fiction. 8-11)

Match Point!
Gallegos, Maddie
First Second (236 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
9781250784148

A girl struggles with trying to make her father feel proud of her.

Eighth grader Rosie Vo has a lot on her plate when it comes to living up to her dad’s winning racquetball legacy. Despite her dislike of the sport, her father pushes her to play—he believes she isn’t motivated to do anything else, and anyway, he’s sure she will enjoy it if only she improves. The stakes are extra high with the annual tournament looming. Rosie, who is cued Asian, feels she cannot do anything well enough to satisfy her father’s expectations. After meeting and forming a fast friendship with racquetball enthusiast Blair, who just moved to town and reads Black, Rosie hatches a plan that she thinks will give both her and her father what they want. But after spending more time with Blair and her family, Rosie sees differences in the two families’ relationship styles that become a point of contention in their friendship. Blair’s parents are more supportive and less critical; Rosie even has fun playing racquetball with them. As Rosie works to overcome her intensely painful feelings, she initially pushes Blair away and finally opens up to her father. The bright, expressive illustrations burst from the pages, showing the intensity of both game play and interpersonal dynamics through the effective use of color and the characters’ exaggerated facial expressions.

A heartwarming sports story showing a journey of personal growth. (Graphic fiction. 10-14)

Thank a Farmer
Gianferrari, Maria
Illus. by Monica Mikai
Norton Young Readers (48 pp.)
$18.95 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781324035796

From produce and bread to clothing and sweets, the favorite items that farmers bring to tables and homes.

Spot art of diverse families eating table-ready foods are combined with large-scale scenes of farms with people, machinery; and animals producing foods like wheat to make bread, milk for cereal, and fruits and vegetables—an effective juxtaposition of the consumers and producers of ingredients and products people use daily. Peanut butter, rice, wool sweaters and socks, and maple syrup are all items for which readers are encouraged to “thank a farmer.” Farmers, in turn, are thankful for the natural forces and creatures that make their farms work, from soil and sun to bees and trees. The text alternates between a simple sentence indicating an item to thank a farmer for (“berries and cherries in your bowl”) and a lyrical description of the work that goes into that particular item (“Pinch. / Pluck. / Pull. /
/ Fill the punnet /). Mikai’s warm, textured art is at its strongest here, complementing the more leisurely text with fully detailed scenes that give a strong sense of the realities of labor and the interconnectedness of people at different points in the food production chain. A full spread of backmatter offers more information about the farming methods featured in the book. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A valuable look at the roles farmers play in sustaining the lifestyles people enjoy. (further reading, further viewing, websites) (Informational picture book. 4-9)

WE COULD FLY
Giddens, Rhiannon
Illus. by Briana Mukodiri Uchendu
Candlewick (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Nov 7, 2023
9781536222548

A Black mother-daughter pair connect to their ancestral stories in this picture-book rendering of a song by folk musician Giddens. The two are sitting outside near a wood when the child asks about a sparrow she sees. Why can the sparrow fly away when the girl cannot? Her mother tells her that her Granny Liza used to fly, connected as she was to both the ancestors, who could fly, and to her grandchild, in whom she saw “the old-time ways.” As the pair share the old stories and their own links to their people, the child feels the time has come, and together they take flight, searching for the promised land. The spare, beautiful verses of this powerful song are well suited to a picture book and well laid out among stirring spreads of artwork in Uchendu’s distinctive textured style highlighting vast landscapes, deep skies of shadowy silhouettes. Drawing inspiration from Virginia Lee Hamilton and Leo and Diane Dillon’s classic folktale collection The People Could Fly (1985), this work wraps readers in a warm embrace. Perfect for bedtime, naptime, storytime, or sharing in schools, this magical picture book will have readers entranced. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Sublime. (author’s and illustrator’s notes) (Picture book. 3-9)

DESSERT QUEEN
Gopal, Jyoti Rajan
Illus. by Scabhu Kohli
Levine Querido (56 pp.)
$18.99 | Oct 3, 2023
9781460414200

A young boy thrust into the role of breadwinner turns to his love of dance. Though Harish is entranced by the music and dance of his native Rajasthan, he is careful not to show how they affect him. Only when playing the Hindu god Krishna in a school play does he embrace the “flowing fabric / and dazzling jewels” that leave him feeling “shiny and / glittery and / NEW.” When he and his sisters are orphaned, he performs in drag to make ends meet. His heart soars under the cover of night but is broken by the taunts he faces by day, living in a society with strict gender norms. This double life weighs on him, but his talent also earns him respect and praise. Based on the real-life story of drag performer Queen Harish (1979-2019), the narrative traces his pain and uncertainty and his joys and triumphs. Vibrant, kaleidoscopic illustrations inspired by the desert environs and the textiles, architecture, and artwork of the city of Jaisalmer capture the joyful dancer’s whirling and swirling movements as he embodies another form: “Not / Boy OR girl. / Man OR woman. / But / fluid / flowing / like a dance / in between / and all around.” Lyrical poetry mirrors the sounds and beats of the local folk music and complements the dreamlike visuals. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Evocative and electrifying. (author’s and illustrator’s notes, more information on Queen Harish) (Picture-book biography. 4-8)

10 DOGS
Gravett, Emily
Boxer Books (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781914912597

It’s not hard to guess what will happen to unattended sausages with dogs around….

Ten pooches of various sizes and species stare longingly at 10 sausages up on the table. One big dog jumps onto the table and sets the rumpus in motion: “1 dog with all the sausages.” “9 dogs with none.” The table’s knocked over, and two dogs play tug of sausage: “2 dogs each with half of them.” “8 dogs wanting some.” The tussle continues, and three dogs end up with most of the sausages, while the other seven have only three. What follows is sausage guarding, snatching, playing, and catching. Each double-page spread features a different split of 10 until each of the 10 dogs has a sausage… and then the inevitable happens (followed by a nap). Gravett’s follow-up to 10 Cats (2023) is just as raucous and enjoyable. The pups might look a bit sad at one time or another, but it is obvious they are always playing (until they are eating), and in the penultimate spread they all work together to help the wiener dog get to the final wiener. All will laugh at the antics, and youngsters owned by doggies will easily pick out their canine companions in the crowd… they might even learn some simple math. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Fun from the first page to the last. (Picture book. 2-5)
“An origin story for the ages—intimate, poetic, singular, and broadly relatable.”

I'M FROM

Gray Jr., Gary R.
illus. by Oge Mora
Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780063089969

For some, “Where are you from?” has a geographical answer, but this kid offers a thoughtful and poignant alternative perspective.

As the Black narrator begins the day, waking in a toy-and-book-filled room and rising from a bed covered by a tapestry that showcases the layered textured papers and gouache paints of Mora’s illustrations, he recalls where—and what and who—he comes from. It’s an ostensibly average day—enjoying a favorite breakfast of pan-fried bologna and pancakes with the fam, admiring the assortment of hairstyles on the school bus, from his own fade to the “laid edges” of a peer, hearing raucous kids earning a stern word from the bus driver, and making it through a long school day of learning. But the boy also encounters racialized comments—scribbled in frenetic large type across a full-page spread—from the other kids that make him visibly uncomfortable: “Can I touch your hair?” “You don’t sound Black.” “Where are you from?” But the answers he ultimately offers are as tasty as “buttermilk biscuits” or as touching as “bear-tight cuddles,” as soft as pecks on the cheek or as far-reaching as the hopes and dreams of his family. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An origin story for the ages—intimate, poetic, singular, and broadly relatable. (Picture book 4-8)

GAME FACE

Green, Shari
Groundwood (376 pp.)
$17.99 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9781773068688

An eighth grade goalie plagued by anxiety both on and off the ice finds help and coping strategies.

Casting his record of miseries into accessible free verse poems and haiku, with occasional ventures into rhyme, Jonah Vanderbeek tracks his increasing tendency in the years since his mother’s sudden death to respond to stress by going stubbornly silent or exploding in rage. Jonah, who is cued as being of Dutch descent, also chronicles inner struggles with fear of failure so intense that at one point he throws up during an ice hockey game—then later comes close to quitting the sport out of guilt when his best friend collapses and is forced to give up his NHL dreams due to a heart condition. The discovery that his distant, repressive dad is actually struggling with an anxiety disorder so severe that he can’t work in an office or give up his NHL dreams due to a heart condition.

A wise school counselor evocatively named Ms. Rogers; and Jonah’s own Oma—who steer him toward the realization that there are always helpers. By the climactic championship face-off, he’s found ways to keep “the alien / in my brain” at bay, so that win or lose “I’ll be okay / I’ll be okay.”

An unvarnished problem-focused novel with occasional doses of quick ice hockey action. (Verse fiction 10-13)

ELLIE’S DELI

Wishing on Matzo Ball Soup!

Greenwald, Lisa
illus. by Galia Bernstein
Andrews McMeel Publishing (224 pp.)
$11.99 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9781524881115
Series: Ellie’s Deli, 1

In this series opener, 11-year-old Ellie Glantz loves her family’s kosher deli almost as much as she loves her grandparents Bubbie and Zeyda. But their small town’s dwindling Jewish community means they may need to sell the business that’s been in the family for four generations to a developer. Ellie makes for a sympathetic protagonist: a natural worrier, thoughtful friend, and dedicated relative to her loving family. Her fear of losing the deli propels the otherwise slight story. One side plot features the introduction of a new member to her mostly white middle school friend crew and Ellie’s fears that her best friend, Ava, is forgetting about her as she gets to know the new girl. Ava is also worrying over her single mother’s new love interest. Recipes interspersed between chapters include both deli favorites and less familiar staples of Ashkenazi cuisine, grounding the story in the milieu of Ellie’s beloved spot. Similarly, religious practices and Yiddish words suffuse the story with a lived-in Judaism—unrelated to a specific holiday—that does not often appear in mainstream children’s books. In buoyant middle-grade fashion, Ellie and Ava join forces to rally the community and update the business in an effort to save the deli.

A cute and concretely Jewish take on a classic storyline. (Fiction 7-10)

THE LITTLE KID WITH THE BIG GREEN HAND

Gubler, Matthew Gray
Amulet/Abrams (224 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781419771224

A young girl is embarrassed by her giant green hand.

Lenore always realized that she was different; others have green eyes or even green nail polish, but
Unimpressed with Uncle Mo, Great-Aunt Gloria says he must state his nephew’s favorite activity. When Leo springs to take a quiz on “Auntieology and Uncleology.” After several wrong answers, Uncle Mo has a final chance at redemption: he’s in town for a “rubber band convention.” Illustrations show both with wavy brown hair and light tan skin. Not only does Leo think his uncle is rather dull, he’s also leery of Uncle Mo’s many rules. A rather abrupt narrative shift occurs when the pair inexplicably drive into another dimension. Here they encounter Great-Aunt Gloria (who is very tall and presents Black) and Uncle Munkle Carbunkle (who is very short and light-skinned), who guide them through the Secret Society of Aunts & Uncles. Unimpressed with Uncle Mo, Great-Aunt Gloria says he must make a quiz on “Auntieology and Uncleology.” After several wrong answers, Uncle Mo has a final chance at redemption: He must state his nephew’s favorite activity. When Leo springs into action to dance for his clueless uncle, a mishap leaves him mortified and un-bespectacled. Enter Uncle Mo to save the day by using a rubber band to secure Leo’s glasses. While Santat’s energetic illustrations do much to clarify the narrative, they can’t fully make up for the disjointed storytelling—it’s never clear why the two have entered this dimension or why Leo is suddenly so eager to help Uncle Mo. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Warm but underdone. (Picture book. 4-7)

THE SECRET SOCIETY OF AUNTS & UNCLEs

Gyllenhaal, Jake & Greta Caruso Illus. by Dan Santat
Feiwel & Friends (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781250776990

In this picture book from actor Gyllenhaal and his partner, Caruso, a child and his uncle bond on a fantastic journey:

Leo, an avid dancer, is dismayed when Uncle Mo visits—he’s in town for a “rubber band convention.” Illustrations show both with wavy brown hair and light tan skin. Not only does Leo think his uncle is rather dull, he’s also leery of Uncle Mo’s many rules. A rather abrupt narrative shift occurs when the pair inexplicably drive into another dimension. Here they encounter Great-Aunt Gloria (who is very tall and presents Black) and Uncle Munkle Carbunkle (who is very short and light-skinned), who guide them through the Secret Society of Aunts & Uncles. Unimpressed with Uncle Mo, Great-Aunt Gloria says he must make a quiz on “Auntieology and Uncleology.” After several wrong answers, Uncle Mo has a final chance at redemption: He must state his nephew’s favorite activity. When Leo springs into action to dance for his clueless uncle, a mishap leaves him mortified and un-bespectacled. Enter Uncle Mo to save the day by using a rubber band to secure Leo’s glasses. While Santat’s energetic illustrations do much to clarify the narrative, they can’t fully make up for the disjointed storytelling—it’s never clear why the two have entered this dimension or why Leo is suddenly so eager to help Uncle Mo. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Warm but underdone. (Picture book. 4-7)

THE GHOSTLY PHOTOS

Haddix, Margaret Peterson
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins (336 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780063089815

Series: The Mysteries of Trash & Treasure, 2

Old photos of a boy in a coffin lead two young Ohio gumshoes into a web of secrets.

A mystery involving a possibly haunted funeral home owned by a newly arrived family puts the nerves as well as the investigative skills of outgoing Nevaeh Greevey and shy, cerebral Colin Creedmont to the test in this sequel to The Secret Letters (2022). Not only does a complex tale dating back decades ultimately come to light in long-hidden letters, news stories, pictures, and keepsakes, but the plot features spooky rummaging through the funeral home’s cluttered attic and a graveyard visit. There’s also a familial connection, as the parents of both amateur sleuths run house-clearing operations—formerly as rivals with very different ideas of what constitutes “junk” and now in a contentious partnership. But since Haddix focuses largely on her protagonists’ thoughts, reactions, and attitudes in shaping the narrative, her tale has a distinctly introspective turn—particularly after Colin learns something about the father he’s never met. Readers seeking a meaty mystery solved by clues and deduction will find one, but it sometimes takes second fiddle to developments within and between members of a mostly white cast. The blended family that moves into the funeral home is implied to be multiracial. One elderly source of information exhibits clear signs of dementia, which the author discusses, along with funeral customs and other relevant topics, in a lengthy afterword.

Sleuthing aplenty but more character-than-conundrum-driven. (Mystery. 8-12)

TIME TO GO, LARRY!

Hawkins, Alison
Orchard/Scholastic (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781338795196

Larry can’t possibly imagine getting out of bed, but sure enough the little bear is tempted by all the day has to offer. It’s tough to get up in the morning when conditions are just right: soft blankets, pillows in the perfect spot, the ideal temperature. But the unseen narrator (apparently Larry’s caregiver) eventually coaxes Larry out with the lure of breakfast. Next it’s time to go outside, but Larry prefers to stay at the breakfast table. Eventually, though, the prospect of a sunny day is too appealing to refuse. And so it goes, with Larry being coaxed into a variety of activities. Swimming, a warm bath, and finally the snugly bed from the book’s beginning serve as bait to keep Larry moving.

Old photos of a boy in a coffin lead two young Ohio gumshoes into a web of secrets.

A feel-good read reaffirming the power of empathy. (Illustrated fiction. 7-11)
Any caregivers who spend time with little ones will find Larry’s reluctance (perhaps painfully) familiar. Hawkins artfully shows little readers just how fantastic each portion of the day can be. There’s hot chocolate with whipped cream, a relaxing bubble bath with a rubber duck, and a story before bed. The illustrations are appealing, with just enough detail. Larry is a sweet and playful little bear with childlike features and behaviors. (This book was reviewed digitally.) A tale featuring a relatable lead character and a theme that will resonate with caregivers everywhere. (Picture book: 3-5)

THE WIDELY UNKNOWN MYTH OF APPLE & DOROTHY
Haydu, Corey Ann
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins (368 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780062976932

A dual-perspective story of friendship, grief, and the pressure of familial expectations.

Dorothy is a modern-day descendant of Pandora of Greek myth. “Nearly perfect” Apple’s illustrious forebears are the famed gods Zeus and Hera. Growing up, the two sixth graders’ mothers were very different people yet still best friends: “kind of wrong but still somehow right.” In their community of near-gods, everyone must climb a silver ladder to Olympus each winter solstice to take a bite of a golden apple and guarantee their immortality for another year. However, when Dorothy’s mother decides to stay below, renouncing her immortality and dying just a month later, the tradition is upended. In retaliation, the gods decide that everyone must choose on the next winter solstice: either join them on Olympus or remain mortals on Earth. While Apple and Dorothy are complete opposites, they find comfort and solace in each other after Dorothy’s unexpected loss. But as the deadline approaches, Apple makes a hasty decision that affects everything. This story is tender, complex, and full of hope—emotionally messy in the best ways. Apple and Dorothy are intricately written characters who express relatable feelings of fear, love, and loss. Apple has curly dark hair, and Dorothy’s hair is red-blond and wavy; the near-gods are diverse in appearance.

A refreshingly character-driven take on Greek mythology retellings. (Fiction: 8-12)

THE STUPENDOUS SWITCHEROO
Heider, Mary Winn
Illus. by Chad Sell
Knopf (304 pp.)
$13.99 | $16.99 PLB | Sept. 12, 2023
9780593427309
9780593427316 PLB
Series: The Stupendous Switcheroo, 1

A kid with unpredictable superpowers gets a crash course in heroes, villains, and perspective. The book opens as the nameless protagonist/narrator wakes up one day with unexplained powers of telekinesis. Understanding the nature of the ways his powers switch every day—and choosing his superhero name, the Stupendous Switcheroo—comes later, but with his inventor mother gone on an extended trip, he only has to answer to Al, a babysitting robot. When Vin Valor, Switcheroo’s favorite superhero, needs a hand, he uses his mom’s teleportation technology to leap into action. However, with each passing day, he misses his mom a little more. Switcheroo teams up with Tana, a wunderkind from Vin Valor’s organization, to navigate his changing powers, find his mom, and even uncover some dirty secrets about his hero. The story remains fresh through the evolving mystery and seeing how Switcheroo’s latest power will come into play in each chapter, especially as he begins to doubt Vin Valor’s motives and sympathize with those labeled villains. The interplay between the text and the black-and-white comics panels is seamless. Switcheroo’s thoughtful internal monologues and the expressively drawn eyes and costumes demonstrate a deep love and care for this superpowered universe and its denizens. True to serialized superheroics, the next installment is teased at the end. Switcheroo has paper-white skin and black hair; Tana’s skin is shaded, and she has Afro-textured hair.

A wannabe superhero faces multiple mysteries and tests in this engaging series opener. (Graphic adventure: 8-12)

LOVE IS IN THE BEAR
Henderson, Judith
Illus. by Nahid Kazemi
Owlkids Books (32 pp.)
$18.95 | Oct. 17, 2023
9781771475891

A bear finds love in both music and a feathered friend.

Bear groggily wakes from a winter slumber, lumbering outside to greet the world. But if he had slept one more second, he would have missed it: “the moment—the moment—in a day that started everything.” An enchanting song is heard. Bear follows the sound and finds a dainty chickadee singing her heart out. She is, in fact, practicing for the opera. “AHHH-PERA,” says Bear. And then questions: “What’s the Opera?” (“It’s a
story with lots of singing.”) Bear wonders if he could be part of the opera, too. Bird’s wide-eyed expression at Bear’s “BASSO PROFUNDO” voice leads readers to guess that his talents might be lacking. The two practice together and audition. In an unexpected twist, Bear does not get the part (though Bird does). But the love that has developed between them transcends all. They are still an undeniable duet, and when winter returns, Bird promises to watch over Bear as he sleeps. Kaze-mi’s ethereal forest, full of smudged trees and floating dandelion wisps, enhances the sentimental atmosphere of these sweet soul mates. The intended audience might not immediately hear John Paul Young’s crooning voice once the title is read, but listening to “Love Is in the Air” or an operatic aria is a logical next step. (This book was reviewed digitally.) Elevates standard hibernation fare to a new level. (Picture book. 4-8)

**SMALL PLACES, CLOSE TO HOME**

*A Child’s Declaration of Rights: Inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

Hopkinson, Deborah
Illus. by Kate Gardiner
Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$19.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780063092587

Starting with a loving image of a biracial family, this intimate book connects the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the life of the individual child.

The document, with its drafting committee chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, then U.S. delegate to the United Nations, was formally signed in December 1948. The author and illustrator have worked together to make young readers aware of the declaration and to ensure that they understand their important role—as inhabitants of their own “small places, close to home,” in Roosevelt’s words—as members of local communities, countries, and the world vital to the realization of the Declaration’s purpose. Organized into short sections, from “Me” to “My School and Community” to “My Country and World,” the book introduces children to human rights such as education and equality and then urges them to take responsibility: “It’s up to me to stand up for the rights of others who need protection.” The muted, understated illustrations, in pencil and gouache assembled digitally, portray diverse people; a world map depicts people from all around the globe. Most useful when read in group settings, this quietly powerful book will promote discussions about important topics. (This book was reviewed digitally.) Weighty ideals translated into an accessible format for young readers. (Information about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Eleanor Roosevelt, further resources) (Informational picture book. 6-8)

**EAGLE DRUMS**

Hopson, Nasuŋraq Rainey
Roaring Brook Press (256 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9781250750655

The Iñupiaq origin story of the Messenger Feast and a boy who was kidnapped by eagles.

Throughout Pia’s childhood, he was told haunting stories about the dangers of strangers, an unknown presence in the mountains near his family’s sod house, and his missing older brothers, Atau and Maliŋu. His mother’s projection of his brothers’ successes onto him combined with his father’s silence, both expressions of their grieving, leave Pia wondering. “How can you compete with someone’s memories, anyway?” One day, Savik, who shape-shifts between man and golden eagle, offers
Piña a choice: death or captivity. Piña reflects on the pain his death would cause his parents. He decides to go with Savik and try to return someday. The eagles teach Piña singing, drumming, and dancing. He also learns how to build a giant sod house and host a huge feast. The lessons aren’t easy, and his ego is challenged: “I learned not to lead with demands. I learned to lead with connections.” Piña struggles with fear and distrust instilled by his family, overcomes self-doubt, and becomes both “creator and learner.” This orally transmitted tale, once banned like the feast it describes, offers a deep connection to rich cultural teachings. Inupiaq author and illustrator Hopson enhances the story with full-page color illustrations that visually connect readers with Piña’s journey and emphasize the importance of connections to nature, spiritual beings, and human relatives.

A captivating tale filled with enduring lessons about overcoming the fear of others. (author’s note) (Folklore. 8-12)

KATI’S TINY MESSENGERS
Dr. Katalin Karikó and the Battle Against Covid-19
Hoyt, Megan
Illus. by Vivien Mildenberger
Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$19.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
978006216624
9

The story of a Hungarian-born researcher whose childhood fascination with science led to a central role in the development of one of the first effective vaccines against the Covid-19 virus.

In a personal message at the end, Katalin Karikó herself urges young people, girls especially, who dream of becoming scientists to go for it! Her story, as Hoyt tells it, reflects that determined attitude—tracing a career that included emigrating from Hungary to the United States (with forbidden but needed cash secretly stuffed into her daughter’s teddy bear) and sticking to studies of cellular biology through years of funding difficulties and failed experiments. If her prose does sometimes take a giddy turn (“But Kati’s mind never took a break. Messenger RNA danced through her dreams and filled up her days”), the author presents clear pictures of her subject’s character as well as achievements, culminating in a suspenseful account of the vaccine’s human trials in 2020. Along with fuller explanations of DNA, messenger RNA, and how mRNA vaccines work, the backmatter includes nods to colleagues and photos—including one of that teddy bear. The light-skinned cast in Mildenberger’s bright, transparently hued illustrations gives way to a more diverse one in later scenes of isolated families and masked medical workers. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An inspiring profile of a scientist making history. (timeline, source list) (Picture-book biography. 7-9)

CATSIDE UP, CATSIDE DOWN
Dr. Katalin Karikó and the Battle Against Covid-19
Hoyt, Megan
Illus. by Vivien Mildenberger
Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$19.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
978006216624
9

Rhyming couplets—full of prepositions—accompany photographs of brightly colored cats and props, all composed of knitted, sewn, and arranged yarn.

“Catside up, / catside down,” proclaims the first page in bold black lettering. At the top right of the stark white page, a sweet-looking tanish cat smiles above the rim of a blue basket. There is no mistaking the fact that the black cat in the lower left is “catside down.” Across the gutter, there’s a bright pink “cat on a turntable, spinning around”—and again, quirky, masterful details in the art. On every page, prepositions are shown in boldface. The humorous text includes sophisticated vocabulary, with words such as configure and astraddle. The image of a feline pair with limbs linked (for “cats akimbo”) is particularly funny, as is the cat matryoshka doll. The visuals are witty and whimsical but also spot-on in their portrayals of typical cat behavior—right through to the final, purrfect catnap. The last page has a rudimentary definition of prepositions that assumes understanding of nouns and pronouns—and contains one last, funny, cat-loving note. It is ironic that a book purportedly about prepositions includes some adverbs in boldface as well as prepositions. But who cares? As it entertains and educates, this book enhances appreciation for the English language. Human characters are diverse in skin tone. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Delightful for cat lovers—and everyone else. (Picture book. 4-9)

WHAT’S INSIDE A CATERPILLAR COCOON?
And Other Questions About Moths & Butterflies
Ignotofsky, Rachel
Crown (48 pp.)
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Sept. 5, 2023
9780593176660
9780593176563
PLB
Series: What’s Inside?

From egg to caterpillar to pupa to adult, learn about lepidoptera.

The creator of What’s Inside a Flower (2021) returns with equally engaging answers to readers’ questions about caterpillars, moths, and butterflies. What’s particularly attractive about this invitation to look more closely at the natural world are Ignotofsky’s signature graphics, styled illustrations with flat colors and intricate details. Carefully organized information is arranged in short bits against a background of informative images. Many pages could easily be stand-alone posters. Varied
page design helps with the organization and makes the whole more absorbing. Ignotofsky labels nearly every one of the over 80 species pictured as caterpillars, pupae, or adults, with the common name in tiny but legible uppercase lettering. These pages deserve to be pored over. To begin, the author/illustrator explains the stages of a caterpillar’s life and the transformation we call metamorphosis. What may astonish young readers most is the answer to the title question: Inside the cocoon or chrysalis, a caterpillar’s body becomes “soup-like,” turning into “a brand-new body...with wings, big eyes, and a different mouth.” Ignotofsky goes on to describe the physical details and behavior of the adults that emerge. She concludes by noting how important these insects are as pollinators and encouraging her readers to help protect them. Racially diverse humans appear in a few scenes. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Complex information sensibly organized and beautifully presented. (sources and resources) (Informational picture book. 6-9)

THE KITTEN STORY
A Mostly True Tale
Jenkins, Emily
Illus. by Brittany Cicchese
Minerva (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
9781662651151

A close family disagrees, survives minor disappointments, and rejoices, together.

Narrator Mommy, who is pale-skinned; Daddy, brown-skinned; and children Rosie and Tulip, brown-skinned, love cats and books but have differing opinions on what cat to adopt. Daddy reasons that an older cat would have a known personality, whereas a kitten could be “bitty” or “scratchy.” When Mommy votes “kitten” with the kids, Daddy, outnumbered, glowers. Mommy’s “scientific method” of name-choosing, intended to head off further debate, is an utter failure. So is the foray going to purchase banned books for the diverse community’s Little Free Libraries. Later, as she and her grandmother Teita bake baklawa, Teita draws a connection between this protest and those she marched in during the 2011 Egyptian uprising, impressing on Kanzi the need to raise her voice. The book takes on an all-too-relevant topic—indeed, the author’s note discusses how this tale was inspired by a real-life attempt at banning The Arabic Quilt in 2021. However, it suffers from rushed pacing and didactic writing. It’s not clear why the ban is reversed so quickly or why the books were removed to begin with. The librarian’s explanation that “some books are so powerful that they intimidate people” is a misguided statement at odds with the story’s message that books centering marginalized identities are especially being targeted. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A well-meaning effort at exploring censorship that doesn’t quite hit the mark. (recipe) (Picture book. 7-10)

THE GREAT BANNED-BOOKS BAKE SALE
Khalil, Aya
Illus. by Anait Semirdzhyan
Tilbury House (32 pp.)
$18.95 | Aug. 1, 2023
9780884489672

A districtwide book ban sparks a protest in this follow-up to The Arabic Quilt (2020).

Kanzi, an Egyptian immigrant, and her classmates are dismayed to learn that a number of diverse stories—defined as “books showing people of many identities, backgrounds, and walks of life”—have been removed from their library and classrooms (oddly, these titles appear to have been confined to a single “diverse books” section). Not finding any books that reflect her identity, Kanzi retreats into her poetry notebook. A class discussion leads Kanzi to suggest a bake sale, with proceeds going to purchase banned books for the diverse community’s Little Free Libraries. Later, as she and her grandmother Teita bake baklawa, Teita draws a connection between this protest and those she marched in during the 2011 Egyptian uprising, impressing on Kanzi the need to raise her voice. The book takes on an all-too-relevant topic—indeed, the author’s note discusses how this tale was inspired by a real-life attempt at banning The Arabic Quilt in 2021. However, it suffers from rushed pacing and didactic writing. It’s not clear why the ban is reversed so quickly or why the books were removed to begin with. The librarian’s explanation that “some books are so powerful that they intimidate people” is a misguided statement at odds with the story’s message that books centering marginalized identities are especially being targeted. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A well-meaning effort at exploring censorship that doesn’t quite hit the mark. (recipe) (Picture book. 7-10)

LORE ISLE
Kim, Jim
Nimbus Publishing (304 pp.)
$10.95 paper | Sept. 27, 2023
9781774711927

A Canadian boy travels to a magical world to help his family and restore a lost wolf population.

A century ago, Newfoundland wolves were hunted to extinction by humans. So when 13-year-old Peter Connors sees a wolf while he’s out fishing with his grandfather, he is bewildered. Life gets turned upside down when Grandpa dies suddenly, and his will discloses that the house has been left to all his daughters, not just Peter’s mother, who has been living there. With the home he grew up in being sold and Mom struggling with anxiety, Peter accepts an offer from Mr. Doyle, a strange man claiming to be Grandpa’s friend. Together they travel to Lore Isle, a land of mythical creatures, where Peter will help Mr.
Doyle find something in return for gold that will allow his mom to buy the house. The longer he spends on Lore Isle, the more Peter discovers that not everything is as it seems. Mr. Doyle hasn't revealed the entire truth. Faced with evil mummers, giant insects, and fairy curses, Peter must find the courage to do what is right. This well-paced fantasy features strongly developed characters and twisted versions of mythical creatures. It highlights ecological and mental health concerns, limiting conceptions of masculinity, and the process of self-discovery. Sporadic black-and-white illustrations add to the eerie, somber tone. Characters largely present white; Peter and his mother are implied biracial by his late maternal grandmother's East Asian surname.

An atmospheric, well-executed, and otherworldly fantasy. (Fantasy 10-14)

WHERE'S JOON?
Kim, Julie
Little Bigfoot/Sasquatch (120 pp.)
$22.00 | Oct. 10, 2023
9781632174154

The Korean siblings introduced in Where's Halmoni? (2017) encounter a new conflict and some fantastical familiar faces. Jin is alarmed by the mess in the kitchen, and her younger brother, Joon, is nowhere to be found. Her grandmother Halmoni uses magic to investigate and, using her magical door handles, sends Jin through a window to the world of the first book to deliver rice cakes to Halmoni's friend Jo-harabuji. Halmoni mentions Joon will probably be waiting there for Jin. Jin, equipped with a door handle that will return her home, as well as some smarts from her previous foray into the magical land, sets out. Meanwhile Joon, who needs help repairing Halmoni's beloved cooking pot, knows exactly where he's going with his own door handle and reunites with his friend Tokki, a spunky rabbit. Hilarity ensues as characters from Korean folktales are portrayed with dynamic expressions amid a whimsical backdrop of colorful mountain ranges and roaring rivers. Joon and Tokki struggle to fix Halmoni's pot while Jin looks for Joon, outfoxes a familiar trickster tiger, and delivers rice cakes. Kim deftly balances all of the characters and their evolving goals as the siblings inadvertently reunite spirit friends and bring Halmoni fortuitous cooking alternatives. Korean dialogue is interspersed throughout the panels of this graphic novel, with translations and guides to folktales following the story.

Rich in folklore, comedy, and color, a riotous and pleasurable treat. (Graphic fiction 7-10)

Farther Than the Moon
Lackey, Lindsay
Roaring Brook Press (336 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781250205209

There's nothing Houston Stewart cares more about than space—with the exception of Robbie, his little brother. When their dad walks out on them and their mom, the brothers make a vow: They'll go to the moon together someday. Accepted into the prestigious Junior Astronaut Recruitment Program, Houston's path to this dream has begun. However, 10-year-old Robbie has cerebral palsy and epilepsy and is non-speaking. Thirteen-year-old Houston is determined to not only find a way for Robbie to join him, but in the process win over his NASA hero—who's also the maternal grandfather he's never met. Houston's newly assigned crew is full of quirky, varied personalities, and they must work through conflicts to lift each other up. A wealth of fascinating details about space travel is shared naturally via their lessons and tasks; both the overwhelming and the excitement of the aspiring astronauts are well conveyed. Houston's connection with his estranged grandfather—one distant idol, now coming into view as a flawed human being—provides an emotional center of gravity, as does the affection between the brothers. But, while treated with respect, Robbie often feels pushed off to the side, present to motivate Houston's journey. The need for accessibility both in regular life and the space program for people with disabilities like Robbie and Houston's crewmate Freya, who has a sensory processing disorder, is highlighted. Houston and his family read white; the JARP candidates are racially diverse.

Full of passion and determination. (author's note, resources) (Fiction 8-12)

Enlighten Me
Lê, Minh
Illus. by Chan Chau
Little, Brown Ink (144 pp.)
$12.99 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
9780759555488

Stories of Buddha's past lives help a young boy "find [himself] in the moment." Binh and his siblings, who are cued Asian, can't believe they're spending the weekend at a silent meditation retreat. Binh would rather play his Game Boy so he doesn't have to meditate and inevitably think about the bullies at school. It is only when Sister Peace tells stories about the Buddha and his past life that Binh is able to imagine himself entering a video game–inspired world and thus process his feelings of shame, isolation, and anger. With each Jataka tale, Binh's awareness expands, and so, too, does his ability to be present for and helpful to those around him.
A welcome addition to the handful of middle-grade stories featuring Buddhist protagonists, this exploration of identity and Buddhist principles will find an audience with young readers who love Raina Telgemeier but aren’t quite ready to level up to the complexity and nuance of Gene Luen Yang’s epic *American Born Chinese* (2006). The video game elements are compelling, although they understandably diminish as the story progresses and the protagonist’s inner life grows. Warm fall colors and luscious black lines anchor the story as it transitions among flashbacks, stories, and the present day. Filled with talking animals, the parables can be a little heavy-handed, but the witty banter between Binh and the narrator during fantasy sequences provides levity.

A thoughtful, humorous, community-centered exploration of identity and Buddhism. *(bibliography)* *(Graphic fiction. y-12)*

**THE SHADE TREE**

*Lee, Suzy*

*Trans. by Helen Mixter*

Aldana Libros/Greystone Kids (32 pp.)

$18.95 | Sept. 5, 2023

9781778400186

Series: Aldana Libros

A traveler attempts to rest in the shade of a tree.

The traveler, along with several villagers, is soon driven off when the rich man who owns the land the tree sits on demands they leave his property. The traveler makes a deal with the rich man. Parting with all his money, he purchases the right to sit in the tree’s shadow wherever it may land for as long as he wants. The rich man believes he’s made some easy money; but as the day lengthens, so does the tree’s shadow, allowing the traveler to reach unexpected places. Eventually he gets the better of the rich man and finds a way to allow all the villagers to share in his happiness. Abstract backgrounds and characters presented as silhouettes meld with the narrative, a retelling of a Korean folktale, to create a fairy tale–like mood. The eponymous tree features in nearly every illustration, and clever layouts and a dramatic gatefold demonstrate the true extent of its shade as the day goes on, making for a stunning dusk scene as the traveler literally dances making for a stunning dusk scene as the traveler literally dances through the tree’s shadow wherever it may land for as long as he wants. The rich man believes he’s made some easy money; but as the day lengthens, so does the tree’s shadow, allowing the traveler to reach unexpected places. Eventually he gets the better of the rich man and finds a way to allow all the villagers to share in his happiness. Abstract backgrounds and characters presented as silhouettes meld with the narrative, a retelling of a Korean folktale, to create a fairy tale–like mood. The eponymous tree features in nearly every illustration, and clever layouts and a dramatic gatefold demonstrate the true extent of its shade as the day goes on, making for a stunning dusk scene as the traveler literally dances making for a stunning dusk scene as the traveler literally dances through the tree’s shadow wherever it may land for as long as he wants. The rich man believes he’s made some easy money; but as the day lengthens, so does the tree’s shadow, allowing the traveler to reach unexpected places. Eventually he gets the better of the rich man and finds a way to allow all the villagers to share in his happiness. Abstract backgrounds and characters presented as silhouettes meld with the narrative, a retelling of a Korean folktale, to create a fairy tale–like mood. The eponymous tree features in nearly every illustration, and clever layouts and a dramatic gatefold demonstrate the true extent of its shade as the day goes on, making for a stunning dusk scene as the traveler literally dances making for a stunning dusk scene as the traveler literally dances

**A MORRIS AND THE MAGIC OF STORIES**

*Lévy, Didier*

*Illus. by Lorenzo Sangiò*

*Trans. by Jill Phythian*

Thames & Hudson (40 pp.)

$17.95 | Sept. 12, 2023

9780500653258

A hungry feline plots to catch some mice and ends up getting more than he bargained for.

In this tale translated from French, Morris, a cat with a large book collection, has grown tired of chasing mice and decides to instead lure his prey by reading stories out loud. The ruse works, and the mice gather, but each time he finishes a book, Morris finds he’s not in the mood to eat. Undeterred, he opts to write a story himself. After going through many discarded drafts, a frustrated Morris finally decides to write about his own experience: “the story of a cat who tried to catch mice by reading stories to them.” He gives his story a happy ending for the mice and, ultimately, himself. The artwork, reminiscent of Richard Scarry’s, complements and adds cheer to this straightforward narrative that underscores the benefits of writing what you know and shows how creativity can lead to unexpected rewards. Though the theme of catching and eating the mice might be macabre for more sensitive readers, potential darkness is averted with gentle humor and the realization that the mice, who ply Morris with pastries as a thank you for reading to them, are cleverer than they look. *(This book was reviewed digitally)*

A charming book about the importance of creativity, persistence, and not eating your potential friends. *(Picture book. 4-8)*

**AUTUMN PELTIER, WATER WARRIOR**

*Lindstrom, Carole*

*Illus. by Bridget George*

Roaring Brook Press (40 pp.)

$18.99 | Sept. 19, 2023

9781250795274

The true story of a young Anishinaabe woman and her family’s legacy of Native water activism.

In the foreword, Anishinaabe activist Autumn Peltier explains, “In our culture, we look at water as a living being, and we’re taught to treat it with the same respect we would show another human.” With this ethic in mind, Lindstrom (Anishinaabe/Métis) and George (Anishinaabe) tell their story from the perspective of nibi (Anishinaabe for water) itself. Beginning with the Anishinaabe tradition of “looking seven generations into the future” to ensure that water is clean for everyone, nibi celebrates Indigenous land and water stewardship. But “over time, more people came” and polluted and mistreated water, and Native women “were forced to get louder” in the fight for water protection—including Grandma Josephine, Autumn Peltier’s great-aunt. A water warrior famous for trekking around
the Great Lakes with a copper water pail, Grandma Josephine inspired young Autumn to also make waves. George’s rich, cartoon images reverently depict Autumn’s growth as an organizer under her ancestors’ guidance, honoring their intergenerational struggles. After the story concludes with an invitation to join Autumn in the fight for water rights, backmatter offers more details about Grandma Josephine and Autumn’s activism. Lindstrom’s latest is a moving tribute to Native women and their crucial leadership in Indigenous and water rights. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

A touching ode to Indigenous activists organizing for generations of clean water. *(glossary, further reading) (Informational picture book. 5-10)*

**EMPTY AND ME**

*A Tale of Friendship and Loss*

Mahdavi, Azam

Illus. by Maryam Tahmasibi

Trans. by Parisa Saranj

Lee & Low Books (48 pp.)

$21.95  |  Oct. 3, 2023

*A child’s-eye view of the emotional impact of losing a parent.*

In a dark apartment building, a tan-skinned protagonist stares at a photograph—“the last picture of Mom and me and the last pot we planted together.” The young narrator explains that soon after the picture was taken, Mom died. Empty, a translucent, bloblike figure, showed up soon after and became the narrator’s new constant companion and sole friend. Empty not only rides the bus with the narrator and walks the child home from school, Empty also literally comes between the narrator and Dad at dinner, on trips to the amusement park, and at bedtime. Slowly but surely, the protagonist’s relationship with Empty changes. The shift begins when the plant that the narrator planted with Mom flowers, and the narrator gives Empty one of the flowers. Soon after, the protagonist and Empty adopt a lost kitten. Featuring exquisite, muted illustrations, this ambiguous ending—it’s not clear what becomes of Empty—may confuse some readers given that the plot is otherwise straightforward, but with grounding from caregivers and educators, it may also spark conversation. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

*A devastatingly honest book about loss, mourning, and recovery. (Picture book. 2-8)*

**THE LIGHT WITHIN YOU**

Mehta, Namita Moolani

Illus. by Kamala Nair

Two Lions (40 pp.)

$18.00  |  Sept. 26, 2023

*A young girl is excited to spend time with her grandmother over Diwali.*

Diya’s family moved to the United States and is now planning a trip back to India to celebrate Diwali. Diya is looking forward to seeing her grandmother (Nani) after moving to a new town and struggling to make new friends. Her classmates don’t know much about Diwali and can’t understand why she is going away for three weeks. After a long trip of over 7,000 miles, Diya is reunited with Nani and is fully immersed in Diwali preparations. As they shop and make sweets, Diya shares stories of her new school with Nani. Sensing how hard things are for Diya, Nani advises her to believe in herself and encourages her to brighten the light within herself and dispel the darkness. Diya takes in her advice along with heaps of gifts for her friends on her return. The illustrations glow in a soft light that depicts Diya’s family in warm brown tones; colorful Diwali lanterns; bustling Indian bazaars; delectable sweets; and sparkly night skies lit up with fireworks. However, the story’s themes of alienation and belonging remain unexplored, and Diya’s focus on trying to win over her classmates overshadows her moments of joy and celebration. Though her grandmother’s advice is heartfelt, none of it feels memorable. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

*Luminous illustrations do the heavy lifting to light up the somber story. (author’s note, glossary) (Picture book. 4-8)*

**PROUD MOUSE**

Mentzel, Cara & Idina Menzel

Illus. by Jaclyn Sinquett

Disney-Hyperion (48 pp.)

$17.99  |  Sept. 12, 2023

Educator Mentzel and her sister, Tony Award–winning actor Menzel, tell the story of a little rodent attempting to get out of her superstar sibling’s shadow.

As made clear in *Load Mouse* (2022), Dee’s a talented singer with a powerful set of lungs. Soft-spoken little sis Cara Lee is a different kind of rodent, but she utterly adores her older sister. Cara Lee is delighted to finally start school. But as the day wears on, she must continually field questions from well-intentioned adults about whether she can sing or play tennis like Dee. By the end, she’s confused and frustrated but determined to figure herself out. On her own, she realizes that she may be like her sister a little, but she’s her own person, and she’s not afraid to say so. Any younger sibling faced with a barrage of teachers who keep bringing up their older siblings will be able to identify with Cara Lee’s struggle. And while her tale may not divulge any particularly scintillating insights, there’s a comfort in recognition.
“Creativity and athletic endeavor forge a surprising alliance in this energetic series opener.”

CLUB KICK OUT!
Into the Ring
Mided, Steph
HarperAlley (224 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9780063116450
Series: Club Kick Out, 1

A group of middle schoolers without an extracurricular to call their own find pro wrestling a perfect outlet for their passions.

Custard Creek Middle School has a new principal with a surprising plan for revamping the school’s finances: He’s canceling all the arts and other clubs and solely funding athletic programs. This sits poorly with the nonsporty students who find emotional outlets through activities like video games, theater, and cosplay. Enter a serendipitous loophole. When a group of these frustrated kids attends a local women’s wrestling expo full of elaborate characters engaging in choreographed confrontations, they have a light-bulb moment: Why not funnel their own stifled creative energies into a wrestling club that requires dramatic imagination, cool costumes, and gamelike storylines?

A comforting, useful book for children dealing with loss. (Picture book. 3-8)

THE PROBLEM WITH GRAVITY
Mohrweis, Michelle
Peachtree (288 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781682635957

Can a space-obsessed seventh grader really do a school community service project with the baton-twirling eighth grader she’s crushing on?

Tatum works hard at both baton twirling and schoolwork, but since her twin brother is a legit genius—Evan’s a 14-year-old college student—her parents denigrate or ignore every one of her accomplishments. Maggie, an autistic girl with ADHD who wants to be an astronaut, is stressed by her fighting parents and by her assignment to work with gorgeous, friendly, organized Tatum. Tatum approaches her, Maggie actually runs away. If Tatum helps Maggie with her project to win a visit from an astronaut for the school, will that earn her her parents’ love? Will their work distract Maggie from her father’s demands she choose which parent she prefers? (Hint: He’s very clear it should be him.) Maggie and Tatum are two of the few white kids mentioned, and multiple characters have physical or developmental disabilities. This is a joyful (and often painful) quick read, about as subtle as an astronaut in a middle school, that explores a sweet queer romance.

Likable protagonists, great friends, and genuinely awful parenting make for a delightful read. (Fiction. 10-13)
A Black child finds inspiration in the legacies of 10 African American men. Whether playing with friends, shooting hoops on the court, or doing good deeds, our young narrator knows “I AM my ancestors’ wildest dreams.” Naming rappers, judges, athletes, writers, actors, and activists, the child ponders how to follow their worthy examples, such as “[using] my voice to touch hearts” like Biggie and Tupac or starting “a bit of good trouble” just as John Lewis did. Dr. Charles Drew, Chadwick Boseman, Muhammad Ali, and other ancestors are pictured alongside the child, who mimics their actions and wears similar clothing. These scenes are interspersed with those depicting the child in welcoming, diverse community. The energetic text reads like a smooth stream of affirmations honoring the self and cultural pride. The cartoonlike illustrations use bright colors, cheerful faces, and confident poses to emphasize the power of the child’s positive self-image, fortified by a strong relationship with past and contemporary heroes. With the resonance of the titular saying and strings, swirls, or tables to winkle out their secrets.

Inspirational reading even for audiences resolute in their math avoidance. (author’s note, patterns in numbers, sample problems to solve, glossary) (Picture book biography. 7-10)

In this graphic novel translated from Vietnamese and based on conservationist Nguyễn’s own experiences, a creature subjected to a lifetime of abuse finds relief and restoration. Chang, a young Vietnamese animal lover who volunteers at Yok Dôn, a national park in Tây Nguyên, encounters H’non, an elderly elephant who has suffered in captivity for 56 years. Beaten by her owner and forced to give rides to tourists, H’non has endured injuries to her spine and legs. Chang and her boss are determined to rescue the elephant and bring her to the park’s animal rescue center—but it will take time for H’non to learn to find food on her own and live among her own kind. The connections H’non eventually forges with the other elephants at the sanctuary are playful and tender, each a healing spectacle brought to life by brilliant use of color and perspective. Meanwhile, Chang also works to educate children, locals, and tourists on proper interactions with wildlife. The manga-esque illustrations—including Chang’s notes about the flora and fauna of Yok Dôn—are lush and informative, rewarding close examination. Fans of Saving Sorya (2021) will be gratified to see Chang continue to fight for the animals she loves. The empathy and perseverance on display make this as beautiful an animal rights book as readers will ever see.

Stirs the mind and heart the way an elephant quakes the earth. (words of thanks from Jeet Zd̄ng) (Graphic fiction. 8-12)
**RISE OF THE UNDEAD**

*Ogle, Rex*

Inkyard Press (236 pp.)

$18.99 | July 11, 2023

9781335453693

Series: The Supernatural Society, 3

Will and his friends must save their town again—this time from the undead. After stopping Ozzie the witch’s last two attempts to bring her dead wizard boyfriend back to life, Will Hunter, Ivy Cross, and her adopted brother, Linus, promised not to interfere anymore upon threat of death. Plus, Will has other things to worry about: His recently divorced mother is struggling to pay the bills, and his poverty makes him the target of bullying. So when a mysterious man starts awakening the dead, Will wants nothing to do with it. After receiving a dire warning from a mystical fox, the trio realize that they must enter an underground maze and try to stop the zombies. With the help of some old allies and a new friend, they uncover the town’s secret connection to Norse mythology and the terrifying reason for the labyrinth’s existence. They encounter more monsters and fight the undead in an effort to stop Ozzie. But saving the world is difficult, especially when Will feels powerless even to help his mom and himself. Full of new puzzles, ciphers, and codes, Ogle’s mysterious, humorous, and captivating tale of friendship, family, and bravery centers a multiracial cast. Letters from narrator Adam Monster offer humorous, well-timed commentary addressed directly to readers.

Interactive and funny; a fitting third installment for this supernatural series. (Fantasy. 8-12)

**THE LITTLE BOOKS OF THE LITTLE BRONTËS**

*O’Leary, Sara*

Illus. by Briony May Smith

Tundra Books (40 pp.)

$18.99 | Oct. 17, 2023

9780735263697

As children, the Brontës create their own tiny books and boundless world. The text begins “Many years before you were born,” urging readers to “look through the window” at the rapt, rosy faces of Charlotte and Anne, two small girls. Charlotte is making an illustrated book that’s the size of a child’s palm, imagining the fortunate life of a girl named Anne. In the girls’ real life, “there has been sadness in the house for a long time”. Almost half the family has died. One poignant bird’s-eye perspective shows Charlotte, Anne, Emily, Bramwell, and their father at the dining table with empty chairs for the dead mother and sisters, though family pets sub in. (Woes like tuberculosis and the harsh boarding school the girls attended in real life go unmentioned.) The central event is their father’s gift of wooden soldiers that will figure in the invented stories they write in matchbox-size books. Celebrating their free childhoods and eliding years full of struggles, the tale ends with a glance at a future when the novelist sisters “write and write.” Instructions on making a folded book are a bonus. The meticulous mixed-media illustrations are tender but never twee, as strong and lively as Yorkshire’s misty air and endless moors and skies. In the images, stone structures provide solidity; domestic animals and firelit, pleasant period interiors suggest warmth. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Splendidly affirming for young readers, writers, and artists. (author’s note, timeline, sources) (Informational picture book. 5-9)

**THEY HOLD THE LINE**

*Wildfires, Wildlands, and the Firefighters Who Brave Them*

*Paley, Dan*

Illus. by Molly Mendoza

Chronicle Books (44 pp.)

$18.99 | Oct. 3, 2023

9781797214504

A tribute to wildfire fighters and the teams supporting them. In orotund tones Paley lionizes frontline firefighters and those behind them, from lookouts to medevac workers, in the struggle to control a forest fire. These rugged heroes, he writes, “do not slide down poles or ride in shiny red trucks” and must be “part lumberjack, part mountain goat” to do their dangerous, exhausting jobs. Moreover, as recognition of the central importance of periodic fires to forest and other ecosystems has grown, he goes on to note repeatedly, they have taken on a larger mission to be “stewards of the land.” Seven elite “hotshot crews” of Native Americans are singled out for special commendation at the end, and though the diverse figures in Mendoza’s dramatic, swirling montages are as generic as the fire, she well serves readers fond of poring over fine details of tools and gear with exact depictions of specialized equipment, from an Osborne Firefinder and Bambi Buckets to digging and clearance implements like the Pulaski and Rhino. And standard checklists drawn from a professional manual of best safety practices and outdoor fire hazards may help readers become more fire aware. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A solid addition to the smokejumpers shelf, timelier than ever. (Informational picture book. 7-9)
Without thinking, he swallows the word’s five vowels; all that remains is “tmbrn.” ZigZag is heartsick to discover that thanks to his voracious appetite, every word in the world now contains only consonants. Subsequent pages hilariously demonstrate what words look like without those vital five letters. ZigZag takes quick action and manages to rescue all the vowels from family and friends—and even readers—and in alphabetical order, too. As ZigZag declares at the end, “What miraculous-ness!” (Note the vowels.) This cheery story about delighting in words and wordplay will appeal to readers who enjoy increasing their vocabularies and testing the sounds and feel of new terms. In an illuminating author’s note in which she invites children to play with language, Paschkis admits she “loves words.” She incorporates numerous ones in her illustrations, many containing multiple vowels; these gambol gleefully throughout her colorful, lively artwork featuring all-animal characters and intricate patterns. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**A veritable feast for word connoisseurs.** (Picture book. 5-8)

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**ZIGZAG**

*Paschkis, Julie*

Enchanted Lion Books (44 pp.)

$18.95 | Sept. 19, 2023

9781592704026

Can one literally eat one’s words? ZigZag, a green-and-yellow crocodile, loves words so much he actually tastes and feels them while playfully rolling them around in his mouth. *Swivel* is “slippery and slightly sour”; *bulb* has “a thick, purple taste.” One day he visits his friends Kit and Kat—anthropomorphic cats—and they all play with tambourines, a word whose juiciness ZigZag loves. Without thinking, he swallows the word’s five vowels; all that remains is “tmbrn.” ZigZag is heartsick to discover that thanks to his voracious appetite, every word in the world now contains only consonants. Subsequent pages hilariously demonstrate what words look like without those vital five letters. ZigZag takes quick action and manages to rescue all the vowels from

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**A HORSE NAMED SKY**

*Parry, Rosanne*

Illustrated by Kirbi Fagan

Greenwillow Books (256 pp.)

$18.99 | Aug. 29, 2023

9780062995957

In mid-19th-century Nevada, a colt named Sky grows up to lead his band of wild horses. Parry’s moving story follows the pattern of her recent animal tales, *A Wolf Called Wander* (2019) and *A Whale of the Wild* (2020), chronicling a wild animal’s life in the first person, imagining its point of view, and detailing and appreciating the natural world it inhabits. As Sky grows from wobbly newborn to leader of his family, he faces more than the usual challenges for colts who must fight their stallions or leave their herds when they are grown up. Fagan’s appealing black-and-white illustrations help readers envision this survival story. Sky’s adventures include forced service with the Pony Express; being befriended by an enslaved Paiute boy; escaping to find his now-captured band; and helping them escape the silver miners who destroyed their world. Animal lovers will applaud his ingenuity and stubbornness. Although Sky’s band has suffered serious injuries (his mother is blind), he and Storm, a mare who was his childhood companion, lead them toward safety in a new wilderness. The writer’s admiration for these wild horses and her concerns about human destruction of their environment come through even more clearly in a series of concluding expository essays discussing the wild horses, the Indigenous Americans, the natural history of the Great Basin, silver mining, and the Pony Express.

A feel-good tale of a clever and determined stallion set against a well-developed landscape. (Author’s note, resources) (Fiction. 7-10)

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**GANESHA’S GREAT RACE**

*Patel, Sanjay & Emily Haynes*

Illustrated by Sanjay Patel

Chronicle Books (52 pp.)

$17.99 | Oct. 24, 2023

9781797224855

Haynes and Patel retell the story of Ganesha and Kartikeya’s race around the world. Divine siblings Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of beginnings, and Kartikeya, the god of war, find a mango that they are unable to share. Their parents, the god Shiva and the goddess Parvati, explain that because the family received the mango from the gods, it has magical properties. Notably, it can only be eaten by someone who wins it in a competition. Delighted, the athletic Kartikeya suggests that the two brothers compete by racing around the world. Ganesha, who is no physical match for his brother, tries to change his sibling’s mind. The tactic backfires: Shiva, overhearing the conversation, declares that the two boys should circle the Earth three times instead of just once. While Kartikeya eagerly jets into orbit, Ganesha decides to do what he does best and uses his brain instead of his body. Ganesha is sure he is going to lose until the last minute, when a revelation from the Vedas—Hinduism’s holy scriptures—gives him the solution he needs. This version of a popular Hindu tale is witty, clever, and entertaining, focusing on the story rather than the moral. Ganesha is an endearing hero, and laudably, the vibrant, quirky illustrations, full of geometric shapes and eye-catching patterns, include dark-skinned versions of the gods. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A charming interpretation of a Hindu myth. (Picture book. 4-7)
“A serious and relatable tale of everyday life intersecting with and diverging from the realities of war.”

I AM KAVI
Porweera, Thushanthi
Holiday House (272 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780823453658

One Sinhalese girl's story set during the late 1990s amid the ongoing Sri Lankan civil war. Ten-year-old Kavi isn't happy, and she hasn't been happy for some time. Her father came home from years of fighting but only because he lost his leg. Then, shortly after Tharththa died, her mother remarried. Kavi's left with no father and a distracted mother who can't understand that no one can replace Tharththa. Her one solace is school; in fact, Kavi does so well academically that she wins a scholarship to attend school in the big city of Colombo. She isn't sure she wants to go live with her maternal aunt who works as a maid in a rich family's house, but it might be better than staying at home. The city is completely different from Kavi’s village, and even as she struggles to fit in, she finds unexpected friendships and explores new experiences. But ultimately, Kavi’s future will depend on the consequences of one mistake and whether she can remain true to herself. Told in accessible, economical verse, this novel explores Kavi's day-to-day struggles against a backdrop of civil war and social inequality. Though her problems at times seem insurmountable, this is ultimately a reassuring story of friendship, family, and finding solutions.

A serious and relatable tale of everyday life intersecting with and diverging from the realities of war. (historical notes, glossary) (Verse historical fiction. 8-12)

THE ODDS
Puckett, Lindsay
Scholastic (272 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781338803815

Growing up in Swamp Root Manor nursing home with 58 magical grandparents may not sound at first like the perfect childhood. But it’s the life of prickly, stubborn Begonia Hollowmoor’s dreams. In a world divided into Never Odds (regular people) and Odds (anything from a grandma with horns to a grandfather with secret-hearing abilities), she’s waiting for her own Oddity to appear before her 11th birthday or face memory-wiping and life in an orphanage with Never Odds. David, the manor’s owner and her guardian, is struggling to keep it afloat financially. Worst of all are the ghost attacks leaving residents in a comalike state. Following a riddle that could awaken her Oddity, Begonia and goofy, passionate 10-year-old Barnabas Montgomery (aspiring mortician, grandson of a resident, and thorn in Begonia’s side) set out to save the home she loves. During a quest full of twists and spooky surprises, Begonia figures out who and what she can trust. A narrative voice that breaks the fourth wall to address readers directly is a delightful touch in a story that’s unafraid of wry, macabre silliness. Amid some truly creative magic, there’s earned emotion, in particular Begonia’s experience with chronic pain. Her severe migraines are depicted with compassion and respect for her agency. Begonia and David read white; Barnabas and his family, which includes his two moms, are Black, and the supporting cast is racially diverse.

A rollicking, spooky adventure with a big heart. (Supernatural. 8-12)
An Ojibwe girl learns that being healthy goes beyond diet.

It seems everyone in 7-year-old Jo Jo’s life is trying to be healthy—her Mama, her Kokum, even her cat, Mimi, who takes vitamins. When her first grade class begins a unit on healthy eating, Jo Jo jumps in with both feet, even if her ideas of “healthy” are often harebrained (like substituting ice cream for milk in her cereal). At the same time, Jo Jo, who lives on the fictional Pembina Ojibwe Reservation, does her best to heed her tribal chair and check in on her neighbors, especially her Elders. When school is canceled due to a snowstorm, Jo Jo proposes that she and her classmates hold their own “winner” Olympics and invite Elders to participate. What unfolds are the Ojibwe Olympics, complete with lip-pointing races and round-dancing, and Jo Jo learns that being in community is an important part of being healthy. This third book in Quigley’s (Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe) series is a charmer, with the spunky, bighearted protagonist continuing to raise laughs and inspire. Readers will be enchanted by Jo Jo’s voice and Audibert’s cute, cartoon-style illustrations, rendered in grayscale. Ojibwe values are woven into the fabric of the story. A glossary of the Ojibwe and healthy goes beyond diet.

An absolute delight. (about this story, author’s note, letter to readers by editor Cynthia Leitich Smith) (Fiction. 6-10)

Reynolds and the Pumphrey brothers take readers on a dazzling journey through Langston Hughes’ legacy.

“There was a party for Langston at the library. / A jam in Harlem to celebrate the word-making man— // Langston, the king of letters.” And what a party! When Langston writes, words move, they collide, they big bang into the very atoms of connection. On shelves in the background, fellow Black writers and poets peer out from the spines of their books, looking on in delight as Langston’s “word-children” Maya Angelou and Amiri Baraka whirl with joy and inspiration, their own word-making mastery a credit to Langston’s legacy. Inspired by a joyous photo of Angelou and Baraka snapped in 1991 at the opening of the Langston Hughes Auditorium at the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Reynolds sets a syncopated pace with his debut picture book, delivering not only a celebratory dance of a biography, but a primer in Hughes’ own jazz poetry. Not missing a beat and laying down one all their own, the Pumphrey brothers’ illustrations incorporate verses from Hughes’ poems and other words he set into motion to create a thrumming visual landscape where meaning takes literal flight. This book demonstrates that Hughes’ work is the epitome of what words can be. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A bar set stratospherically high and cleared with room to spare. (Informational picture book. 3-8)
THE GREAT GRRRRR
Roger, Marie-Sabine
Illus. by Marjolaine Leray
Trans. by Angus Yuin-Killick
Red Comet Press (36 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781636550565

A determined and short-fused monster unites a package with its recipient.

The Great Grrrr, a black creature with a head of spikes, hairy ears, and expressive cartoon eyes, drives a delivery truck. He makes several attempts to deliver a small gift, but each time he rings the doorbell of a quiet rural cottage, he gets no response—even after scratching and tapping. It starts to rain, and frustration builds and bubbles into destructive anger until finally the Great Grrrr crushes the home to pieces. But it turns out that the 99-year-old grandma who owns the home is simply out on an errand, and when she returns, she teaches him a lesson in patience. The spare, black-and-white illustrations, rendered in childlike scrawls, are punctuated with pops of pink for objects such as the cottage, the package, and the grandma’s poncho. With few colors and minimal text, there’s little in this French import to hold kids’ attention on rereads, and the house is nearly always slightly off the page, which may confuse some readers. Adults may dislike the fact that the Great Grrrr never actually apologizes for destroying the house—though he does make amends by rebuilding it. The grandmother has skin the white of the page. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Gets into the neighborhood of interesting but doesn’t deliver. (Picture book. 3-6)

THE BEAST, THE QUEEN, AND THE LOST KNIGHT
Rogers, Alexandria
Illus. by Manuel Šumberac
Little, Brown (432 pp.)
$16.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780316523509

Knights-in-training Caedmon Tuggle and Ellie Bettlebump return in this follow-up to 2022’s The Witch, the Sword, and the Cursed Knights.

Good friends Caedmon, 13, and Ellie, nearly 13, have been given their first quest: to protect a royal wedding. But when banished monsters break through the protective spells and Princess Lorelei, another friend and knight-in-training, erupts in unregistered witch magic, Ellie takes the fall. At her trial, a frustrated Ellie is fitted with a permanent collar that mutes her magic. She later discovers she has dangerous Chaos magic inside her. Ellie meets with the sorcerer Malgwyn, to whom she owes a blood debt, and he tells her to steal the sword Excalibur, which he can use to obtain “the jewel from the belly of the beast.” Meanwhile, Caedmon is charged by the wizard Merlin to bring Lancelot back into the Knights of the Round Table, while Lancelot himself is after the same jewel. So begins the setup of this ambitious fantasy, which strives to pit the two friends against each other. There is imagination galore here, not to mention an abundance of mythical and legendary characters and a meaningful theme of loyalty to one’s friends. However, the story needs a stronger foundation to support and strengthen the fundamentals of the plot, which include a dizzying number of ideas, tenuous connections, and conveniently timed appearances.

An undeniably imaginative story in need of more cohesive execution. (map, list of realms) (Fantasy. 9-13)

LOVE IS IN THE AIR
The Story of Aviation Pioneer Nancy Harkness Love
Romito, Dee
Illus. by Vivian Mineker
Aladdin (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781534484191

Female pilot Nancy Harkness Love broke barriers.

Nancy developed a passion for aviation at age 16 when she took a ride with a barnstormer pilot. While attending college, she earned her pilot’s license, but due to the Great Depression, her family couldn’t afford her tuition, and she ended up moving to Boston. There, a man named Bob Love hired her to demonstrate to customers how airplanes flew. She later married Bob and continued to work as a pilot. When World War II broke out, Love advocated for women to ferry planes for the military and then went on to lead the Women’s Auxiliary Flying Squadron, which merged with another program, becoming the Women Airforce Service Pilots. Though slightly prolonged, the focus on Love’s early life flushes out both her daring personality and the fascinating path that led her to leading the women’s ferrying division of WASP. The downplaying of the sexism Love faced, both when becoming a professional pilot and in military service, combines with bland character designs to belie the unique role in history Love and the other WASP pilots played, but an author’s note gives greater detail regarding who the other original WASPs were and what they accomplished. Love and most other characters present white. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A straightforward biography that may inspire an interest in history and aviation. (photographs, sources) (Picture-book biography. 5-9)
They dote on their dog, Wendy, and her puppies, all named after foods and drinks. Just as Nugget embraces family life, his own adult caregivers as well. Hugo, brown-skinned when in human form, is cued as Latine.

A notable disappearance leaves two young sleuths with a stirring and surprise-filled summer case.

Dr. Alistair Fairfleet is the aging chairman of the Fairfleet Institute, located in the fictional New England town of Northbrook, and a major investor in eighth graders Alex Foster and Asha Singh’s A&A Detective Agency. After Dr. Fairfleet vanishes during a solar eclipse on the kids’ first day of summer vacation, the young detectives receive a letter that includes four names of people connected to the institute: an archivist, a performing arts director, an art museum director, and a natural history museum curator. When Alex and Asha learn that these individuals also received letters with clues, it sends them into mystery-solving overdrive. In the weeks that follow, they encounter literal and metaphorical red herrings as they unearth clues and solve multilayered puzzles connected to the visual arts, Shakespeare, archaeology, history, and more. The winding plot drives the action and excitement, while an emphasis on the characters’ interactions provides relatable snapshots into the tensions that can arise in authentic relationships. Themes relating to morality, bias, and honesty are illustrated through the characters as well as the history the detectives unearth, leaving readers with a satisfying ending, several mysteries solved, and deeper questions to ponder about inheritance, cultural heritage, and record-keeping. Alex is cued white; Asha is Indian American, and there is some racial diversity in the supporting cast.

A complex, cinematic, and eclectic page-turner. (Mystery. 8-12)

NUGLY
Ross, M.C.
Scholastic (256 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9781338827187

A puppy gets lost in the big city and learns about life on his winding way home.

Nugget is born into an idyllic setting: The Vandyck family lives in a cozy home in Boston’s Dorchester neighborhood. They dote on their dog, Wendy, and her puppies, all named after foods and drinks. Just as Nugget embraces family life, his owners announce a sudden move to San Francisco and expedited plans to rehome the pups. Heartbroken Nugget, the runt of the litter, impulsively runs away, becoming lost amid Boston’s maze of streets. He stumbles into the Franklin Park Zoo in a haze of exhaustion, where a porcupine full of prickly wisdom nurtures him for a spell. But a horrible accident lands him once again in human care. Nugget is adopted by overworked mother Linh Trần and her bullied daughter; the bullies’ cruelty sends Nugget on the run again. He falls into the care of the McLaughlins, a large, chaotic, working-class family who embrace him easily, scars and all. The story, related by a loquacious omniscient third-person narrator, is dense and lyrical and celebrates Boston’s vibrancy. The reflective storytelling may challenge those seeking high-speed entertainment, but Nugget’s demands for emotional engagement will reward thoughtful readers. The Trãns are cued Vietnamese; the Vandycks and McLaughlins are not described and may be intended to read white.

An emotional journey about realizing one’s worth within loving, complicated relationships. (Fiction. 9-13)
After 6-year-old Beatrice disappears from an All Hallows Eve party at the Amadeus’ mansion, Mort Amadeus is wrongfully imprisoned; now, it’s time for a reckoning. Beatrice is only one of many children who’ve gone missing from the area, and Mort’s loved ones know that he is not responsible. Thirteen years after the event, Maribelle, Mort’s wife, and Wormwood, the Amadeuses’ caretaker, invite several eccentric guests to the scene of the crime for another All Hallows Eve party. They’ve been hand-picked for their curious talents, and they can’t leave the party until they’ve identified the real culprit among their number—and the statute of limitations for the crime will be up at midnight. The countdown is reflected in each chapter heading, heightening the tension. As the guests move from room to room, they decipher clues and conduct interviews. Their unusual techniques, enlivened by fantasy elements, include creating a specter hound, consulting folklore, resurrecting and talking with a deceased bird witness, and examining an odd scarecrow. It would be terrifying if it weren’t so gloriously zany. Plus, the individual taking the lead on the case is Dewey O’Connor, an 11-year-old child who just needs to point the finger before it’s too late. This atmospheric, magic-infused mystery with an unsettling ending is a party readers won’t want to miss. Major characters read white.

Devilishly clever. (Mystery. 9-13)

In this tale translated from German, a child raises a profound question. At bedtime, Ludwig strikes up a conversation with a rhinoceros. Hearing the chatter, Ludwig’s caregiver enters the bedroom and, not seeing the animal, tries to convince Ludwig that there can’t possibly be a rhinoceros here. The caregiver searches the room, never seeing the rhinoceros. Readers share Ludwig’s perspective and spot the elusive creature on every page. Ludwig argues that it’s not possible to prove the rhino isn’t here—all, the moon is in the sky even though they can’t see it. The backmatter notes that this concept is a play on philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein’s question of how to prove something isn’t there, which is much harder than proving something is. The philosophical theory might go over some young readers’ heads but could still be thought-provoking. The illustrations rely on just three colors—bright blue, yellow, and red (which blend into other colors when printed on top of one another)—while still giving dimension to shadows and details like wood grain on the dresser. Giving little ones—Ludwig and readers—the power of owning the book’s perspective is an interesting flip of traditional adult-child dynamics. Here, the child holds the knowledge that the adult struggles to understand. Ludwig and the caregiver have yellow skin. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Even if the philosophy doesn’t land, the playful illustrations will still appeal to readers. (Picture book. 4-6)

A colossal narrator takes younger readers on a long, essential voyage. Estimating that 80% to 90% of the world’s global trade moves by ship, Schmitt assumes the voice of a (generic) gargantuan vessel piled high with “intermodal containers” to retrace a long journey—delayed by a major storm and extended by a detour around Africa when another ship blocks the Suez Canal—from (according to the dotted line on a schematic map) one unspecified port in east Asia to another in northern Europe. A scene of the ship circling a stopwatch evokes the sense of mission that rings throughout the author’s terse, rhythmic narrative (“I carry goods wherever I go / helping the global economy flow”), and another startling view of the vessel steaming past two diminutive whales really brings home its sheer size. Elsewhere Dong presents flattened, stylized portraits of it and other working ships of diverse size and design, also offering frequent cutaway glimpses of what they carry, from pineapples and pumpkins to cars, clothes, and cows. Along with an expanded discussion of the challenges of the shipping trade, the backmatter includes a select list of related careers and leads to online resources. Rare human figures in the pictures are mostly brown-skinned. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An informative peek at our global infrastructure’s major lifeline. (Informational picture book. 5-8)
Ariana focuses on the rangoli contest, which she is determined to win. After she completes her artwork, though, Rafi trips and spills powder all over what Ariana considered her perfect creation. Infuriated, Ariana bursts into tears only to discover that Rafi’s mistake was actually just what she needed to take her art—and her maturity—to the next level. The book’s gorgeous illustrations and chatty, feisty narratorial voice form a brightly colored canvas for Ariana’s realization about the traps of perfectionism. Shah includes helpful details for readers unfamiliar with Diwali, such as an explanation of how Ariana makes rangoli and backmatter with an overview of the holiday. The book wraps up with Ariana and Rafi watching fireworks, which she appreciates her little brother.

THE BEST DIWALI EVER
Shah, Sonali
Illus. by Chaaya Prabhat
Scholastic (32 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
9781338837834

A South Asian older sister comes to appreciate her little brother. Ariana’s 3-year-old brother, Rafi, seems to ruin everything... will he spoil Diwali? Rafi spills flour on the floor while Ariana and her grandmother make sweets, gets messy handprints on Ariana’s new clothes, and interrupts the traditional dancers with his silly moves. While the adults explain Rafi’s antics away, Ariana focuses on the rangoli contest, which she is determined to win. After she completes her artwork, though, Rafi trips and spills powder all over what Ariana considered her perfect creation. Infuriated, Ariana bursts into tears only to discover that Rafi’s mistake was actually just what she needed to take her art—and her maturity—to the next level. The book’s gorgeous illustrations and chatty, feisty narratorial voice form a brightly colored canvas for Ariana’s realization about the traps of perfectionism. Shah includes helpful details for readers unfamiliar with Diwali, such as an explanation of how Ariana makes rangoli and backmatter with an overview of the holiday. The book wraps up with Ariana and Rafi watching fireworks, which she appreciates her little brother.

A joyful Diwali celebration laced with messages that are important all year-round. (Picture book 3-7)

PENNY DRAWS A SCHOOL PLAY
Shepard, Sara
Putnam (240 pp.)
$14.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780593616802
Series: Penny Draws, 2

Journal entries addressed to her dog, Cosmo, continue to help Penny navigate life’s more difficult situations. Though things have been going OK for a while, Penny knows she needs to start writing letters to her dog again when her classmate Luke’s folded-paper fortune-teller predicts “unexpected surprises” are coming her way. The first surprise turns out to be that everyone will be required to participate in the fifth grade class play. As if that isn’t enough, next her parents suddenly announce they’re moving to a new house. This second series entry further explores Penny’s changing friendship with ex-bestie Violet. She also attempts to forge a friendship between two people she likes very much who unfortunately dislike each other. Navigating these uncomfortable changes and social situations requires Penny to step outside her comfort zone and lean on her coping mechanisms to deal with her anxiety. Discussions with her Feelings Teacher offer more useful strategies for young people with anxiety. Although Penny’s new friend group is supportive, readers will squirm with vicarious embarrassment from some of the situations she finds herself in. Parts of the narrative would have benefited from tightening, but many readers will feel seen and validated. The interspersed comics are a highlight, carrying surprising emotional weight and humor given their simplicity. Penny and her family read white.

A helpful story about a young anxiety sufferer navigating the unexpected. (Fiction. 8-12)

NINJA NATE
Sheppard, Markette
Illus. by Robert Paul Jr.
Denene Millner Books/Simon & Schuster (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781544760299

A boy with a ninja alter ego battles the first day of school. Ten-year-old “ninja master” Nathaniel Brown has been rocking his green ninja suit all summer; accordingly, his friends dub him Ninja Nate. He deems his older brother, Charlie, his sensei, but the boss is Mama Mary, who nurtures her ninjas “between snack-time rumbles and play-time fumbles.” When he’s not performing feats of “play-jitsu” with his silver sword, battling butterflies and deflecting sprinkler sprays, Nate chills like any other kid. The night before the first day of school, Ninja Nate dreams of combating “a gazillion nefarious ninjas” intent on conquering Potato Chip Dip Mountain. But he wakes to a harsher reality. After an accident, his leg was replaced by a prosthesis, which his costume has concealed; his sword is a sticker-dotted cane. Will his classmates accept the “new” Nathaniel? When he heeds Mama Mary’s advice—“One step at a time”—he discovers that his racially diverse classmates admire both Ninja Nate’s “cool ninja moves” and Nathaniel’s intelligence and kindness. While their ready acceptance of his limb difference is reassuring, the resolution feels somewhat rushed; readers battling similar anxieties may wish for more details. Bold, animated comic-style text and illustrations immerse readers in Nathaniel’s vivid imagination while sympathetically conveying his apprehension and family members’ and friends’ support. Nathaniel and his family are Black. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An upbeat introduction to limb difference. (Picture book 4-8)
WHAT IT’S LIKE TO BE A BIRD (ADAPTED FOR YOUNG READERS)
From Flying to Nesting, Eating to Singing—What Birds Are Doing and Why
Sibley, David Allen
Delacorte (208 pp.)
$19.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
978-0-593-43018-7

An expert ornithologist lays out the hows, whatis, and whys of bird behavior.

Sibley, the much-admired creator of a popular series of identification guides for birds, has adapted his adult title What It’s Like To Be a Bird (2020). But, in fact, his initial impetus for that book was his desire to write an introduction to birds for young readers—not a field guide but an album that would foster appreciation for the birds around us. And here it is. In organization and presentation, this adaptation is very like the source material; a concise overview of birds in general is followed by profiles of various species. Sibley covers a broad set of the most familiar birds in the continental United States and Canada. His illustrations are striking and meticulously accurate. The format—short, informative paragraphs that focus on a particular species but also answer broader questions about bird physiology and behavior—works both for browsers and those reading from cover to cover and is just as appealing as the original. The biggest change is a good one: The introduction to each species depicted now appears at the beginning of the entry, near a portrait of the bird, rather than as part of an index in the back. Some wording has been simplified and some details left out, but overall, this is an immensely entertaining and enlightening volume that will entice both adults and children.

Splendid. (Nonfiction. 8-15)

RAYLEIGH MANN IN THE COMPANY OF MONSTERS
Smart, Ciannon
Harper/HarperCollins (368 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9780063081253

A 12-year-old boy discovers that he belongs to a world of monsters.

Rayleigh Mann, a Black British boy, has always been a bit of a troublemaker. It’s All Hallows’ Eve, and he’s excited to meet his friends for tricking—and the occasional treat—even if it means sneaking out of Brutely Estate, the London high-rise where he lives with Mama and Nana, who is from Jamaica. But Rayleigh can’t find his friends, and the government-imposed curfew to save energy (“Lights Out to Help Out”) in a world affected by climate change is rapidly approaching. Instead of trick-or-treating, Rayleigh is captured by a brown-skinned northern girl called Marley and meets his Uncle Thelonious, a jumbie. Rayleigh learns that he’s a monsterling; his missing dad is the Bogey Mann, “Supreme Scarer for the entire Confederation of Lightless Places”, and now he has the opportunity to pass trials in Below-London that will allow him to become a citizen of a world where monsters scare kids into behaving properly and produce Volence, a renewable energy source harvested from “rehabilitated children.” Rayleigh must race against time to complete the trials and rescue his father before evil triumphs over good. Rayleigh rises to the occasion and stands out due to his great courage and curiosity. The diversity of monsters from various cultures present in the story is refreshing. Readers will be left on the edges of their seats, waiting for the next series installment that may fully unravel the mystery behind his dad’s disappearance.

Fantastic, frightful fun. (Fantasy. 8-12)

THE BOY, THE CLOUD AND THE VERY TALL TALE
Smith, Heather
Orca (280 pp.)
$12.95 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
9781459836037

A boy must thwart a dreadful scheme to separate people from their memories.

Eleven-year-old Ewan’s grief is so contained that he hasn’t cried in years despite losing both of his parents. His mother, who built the house they had lived in, died when he was 7; his father disappeared when Ewan was 9. Resolved to find his father—who was taken away by a cloud according to Grumple, the grandfather Ewan and his sister now live with—Ewan sets out on a journey up the Newfoundland coast to the place his father spent childhood summers. He’s joined by his irrepressible 7-year-old sister, Flora, and Mr. So-and-So, an unusual purveyor of notions who wields unpredictable magic. Smith deftly avoids being twee, employing rich, alliterative language and contrasting amusing fantasy elements with Ewan’s stolidity. That he carries a burden of grief and sorrow that he can’t easily release comes across in subtle details. The characters all read white; the post–World War I setting of fishing villages and farms is revealed in small details about clothing, transportation, and songs. Just as Ewan finds insights into his sadness, he is confronted by the discovery that darker forces are at work. The story is reminiscent of Richard Kennedy and Kate DiCamillo in its mixture of strong, somewhat eccentric fantasy elements and confrontation of sorrow.

Complex and memorable. (Fantasy. 9-13)
“An immensely satisfying glimpse of a family’s ability to navigate challenges through honest conversation and mutual support.”

**DO YOU REMEMBER?**

Smith, Sydney
Neal Porter/Holiday House
(40 pp.)
$18.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
9780823442621

A parent and child share memories during their first day in a new home.

Hands, feet, faces. Close-ups of these body parts indicate proximity of child to parent in this quietly affecting story of separation and change. The book opens on two light-skinned faces wreathed with dark hair snuggled into bed pillows. The color of the text indicates the speaker (pink for the parent, blue for the child). Each episode begins with parent or child asking the titular question, and as time shifts between present and past, the design goes from double-page spreads to square, sequential panels, allowing Smith to home in on details: the parents sitting on a blue checkered picnic blanket in the hazy sunshine as the child presents berries; the child riding a bicycle before crashing, laughing, into a haystack; Grandpa’s lantern—its glow contrasting with the darkness the night the power went out. As in Smith’s previous stories, sensory descriptions beautifully gird the emotions of the visual narrative, and a sensitive caretaker and child face challenges with loving attention to one another. The parent and child recall how they got lost driving to the new dwelling; the child handed the parent the teddy bear that Dad—who hasn’t come with them—had given them. Gazing out the apartment window at dawn, surrounded by these familiar objects, the child wonders if this “magic” moment will also be a memory one day. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

An immensely satisfying glimpse of a family’s ability to navigate challenges through honest conversation and mutual support. *(Picture book. 4-7)*

**THE OGRE IN THE HALL**

Sorin, Céline
Hippo Park/Astra Books for Young Readers (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781662640520

A young pup needs to use the bathroom, but someone’s already on the toilet!

Even though Jojo is scared of the ogre who comes out at night, a full bladder is keeping the little dog from sleeping. So, armed with a toy sword, Jojo opens the bathroom door and confronts the ogre, who turns out to have a tummy ache. The ogre likes Jojo’s bathroom because it has a light (unlike his own). The ogre needs to wash his hands in Jojo’s other bathroom (the first bathroom apparently lacks a sink), but he’s scared of the octopus who lives there, so Jojo accompanies him. That octopus is herself afraid of the crocodiles in the hall, and they in turn are terrified of the ogre. And Jojo still needs to pee! The bright colors and cute concept make this French import an appealing read for young children, who’ll be empowered to face the dark on their own trips to the bathroom at night. Jojo veers between resembling a dog and a kangaroo throughout, and it doesn’t make a lot of sense that the first “monster” Jojo encounters is a literal ogre while the rest are animals like Jojo. But the conclusion to the potty emergency will leave both Jojo and readers satisfied even if the penultimate joke falls a little flat. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

An amusing, empowering story about conquering nighttime fears. *(Picture book. 2-4)*

**THE IMPOSSIBLE TALES OF BASKERVILLE HALL**

Standish, Ali
Harper/HarperCollins (336 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780063275577

A promising young sleuth investigates curious cases at his new school in this series opener written in partnership with the Conan Doyle estate.

Young Arthur Conan Doyle is an observant Scottish boy living in poverty in Edinburgh in 1868. When he helps save a young mother and her baby, his keen intellect and quick wits do not go unobserved; soon afterward, he receives an invitation to attend a secretive institution, “the most rigorous and innovative school in these British Isles.” A futuristic airship whisks Arthur away to Baskerville Hall, where he’s greeted by peculiar professors. He soon makes equally eccentric friends, such as an Irish girl who hoards useful miscellanea in her pockets and a South Asian British boy who writes obituaries for his very much alive acquaintances. There’s also a snobbish bully, the son of a member of Parliament. The multilayered mystery brings together the initiation rituals of a secret society, a dinosaur egg, and a mysterious grandfather clock. It builds on the familiar setting of a strange school with quirky inhabitants, evoking the mood of and incorporating characters from Conan Doyle’s classics, including professors Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, and Arthur’s roommate, James Moriarty. These details will delight fans, but the intricate worldbuilding may overwhelm readers unfamiliar with this universe. The coed student body includes international students and is marked by gender parity and socioeconomic diversity.

A satisfying mystery shrouded in layers of scene-setting details. *(historical photos and drawings)* *(Mystery. 9-14)*
“Masterfully updated and impeccably rendered.”

THE NORTH WIND & THE SUN
Stead, Philip
Neal Porter/Holiday House (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Oct. 10, 2023
9780823455836

The North Wind and the Sun face off in a retelling of one of Aesop’s fable.

Cued by a chill in the air, three brown-skinned sisters rise from their rockers in their little house. The sisters don beautifully patched and mended woolen coats. Each sister’s coat is a primary color: yellow, blue, and red—and colored lines on their white socks match. Outside, the Sun admires the sisters’ coats “with radiant joy” while the North Wind rages at the puny garments. Both forces of nature strive to pull the coats from the sisters’ backs. As the North Wind blows, the sisters huddle together with their black dog until it subsides. The Sun’s warmth then brings wild animals out of hiding. The coats soon become repurposed as picnic blankets—a clear sign of the contest’s victor. While many artists have retold this story, Stead has created something truly special. The original fable’s solo traveler has become three sisters, demonstrating a collective strength. The sisters’ colors also each symbolize something more: joy, sadness, and trouble/strike. Stead’s beautifully textured illustrations create a strong duality between the elements, with the North Wind’s frenetic lines in stark contrast to the Sun’s serene spirals. Several page turns play with the sense of scale and encourage readers to rotate the book. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Masterfully updated and impeccably rendered. (Picture book. 4-8)

PELL OF GUMBING
My Extremely Normal Fairy-Tale Life
Steinkellner, Emma
Labyrinth Road (224 pp.)
Sept. 26, 2023
9780593570678
9780593570692 paper
9780593570678 PLB
Series: Nell of Gumbling, 1

Things do not go as planned for young Nell.

In the magical world of Gumbling lives bespectacled 12-year-old Nell Starkeeper, her two younger siblings, and her star-farming parents, Dad and Pa. More than anything, aspiring artist Nell wants to be assigned as an apprentice to famous painter Wiz Bravo. However, when the apprenticeships are announced by teacher Ms. Garlic, she learns she’s been placed with formidable, dour Mrs. Birdneck, the Town Lorekeeper. Nell is averse to both Mrs. Birdneck and the lorekeeping archives, which are housed in a cold, dark dungeon. Her two best friends, Gilligan Bugg, a Thumbkin, and Myra Didwell, who is half fairy, got their preferred apprenticeships, something that brings Nell down further. When a wily duo of human developers arrives from New York City, claiming to be long-lost relatives of a past ruler and planning to transform quaint Gumbling into a bustling resort, Nell and her friends use their newfound apprentice skills and the power of friendship to try to save their beloved kingdom. Steinkellner’s vibrant and fun series opener is a delight that captures the ups and downs of tweendom with whimsy and panache. Through her missteps, Nell’s journey to finding her own happiness is wholly engaging. The charming art supports the cleverly wrought worldbuilding, including details readers will pore over and alternating between pages of text with illustrations and traditional comic panels. Most characters present white; Myra reads Black.

A feel-good tale of friendship, community, and unexpected joy. (additional comics) (Graphic fantasy. 8-12)

TAKE A HIKE!
Stromoski, Rick
Union Square Kids (144 pp.)
$16.99 | June 27, 2023
978-1-4549-4831-5
Series: Schnozzer & Tater toes

In this graphic-novel series opener, two dogs run into fairy-tale staples while seeking out a faraway town.

On a rainy day, Mr. Schnozzer and Tater toes play Mother May I?—which prompts them to wonder why Tater toes can’t remember anything about having a mother; a birth certificate leads them on a quest to a puppy farm in the town of Buzzard’s Breath. Kind but dimwitted Tater toes tries to call a cab to take them there…on a calculator. The story leads the two agreeable pals on some silly paths, from the cottage where Little Red Riding Hood is about to meet a wolf in disguise to the house where Hansel and Gretel are about to be cooked. The mix of familiar fairy-tale stories and Schnozzer and Tater toes’ own adventures is novel, but the two characters are funny and lovable enough to sustain a story without those detours. Tater toes saves Schnozzer from quicksand using a yo-yo and amusingly mishears Schnozzer’s assurance that there are “no spiders” as “nose spiders,” resulting in Tater toes’ spending the night with pine cones stuffed up his nostrils for protection. Stromoski is the creator of the long-running comic strip “Soup to Nutz,” and his talent is evident in the brisk pacing, exaggerated cartoon illustrations, and many jokes; this entertaining story moves along quickly and never sags. Human characters are generally light-skinned.

Travel is made fun with two excellent new characters off on their first quest. (Graphic fiction. 7-10)
MAID FOR IT
Sumner, Jamie
Atheneum (240 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781665905770

Franny Bishop’s life is built on worrying: She worries that Mom will relapse again and that they will have to move back to Memphis, “where all the bad memories live.”

Suppressing her anxiety is 12-year-old Franny’s specialty—to combat it, she religiously crosses daily goals off in her favorite purple planner. Drawing a line through each item helps her find a sense of peace, even if that means hiding in the bathroom at lunchtime and calling to check on her mother. When she’s assigned to sit at a table in math class with popular (and mean) cheerleader Sloan and basketball player and origami enthusiast Noah, Franny is pushed further outside of her comfort bubble. And when a car accident lands her mother in the hospital, upsetting the delicate balance they have achieved, even the support of Mimi, her mother’s Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous sponsor, can’t stave off her panic attacks. Franny sees no choice but to take over one of her mother’s jobs cleaning houses, even if it means resorting to some ingenious strategies to pull off. This honest story invites readers into a realistic situation that many young people experience. It offers an accessible, welcoming, and introspective account of the struggles faced by those who worry about a loved one’s addiction. The well-developed relationships are a highlight. Noah is Black and has two moms in a community that is predominantly white and straight.

A heart-wrenching read about a girl forced to grow up too quickly. (Fiction. 10-14)

BOOK OF SCREAMS
Szpirglas, Jeff
Illus. by Steven P. Hughes
Orca (176 pp.)
$14.95 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
9781459834095

A reader takes matters into her own hands after she discovers her favorite author is stealing his terrifying tales. Tanya is beyond excited to meet Joel Southland. His scary stories are so relatable, and she treasures the signed bookmark he gives her when he visits her school... until late one night, when the ink from the signature appears to come to life. When a new Southland story feels entirely too familiar, Tanya begins to piece together the clues about where he’s getting his ideas, and she patiently develops a plan to turn the tables. Interwoven with Tanya’s journey to stop Southland are many of the short stories he’s credited with having written, creating a story within a story, all told in very short pieces. Particularly dark imagery (both written and illustrated) will be a strong draw for the intended age range. The contemporary relevance of the opening tale, which involves mask-wearing, will serve as a hook for young readers, and insertion of other pieces of short fiction results in the cliffhangers that heighten the suspense. This well-paced, rather disturbing, and very creepy collection will appeal to a wide variety of readers. Physical descriptions are minimal in the text, but Tanya presents white in the illustrations.

Nightmarish short stories threaded together by an intrepid reader’s determination. (Horror 9-12)

DOÑA QUIXOTE
Rise of the Knight
Terciero, Rey
Illus. by Monica M. Magaña
Henry Holt (240 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9781250795526
Series: Doña Quixote, 1

As a descendant of Don Quixote, Lucia Castillo is ready to follow in the tradition of her ancestors and be a real knight.

Abuelo taught Lucia how to “be the champion of right and good, against justice and evil.” She trained alongside him since she was a little girl, abiding by her knight’s code and learning to help any damsel (or dude) in distress. He was her hero—despite most of the town, including her mother, believing he was fighting invisible monsters and dubbing him Abuelo Loco. After he passes, Mexican American Lucia continues his mission despite receiving judgment from everyone around her apart from her best friend, Sandro, and her trusty steed, Rocky the donkey. When she discovers Abuelo’s old helmet in an attic chest and realizes that it allows her to see mythical creatures, Lucia sets out with Sandro to uncover her town’s monstrous mayor’s evil plot and save the community before it’s too late—all while juggling Abuela’s and Sandro’s secrets. Will her hasty impulse to be helpful turn out to be her downfall? Over the course of Lucia’s journey, she grows in empathy and compassion with the help of her family and friends, learning the real meaning of doing good. The cartoonlike illustrations depict a vibrant world of colorful humans and spirits alike, emphasizing the characters’ facial expressions and highlighting the narrative’s action.

An exciting adventure of mythical proportions centering real-life concerns. (author’s note) (Graphic adventure. 8-12)
Tiger Trouble
Thompson, Dan
Random House Graphic (96 pp.)
$10.99 | $13.99 PLB | May 9, 2023
978-0-593-48628-3
9780593486290 PLB
Series: Tig and Lily, 1

Two felines question each other’s identities.

Tig the cat barges into Lily’s tiger pen at the city zoo and declares it home. Lily’s confused when Tig says that he is a tiger, but Tig flips the script and raises questions over whether Lily is a tiger. Tig even goes so far as suggesting Lily’s parents called her “Tiger” as a nickname, which causes Lily distress. Luckily for Lily, there are signs at the zoo that make it clear she’s a tiger. Lily is able to laugh in self-awareness that she was coerced into an identity crisis at all and even confronts a couple of rude tigers who are mean to Tig over his assertion. This is a clever tale of self-image and how it can be reinforced or denied, and ultimately friendship blossoms between the pair as Lily tells Tig, “You can be whatever you want to be.” Tig’s consistent refusal to recognize Lily as a tiger threatens to cross over into its own form of bullying, but he comes off as more oblivious than malicious. The humorous dialogue is supported by artwork that demonstrates the tension between Tig and Lily, including colorful sound effects and facial expressions that convey Tig’s self-confident attitude and Lily’s various states of unease.

A whimsical reminder that respect and friendship sometimes matter more than winning an argument. (facts about cats and tigers, how to draw Lily and Tig) (Graphic fiction. 5-8)

The Fox’s Tower
Thompson, Sam
Illus. by Anna Tromop
Little Island (272 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
9781915071354
Series: Wolfstongue, 2

In the sequel to Wolfstongue (2022), Silas’ daughter must rescue her father when he’s kidnapped by devious fox Reynard.

Ever since Mum died, Willow and Dad’s relationship has been strained. Willow doesn’t understand why Dad dwells on the past, and she doesn’t share his guilt about humans’ harsh treatment of wolves, with whom Dad shares a special bond. But when a fearsome beast drags Dad into the woods, she’s determined to save him. Accompanied by Hersent and Isengrim’s three daughters—now the Forest’s last wolves—she enters Reynard’s lair, his chaotic Tower that is patrolled by automatonlike clay creatures and fraught with inequality; foxes at the top flaunt their wealth while the animals below go hungry. Reynard’s henchmen brought Dad to the Tower because, as the

Wolfstongue, he’s the only one who can retrieve the magical clay that will prevent the Tower’s collapse. When Dad refuses, Willow volunteers to go in his place—setting off a terrible chain of events. Even worse, Reynard isn’t the only animal hatching horrible schemes. In addition to revisiting such themes as self-determination and the power of language, Thompson touches on political rivalry and the effects of grief. While Willow’s complex feelings about Mum’s death are poignant, Silas’ lack of development somewhat reduces the emotional impact of his and Willow’s frayed relationship. Occasionally poetic prose and evocative black-and-white illustrations smooth a slightly disjointed plot. Willow and Dad present white.

Thoughtful, if uneven. (map) (Fantasy. 8-12)

Airi Sano, Prankmaster General
Public Enemy Number One
Tokushige, Zoe
Illus. by Jennifer Naalchigar
Philomel (288 pp.)
$14.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780593465813
Series: Airi Sano, Prankmaster General, 2

Airi Sano is back for more adventures in this story in which she is framed when things go wrong with the school play.

Sixth grader Airi loves to pull pranks, but she’s made a deal with her mom and dad: If she can do better in school, she’ll get a cellphone and maybe even karate lessons. Things are looking up now that she’s been diagnosed with dyslexia, and her teacher is helping her with learning strategies. Airi is earning the best grades she’s ever had and has real friends to talk to—and play tricks with. When the school play is announced, Airi signs up to be with her best friend, Mei. At first, she’s nervous about reading her lines, but after a few drama classes, excitement takes over. But things start to go wrong when some terrible incidents occur, and Mei, some classmates, and even the principal blame Airi. Determined to prove her innocence and save the play, Airi must catch the real culprit. In the process of navigating ups and downs, she learns what real friendship is made of. Told in the first person and enhanced by interspersed case file reports, humorous footnotes, and lively black-and-white illustrations, Airi’s narrative is hilarious and engaging. The spot art adds cultural context to the Hawaiian setting and Airi’s Japanese American Army family life. The supporting cast represents diverse cultures.

Nonstop laughs, mischief, and fun. (land acknowledgment) (Fiction. 8-12)
The mighty history of capoeira—and one of the form's central figures.

A cultural expression that blends fighting, music, dance, and theatrics, capoeira arose from the beliefs and customs of the African peoples who were forced into slavery by the Portuguese in Brazil. Tonatiuh details capoeira's tumultuous rise, from its banning in Brazil in 1890, two years after the abolition of slavery, to “a celebrated art” across the early 20th century. Mestre Bimba (born Manoel dos Reis Machado in 1899) developed a new kind of capoeira called Luta Regional Baiana. Determined to change the form’s “bad reputation,” Bimba opened an academia and taught capoeira in a formalized manner, leading to public bouts that reinforced his notion of capoeira as an artistic expression of resistance. Thanks to Mestre Bimba’s endeavors, as well as the endeavors of other capoeiristas and a slightly more tolerant Brazilian government, capoeira eventually was decriminalized in the 1950s, leading to greater participation, including among previously excluded segments of the population such as women. The author/illustrator’s trademark pre-Colombian-flavored artwork lends itself wonderfully to the subject matter, with exaggerated poses and razor-sharp linework conveying body movements. Several illustrations depict shadows of capoeiristas as silhouettes of enslaved people, emphasizing the form’s origins. A glossary and in-depth author’s note provide further illuminating context. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A superb portrait of Afro-Brazilian endurance. (endnotes, photos, bibliography) (Informational picture book. 5-10)

More reanimated corpses rise to menace stalwart Swiss tinkerer Frances Stenzel and an expanding crew of allies in this sequel to Fraces and the Monster Notebook, and free a group of local villagers seized as experimental subjects, Frances is pursued by moaning revenants, suddenly feral pet dogs, and unnaturally large wolves. Despite struggling with social skills—in part a result of being raised in secret for years—Frances has and enlists allies galore, ranging from a snotty mechanical butler and a chimpanzee with a large sign language vocabulary to her parents, Victor and Mary (wink, wink), and a group of abandoned village children, including one who is deaf. The author opens with a note about different sign languages and shows a knack for describing hand and finger motions clearly. Though the book is set in 1940, there is no mention of Nazis and but one oblique reference to the war. Despite plenty of undead bodies, gunfire, animal attacks, and massive explosions, the casualties, if any; are scrupulously kept offstage. The cast reads white.

A rollicking adventure. (Adventure. 9-13)

Six months after Dad’s fatal heart attack, his grieving family moves to his hometown.

Lonely Savi is just shy of 14. Her older sister escapes into social media. Mom is withdrawn, cleaning obsessively. Leaving polluted Delhi, the Kumars settle in Shajarpur, renowned for its perfect climate and clean air, along with Dad’s 42 houseplants, withering without his care. Savi is determined to save them, and soon something strange happens: Whenever she touches a plant, she has visions, glimpses into her father’s youth, Shajarpur’s history, and threats to its future. At her new school, Savi meets Tree, an enormous Ficus myoreinis, or fig tree, who communicates especially powerfully with her. She joins the school ecology club but is also approached by the uber-wealthy Very Cool and Hip People, who make her feel insecure. Hiding her new powers, Savi is torn between the two groups until the shocking announcement that Tree, who seems to be dying, will be cut down. Tree’s decline also mirrors a negative shift in Shajarpur’s weather. The growing urgency forces Savi outside her comfort zone as the growing urgency forces Savi outside her comfort zone as the story builds to a climax that exposes a shadowy group of con- spirators. Narrated in Savi’s fresh, humorous voice, this dreamy, atmospheric story skillfully explores the dynamics of grief. The nuanced conclusion reinforces central themes of interconnec- tion between people and environment and the joyful, healing properties of nature. The often playful tone helps soften the serious subject matter, and Eipe’s spot art whimsically references the environmental content.

Lush, imaginative, and emotionally insightful. (Eco-fantasy. 10-16)
After becoming ghosts in a freak lab accident, a group of friends pull off heists in the hope of returning to life.

Zenith, a Dutch Indonesian 12-year-old, and her best friends have a lot of fun being dead, but they all agree they’d rather be alive again. And as her family prepares to move away from the area she haunts, Zenith in particular needs to return to life as soon as possible. Using their diverse set of ghostly powers, they work together to steal artifacts, books, and other magical objects that could return them to life, under the guidance of a medium. Nothing works...but then they attempt to take a device called Redeemer from a necromancer, who’s using it for nefarious purposes. When one of her friends gets caught in the middle of the botched job, Zenith must take on the role of leader and save her friends, but at what cost to herself? The kids’ clever antics keep the levity up through what could have been a somber story. Their respective powers, like Zenith’s ability to move physical objects, complement their unique personalities and are organically incorporated into their plans to swipe objects and rescue their friends. The blunt storytelling style brings some reveals on too early but otherwise works to great effect to keep the tone light even while delivering mature messages about death and the meaning of life.

A fun ghostly romp. (Fiction. 9-12)

MONSTERS NEVER GET HAIRCUTS
Versini, Marie-Hélène
Illus. by Vincent Boudgourd
Boxer Books (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781914912733

Monsters can’t get haircuts, play the piano, or wear nail polish.

There’s plenty of other things that these wild-looking, otherworldly beasts can’t do. A many-eyed balled monster sits on a couch watching television. “Monsters don’t wear glasses,” the text states. A giant creature with long arms bursts out of a car, steering wheel dislodged: “Monsters can’t drive.” And so the pattern continues page after page. Some of the monsters are silly—a Loch Ness–esque sea serpent who can’t swim sports a flowery inner tube. Others skew a bit more playfully frightful, like a toothy, all-black one who isn’t afraid of the dark. The final page shows a child with skin the white of the page snuggled peacefully in bed after realizing that monsters don’t do any of these things because they don’t exist. Translated from French, the spare text is effective, allowing readers to linger on Boudgourd’s wonderfully beastly oil paint and pencil illustrations. No two look similar, and each is a little eerie, though nonthreatening. The majority of the color is used on the monsters; the background items and humans are rendered in pencil. The concept that these creatures can’t do what humans do because they aren’t real is a fresh take and potentially reassuring to young readers. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

This look at monsters is fun, original, and even a bit soothing. (Picture book. 3-5)

ZOMBIE SEASON
Weinberger, Justin
Scholastic (240 pp.)
$14.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781338881714

Resourceful kids battle hordes of the walking dead.

Residents of several Northern California counties are being advised to evacuate and “flee to safety” in the wake of a zombie epidemic. Lucy Santifer and her family just make it to their car when they are attacked and killed. Nearby, Lucy’s best friend, 12-year-old Joule Artis, climbs into her treehouse, the better to seek her missing father. Elsewhere, 11-year-old Oliver Wachs is holed up in the Redwood Zombie...
The plot thickens with the forecast of a Rogue Wave of zombies. The action pings briskly among the three young protagonists, and the punchy prose is suitably pitched to a preteen readership.

Lonely Bird's long trek across the kitchen floor to the "mon-Bird. Moments in the plot are likewise engaging, especially Latina, and Joule is minimally described and racially ambiguous. Brigade Headquarters, stocked with weaponry and populated by dedicated zombiefighters. And Regina, 12, is haunted by her narrow zombie escapes even as her mother, Dr. Celeste Herrera, unveils Project Coloma, an ingenious system that uses a zombie treadmill situated in an abandoned gold mine to create much-needed energy for the region. Weinberger's monster thriller is long on suspense, with several close calls but no graphic violence. The action pings briskly among the three young protagonists, and the punchy prose is suitably pitched to a preteen readership.

It's dinnertime, and like so many kids, Sir Julian, a tan-skinned child, is not impressed with his mom's experimental cooking, opting to feed it to the dog. Predictably, this leads to the need for snacks. Sir Julian's evening—beginning with his supper, which smells "like dragon's ooze"—mimics a hero's journey as he vanquishes foes and fears, among them the dreaded potty monster, on the way to his final destination: the kitchen. To his horror, he discovers that the family is out of snacks, rendering his perilous journey moot—or is it? For when Sir Julian, left with no other options, tries the dreadful dinner, he finds it...not bad. Perhaps the real quest is being open to trying new things. Food avoidance, bathroom fears, and nighttime worry are familiar and welcome themes in picture books, and this one, though a bit predictable, is no exception. Digital art effectively depicts Sir Julian's wide range of emotions, from trepidation to terror to triumph, but feels a bit artificial. Adult readers assessing (among other things) how loud this nighttime journey must have been may wonder where the grown-ups in this book are, but kids will enjoy comic nods like the overly dramatic depiction of the unfamiliar—and therefore—monstrous dinner. (This book was reviewed digitally)

An enjoyable, if well-trod, adventure. (Picture book. 3-6)

When Aunt Bea can no longer tell stories, young Zora becomes the new storykeeper. Zora loves hearing family stories from Aunt Bea, who taught acting and uses her theatrical skills, including costumes, to evoke various relatives. Through the family book filled with photographs, names, and dates, combined with Aunt Bea's storytelling, Zora learns about Grandma Jean's swim coaching days and Grandpa Tom's preaching. Zora's page is near the end of the book, and Zora wonders which parts of her life Aunt Bea will focus on. When Aunt Bea becomes weak, her storytelling suffers, and Zora helps her with the stories. Before they reach Zora's pages in the book, Aunt Bea dies. But she has left Zora the book, with Zora's role named on her pages and an envelope of photographs to add to the book, including ones that tell a story of Aunt Bea's life. This deeply moving tale of family history and connections, loss, memory, and legacy offers a
beautiful way to talk to children about the contributions people make during their time on this Earth and is a striking representation of a Black family full of ordinary and outstanding people. Every word of Wilkins’ text is well chosen, and Coulter’s stunning, emotional art, a unique combination of photographs and mixed media, is a memorable visual depiction of a range of tender moments. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Powerfully immersive. (Picture book. 4-10)

SLAVERY AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN STORY
Williams Dockery, Patricia
Crown (272 pp.)
$8.99 paper | $12.99 PLB | Sept. 12, 2023
9780593480465
9780593480472 PLB
Series: Race to the Truth

The Black presence in the Americas began hundreds of years before the establishment of the Colonies and the practice of chattel slavery.

In her exploration of how slavery has impacted the United States throughout its history, Williams Dockery begins her narrative before colonization. For example, in the early 16th century, African conquistador Juan Garrido traveled with Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León in his search for gold in present-day Puerto Rico and Florida. The African slave trade became a point of fierce competition among Western European countries. Their economic ambitions initially led colonists to try to enslave Indigenous people, then use European indentured servants, and later turn to enslaved Africans. Once race-based slavery was established, it became codified in law and contributed to the economic foundation of the country. Every effort was made to ensure lifelong bondage. Resistance to slavery by enslaved people—both small gestures and larger-scale organized efforts—occurred from the beginning. Formerly enslaved persons used their experiences of brutality to help grow the abolitionist movement. Stories and anecdotes are woven throughout the lively text as the author encourages readers to ponder these issues and events. Because of the wide time range covered, most topics are briefly introduced and will require further reading. Williams Dockery concludes with an intriguing look at archaeological and genetic work being done to learn more about those who lived their lives in bondage.

A valuable introduction for budding historians exploring complex aspects of American history. (resources, notes) (Nonfiction. 10-14)

THE SNOW MAN
A True Story
Winter, Jonah
Illus. by Jeanette Winter
Beach Lane/Simon & Schuster (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Oct. 3, 2023
9781665932394

One man makes a difference, far from society, in a cool true tale. When he is young, the man finds a remote cabin at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. There, he proceeds to spend the rest of his life. But being alone can be boring, so to pass the time he begins to record the snowfall, when the flowers bloom, when the animals emerge from hibernation, etc. As he grows older, he notices changes to the seasons, like the snow falling later and melting sooner. When he shares his copious notes with scientists, his data is embraced around the world as definitive proof that the world is growing warmer. The text is straightforward, ending with the final bittersweet observation that the man (whose real name is billy barr) will continue to measure the snowfall “for the time being.” Meanwhile Jeanette Winter brings her talents to bear on the beauty of snowcapped hills and barr’s own, inevitable, aging. Consider this a younger companion to I Begin With Spring (2022) by Julie Dunlap, illustrated by Megan Elizabeth Baratta, which also features a man’s meticulous notes on nature and their invaluable contribution to climate science. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A quiet, necessary consideration of how a single person can make an impact with patient observation. (Informational picture book. 4-7)

BETWEEN MONSTERS AND MARVELS
Wishingrad, Alysa
Harper/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780063244870

After her father dies, a girl must harness both her temper and innate abilities to find his killer and prove it’s a monster. Dare Coates is willful, surly, and unrepentantly nonconforming: “an awful girl.” Only her father truly understood and loved her, but he was often busy patrolling for monsters on the island where they live, even though one hasn’t been seen there for over 20 years. After his violent murder, her mother marries the island’s pompous and secretive governor, who then sends Dare to the mainland to live with her father’s aunt. From the moment her journey begins, Dare finds connections to her father through his past associates and the guild emblem on his special wooden box. The more she learns about him, the more peril Dare finds herself in, especially as she realizes the connection both she and her father have with so-called monsters. Dare has an outwardly canankerous nature that hides a desire for acceptance. This works
to endear her to readers even as her thorny exterior provides entertainment. Dare’s true nature reveals itself piece by piece, like the clues dropped in every so often that help expand the worldbuilding as well as the moral conundrums Dare becomes embroiled in. Questions of what constitutes a monster and who decides what’s true add depth to an already feisty caper. Characters read white.

A quirky examination of true monstrousness with a memorable protagonist. (Fantasy. 9-12)

THE BOY WHO WOKE THE SUN
Woodley, A.T.
Illus. by Mike Deas
Red Deer Press (240 pp.)
$14.95 paper | Sept. 1, 2023
9780889956858

A boy must journey across unknown lands while avoiding menacing butterflies.

Eleven-year-old Elliot Wood is having a rough start to the summer. His family members are engrossed in phones and work, and the news is filled with the pandemic, climate disasters, and other worrisome things, but he takes comfort in the ocean and observing marine life. One night, Elliot wakes up, trapped within his nightmare and lost at sea on an island of plastic garbage he’d read about. After being chased by a giant masked man, he discovers he’s been transported to Lappanthia, a world shrouded in darkness. Lappanthia is plagued by butterflies whose “sole purpose is to make you feel so sad, you wish you’d never been born.” Elliot learns the only way home is a 10-day journey through wild terrain.

Along with new friends—a talking octopus and an old woman named Granny Yilba—Elliot must face his fears and evade the evil butterflies to return home. Although the subject matter is heavy, this well-paced fantasy is full of lighter moments that are enhanced by the black-and-white illustrations. It explores emotional pain while guiding readers to think about who they are and what brings them happiness. Themes of pollution, kids as changemakers, friendship, family, and self-discovery recur throughout, with everything working together cohesively and offering readers new perspectives to ponder. Elliot is shown with dark hair and lightly shaded skin.

Moving and serious yet leavened with humor. (author interview) (Fantasy. 8-12)

A SKY OF PAPER STARS
Yi, Susie
Roaring Brook Press (240 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Sept. 26, 2023
9781250843890

When her wish to fit in goes wrong, Yuna tries to make it right by folding 1,000 paper stars so she can make another wish and set things right.

Feeling out of place as the child of Korean immigrants at a predominantly white American school, Yuna remembers a legend that her halmoni shared: “If someone gathers 1,000 paper stars in a jar...that person can make a wish on the stars...and it will come true.” Yuna folds her thousandth star and wishes her family could return to Korea, where she might finally belong. The next morning, she learns that Halmoni has passed away, and just as she wished, her family will be traveling to Korea. Yuna also discovers that her right hand has turned to paper. As the paper spreads to her forearm, she becomes convinced that she must fold another 1,000 paper stars to bring Halmoni back—and avoid turning entirely into paper. This is a quiet and deeply moving story of intergenerational love and sacrifice. The narrative uses different fonts to indicate Korean, English, and internal thoughts, while varied color palettes effectively distinguish Yuna’s memories and those of other family members from present-day scenes. These memories create a remarkably rich and clear depiction of Halmoni and the complexity of Yuna’s feelings toward her, despite the time and space that separated the two.

An affirming exploration of belonging and a testament to the power of family stories. (paper star folding instructions, author’s note) (Graphic fiction. 8-12)
OMEN OF ICE
Accardo, Jus
Entangled Teen (400 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug 1, 2023
9781649374028
Series: Omen of Ice, 1

A magical error binds human and Fae and thaws a kingdom's frozen secrets.

As a member of a druid order sworn to protect the Winter Fae, 18-year-old Keltania has spent most of her life training to serve as a guard in the Winter Lands, the sole place in the kingdom where magic still thrives. The initial honor she feels about protecting Valen, the court's reluctant heir, quickly vanishes upon meeting the arrogant, wolfish, 19-year-old Fae. She performs her duty to safeguard Valen's life and clandestine magic while warding off his repeated advances.

When the use of a protective sigil has unexpected consequences, Keltania and Valen are plunged into events stemming from truths about Valen's origins, the histories of their people, and their growing mutual attraction. Chapters alternate between the leads' first-person perspectives, allowing for rich internal monologues that soften Valen's persistently sexual dialogue and negging, which readers may find abrasive when combined with the unequal power dynamics. Shifting the setting beyond the Winter Lands invigorates the pacing and plot development. An entertaining side quest involving trolls enriches the narrative and serves to introduce several well-developed supporting characters like a trickster kelpie. The briskly paced ending brings initial resolution and forecasts conflict for additional installments. Keltania and Valen are described as pale-skinned; Keltania has red hair and hazel eyes, and Valen has black hair and violet eyes.

A mixed start for a feisty fantasy romance series. (Fantasy romance. 16+-adult)

FIRE FROM THE SKY
Åstot, Moa Backe
Trans. by Eva Apelqvist
Levine Querido (216 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept 26, 2023
9781646142484

A Sámi teen wrestles with his sexuality amid tradition and homophobia in this novel translated from Swedish and set in an Indigenous Arctic community.
Reindeer are everything to 16-year-old Ánte, who carries on his village’s traditions with honor. That is, until Ánte realizes that his entire body trembles at the sight of his friend Erik’s eyes. Soon, everything becomes about Erik—who, unfortunately, has a girlfriend. As confusion swirls within, Ánte explores an internet message board, finding a thread entitled, “Do homosexual reindeer herders exist?” Overheard conversations (including a few involving his father) reveal the community’s deeply embedded homophobia, contributing to Ánte’s own internalized homophobia. Leaving the village is not an option, but what if his feelings never go away? Why should Ánte have to choose in the first place? Despite the looming shadow of canonical queer tragedies in pastoral settings, debut Sámi author Åstot delicately manages to simultaneously honor tradition and push against it. The result is a rare and triumphant look at what it means for queerness to stay put, with all the messiness and pain that entails. The time-stopping emphasis on gazing and longing results in romantic tension that nearly rivals period romances, yet the story is anchored in the present. Sámi words and phrases and rich descriptions make for an immersive read. Though Ánte’s queerness is isolated, an adult gay Sámi’s reappearance hints at queer community.

A fresh voice and a setting that’s pure fire. (author’s note) (Fiction. 13-18)

LAYERS
Bagieu, Pénélope
Trans. by Montana Kane
First Second (144 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781250873736

Award-winning Parisian artist and graphic novelist Bagieu shares vignettes from her life in this title translated from French.

The opening tale, “Why Don’t You Have a Cat? You Love Cats!” is the strongest, telling the story of a very small Pénélope and her sister’s desperation to have cats of their own, the surprise kittens that appear under the Christmas tree, and the subsequent giddy highs and heartbreaking lows of pet ownership. One especially poignant and humorously told story relates the carefree, passion-filled summer of 1999, right before Bagieu entered university, when she and her equally poorly informed boyfriend received a crash course in safe sex from a compassionate gynecologist. More serious topics—death, sexual assault, and public harassment by predatory men—are interspersed with lighter-hearted tales of struggling with the cold as an exchange student in London, trying to connect with a high school crush who plays in a rock band, and musing on the impact of receiving participation awards as consolation prizes. The stories, which vary dramatically in length and tone, are presented with little analysis or commentary, trusting readers to draw their own conclusions. Overall, they feel like reminiscences filtered through an adult perspective rather than stories written to speak directly to young people currently living through similar experiences. Bagieu’s skillful, digitally rendered art mimics the looseness of pencil sketches and has a whimsical, highly emotionally expressive feeling. Kane’s translation is seamless and natural sounding.

Beautifully illustrated glimpses into a coming-of-age journey. (content warning) (Graphic memoir. 15-adult)

THE PRINCE & THE COYOTE
Bowles, David
Illus. by Amanda Mijangos
Levine Querido (336 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781646141777

Fight alongside young Nezahualcoyotl as he comes of age and earns his crown.

In pre-Columbian Mexico in the year 1418, a forced peace has granted the Acolhua people temporary reprieve. Fifteen-year-old crown prince Nezahualcoyotl (then called by his birth name, Acolmiztli) must leave the palace for the calmcac and become a man. This rite of passage is interrupted, however, when battle returns to Tetzcoco and everything changes forever. Nezahualcoyotl kills a man for the first time. He also watches silently from a tree as his father is slain. Shedding his clothes and his birth name, Nezahualcoyotl goes into hiding until the time is right to return. In a maelstrom of oscillating joy and tragedy, the story follows Nezahualcoyotl (of contemporary 100-peso bill fame) until the age of 23 in this grand adventure. While most of the four-part story is told through prose, scattered verse showcases Nezahualcoyotl’s poetic gifts (including some direct translations of Nahua poems). Political machinations abound alongside an exceedingly high body count. Bowles deftly uses the first-person present tense to add immediacy to Nezahualcoyotl’s otherwise distant story. Gender and sexuality are understood differently in Nezahualcoyotl’s culture, but significantly, a main love interest is xochihuah (“a queer gender in Nahua culture that doesn’t quite align to modern perceptions”). Though sparse, Mijangos’ full-color illustrations add a regal beauty to the book’s design. An appended “Guide to Unfamiliar Concepts” offers extensive additional context for each chapter.

Riveting. (family trees, map, pronunciation notes, author’s note) (Historical epic. 14-18)
As summer vacation draws to a close, young people across the U.S. are preparing for the upcoming school year with varying degrees of anticipation and trepidation. These nine recent releases reflect a wide range of experiences, offering readers mirrors for their own lives as well as glimpses into ones that are different and new.

Romance, with all its highs and lows, is an inevitable outcome of teens being thrown together for the majority of their waking hours. These books explore the complexities of figuring out young love.

*Belle of the Ball* written and illustrated by Mari Costa (First Second, March 21): In this adorable graphic novel rendered in pleasing shades of pink, awkward Belle’s crush on cool cheerleader Gina leads to her tutoring Gina’s jock girlfriend, Chloe, as a favor—and nothing going according to plan.


*All Alone With You* by Amelia Diane Coombs (Simon & Schuster, July 25): Opposites attract in this charming romance in which misanthropic Eloise, hoping to pad her college resume, volunteers with annoyingly cheerful Austin. They visit a 70-something former rock star, and Eloise gradually finds her defenses breaking down.

Boarding schools hold a certain cachet, and stories set in them are a long-time staple of young people’s literature. More opportunities to be away from parental supervision combined with the intensity of shared living quarters make them ideal settings for intrigue.

*What Happens After Midnight* by K.L. Walther (Sourcebooks Fire, June 27): An annual tradition at a New England boarding school brings exes Lily and Tag together in this cozy romp. As the pair roams campus setting up the senior prank, self-doubting Lily gains new personal insights.

*Ghosted: A Northanger Abbey Novel* by Amanda Quain (Wednesday Books, July 25): Even readers who are not Austenites will enjoy this delightfully spooky tale about headmistress’s daughter and paranormal skeptic Hattie, who’s assigned to work with new boy Kit, attending their supposedly haunted school on a ghost-hunting scholarship.

*Everyone’s Thinking It* by Aleema Omotoni (Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins, Sept. 5): Set in an English boarding school, this nuanced coming-of-age story centering two Nigerian cousins revolves around a mysterious act of sabotage that disrupts social dynamics and throws racial and other power structures into relief.

Heading off to college is a major transition in a young person’s life, and whether or not you feel socially, financially, and academically prepared, it’s one that will inevitably bring challenges and spark personal growth.

*Study Break: 11 College Tales From Orientation to Graduation* edited by Aashna Avachat (Feiwel & Friends, March 7): Diverse contributors make for an array of glimpses into college life in this anthology that contains loosely connected stories examining the highs and lows of campus life with a particular emphasis on identity and self-acceptance.

*First-Year Orientation* edited by Lauren Gibaldi and Eric Smith (Candlewick, April 4): This anthology benefits from a rich variety of voices, each offering peeks at what can happen during the emotionally tumultuous first days of college as young people figure out who they are and who they hope to become.

*Unnecessary Drama* by Nina Kenwood (Flatiron Books, Aug. 8): When anxious overthinker Brooke moves to Melbourne for university, she’s dismayed to be sharing a group house with Jesse, a boy she loathes based on their shared history; genuinely tender moments punctuate the resulting laugh-out-loud-funny mishaps.

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
FAULT LINES
Carpenter, Nora Shalaway
Running Press Kids (384 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780762480999

A relationship blooms between two misfit teens in rural West Virginia in this contemporary novel.

High school junior Viv has a sort of supernatural connection to the energy emitted by the world. After her deceased Aunt Elle’s favorite tree collapses in what seems to be a sinkhole, she becomes wary of Briar Gas, the company offering her father money for permission to use their property for a right of way. Twisted Pines newcomer Dex and his mom have struggled to make ends meet for as long as he can remember, and her job working on the oil pipeline that’s being built offers them a badly needed shot at economic security. In alternating third-person narratives from the points of view of Viv and Dex, the story shows the unlikely pair being drawn together even as they often disagree with one another’s stances on the environmental and economic implications of the pipeline. If the many issues explored here, such as environmental racism and systemic poverty, are at times a bit obvious in their delivery rather than seamlessly interwoven into the story, they are nevertheless important ideas explained by well-developed, nuanced characters with whom readers will easily empathize. The forested setting comes to life in lush, vivid descriptions. Viv and Dex both read white; there is diversity among the secondary characters.

An engaging novel that will keep readers thinking. (Fiction. 13-18)

FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY’S
Fazbear Frights Graphic Novel Collection
Cawthon, Scott, Kelly Parra & Andrea Waggner
Adapt. by Christopher Hastings
Illus. by Didi Esmeralda, Coryn Macpherson & Diana Camero
Colors by Ben Sawyer, Gonzalo Duerte & Judy Lai
Graphix/Scholastic (192 pp.)
$24.99 | $14.99 paper | Sept. 5, 2023
9781338860467 paper
9781338860429 paper
Series: Five Nights at Freddy’s: Fazbear Frights, 3

Creepy animatronic critters and troubled families link three graphic tales adapted from print tie-ins to a series of video games in this third series entry.

Furnished with slender storylines, the trio of stories—two featuring evil bunnies and the third, a maimed animatronic pirate fox who accurately predicts gruesome injuries for a hapless teen gamer—follow the contents of earlier volumes in reducing prose tales to sparsely narrated graphic remakes that alternate bland scenarios with lurid dream sequences and climaxes. For all the supposed bloodshed, the gory bits, rendered as minor dribbles and smears, barely register visually even though one character is dismembered at the end by doctors who are harvesting his organs and another winds up impaled on some jagged stage scenery. Those two entries bookend a more benign story, “Bunny Call,” in which a restive dad rediscovers family values after spending a night protecting his kids from a summer camp prank that starts out merely tasteless—and then goes really wrong. The cast reads white with minor exceptions. Some cast members—human or otherwise—will be familiar to players of the titular game series. The straightforward art panels feature clean backgrounds and are rendered in muted, atmospheric shades.

Low-budget thrills for the Goosebumps set. (Graphic horror. 12-14)
THE ONLY GIRL IN TOWN

Condie, Ally
Dutton (320 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780593327173

A teenage girl finds herself alone after everyone else in her town mysteriously disappears, leaving her scrambling to figure out how to find them all.

One late summer day, everybody in July Fielding's town disappears. She is left to piece together what happened, following a series of cryptic signs she finds around town urging her to “GET THEM BACK.” The narrative moves back and forth between July's present and the events of the summer before, when her relationship with her best friend, cross-country team co-captain Sydney, starts to fracture due to a combination of jealousy over July's new relationship with a cute boy called Sam and sweet up-and-coming freshman Ella's threatening to overtake Sydney's status as star of the track team. The team members participate in a ritual in which they jump off a cliff into the rocky waters below at the end of their Friday practice runs. Though Ella is reluctant, Syd pressures her to jump. Short, frenetically paced sections move the story along quickly, and there is much foreshadowing pointing to something terrible that occurred at the end of that summer, which may be the key to July's current predicament, but there is much misdirection too. Ultimately this is a story without enough setup to make the turn the book takes in the end feel fully developed or earned. All characters read white.

A high-concept premise that falls short in its execution. (Fiction. 14-18)

IZ THE APOCALYPSE

Currie, Susan
Common Deer Press (230 pp.)
$12.95 paper | Sept. 1, 2023
9781988761848

Fourteen-year-old Isabelle Beaufort is all-too-familiar with the foster care system.

In her short life, she has been in 26 homes and 14 schools. Now in eighth grade, Iz discovers the Métier School, a private international high school for musically gifted young people. Iz, who taught herself to play a guitar she found in a dumpster, hatches a plan to get herself into the prestigious school by forging transcripts and recommendations. When her plan succeeds, she faces new challenges—lying to her foster mother, explaining her lack of formal musical training to the Métier faculty, and finding tuition money. Even as she begins to chafe under the burden of her lies, Iz experiences a completely different life. Now she has friends, a job, and a support system, although she struggles in her new milieu as well. The largely more privileged Métier students make jokes and have conversations that only those with insider musical knowledge will understand. This feel-good story asks readers to suspend disbelief but also sheds light on the plight of many young people caught up in the foster care system. Iz has flashbacks to something traumatic that happened at a former home she calls “That Place,” but she finds healing and catharsis through songwriting and music. Iz reads white; there is ethnic diversity in the supporting cast.

A compassionate, character-driven story that will particularly resonate with music lovers. (Fiction. 12-16)

CRISIS

Teen Mental Health at Risk
Currie-McGhee, Leanne
ReferencePoint Press (64 pp.)
$32.95 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781678205645

An overview of the ongoing teen mental health crisis.

Even before Covid-19, concern about teens’ mental health was building, as various negative indicators rose. Since then, adverse data points have continued to mount. Balancing anecdotal and statistical evidence and recounting stories of a diverse range of teen sufferers, Currie-McGhee lays out the problems, discusses possible causes, identifies the most at-risk teens, and suggests some solutions. Citing abundant recent research, she outlines the symptoms of each condition and describes some effects of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and self-harm, stressing the obstacles posed by stigma, the necessity of self-awareness, and the importance of seeking therapeutic, familial, and other support. Contributors to poor mental health discussed here include external social factors (like lockdown isolation, social media, racism, homophobia, and family conflict) and internal genetic and psychological factors. Among the remedial steps proposed are increased access to counseling, emergency hotlines, and proactive school programs; promoting more inclusive communities to protect marginalized youths; better social media practices; and peer education and involvement. Effective sidebars highlight key points, and the stock color photos feature racially diverse young people. This accessible, user-friendly work offers concise, informative, and approachable coverage for young people, parents, and educators on a topic that is just as important to well-being as physical health.

A clear overview of teen mental health challenges along with some practical steps to address them. (source notes, resources, index, picture credits) (Nonfiction. 12-18)
MIDNIGHT AT THE HOUDINI
Dawson, Delilah S.
Delacorte (368 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780593486795

To escape the clutches of a magical hotel, a Las Vegas teen must uncover its mysterious origins—or be forced to reside there forever.

Sixteen-year-old Anna Alonso just planned the perfect wedding for her older sister, Emily. But when the girls’ dad surprises Emily and her new husband with a condo in Manhattan as a wedding present, organized Anna, always prepared, is devastated; she’d planned on having the new couple nearby. To make matters worse, a tornado watch is issued as Anna, her dad, and his two business associates leave the wedding in their limo. Battered by the increasingly dangerous weather, they reluctantly head to the Houdini, the nearest of the hotels they own. When a telephone pole falls on the limo, trapping her dad and friends inside, Anna seeks help in the Houdini, but it’s strangely deserted and the doors are locked, so she can’t get out. Heading deeper into the hotel, she meets a resident boy named Max who offers to help—but can she trust him? Readers familiar with Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and The Tempest will notice the influences from both works, and fans of contemporary fantasy will be drawn into the magical world explored in this story that is full of twists and turns. Lush details, from descriptions of food and drink to the hotel’s furnishings, will engross readers: While Anna is trying to leave the Houdini, readers might not want to. Most characters are cued white.

Surreal and mysterious; a wild ride. (Fantasy. 12-17)

INTO THE BRIGHT OPEN
A Secret Garden Remix
Dimaline, Cherie
Feiwel & Friends (288 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781250842657
Series: Remixed Classics

Thorny secrets haunt a country house—a girl in an attic, a lost key, and an overgrown garden locked behind a hidden gate.

After the unexpected deaths of her parents, 15-year-old Mary Craven is uprooted from Toronto to live at her estranged uncle’s manor on Ontario’s Georgian Bay. Far from the city and surrounded by unfamiliar people, Mary tries to guard her insecurities. But her uncle’s young housekeeper, the charming and confident Flora, sees the loneliness behind Mary’s infamous temper. Drawn in by a yearning for family and captivated by stories about Flora’s free-spirited younger sister, Mary begins to explore and ask questions that lead her to mysteries surrounding her absent uncle’s estate: the presence of Olive, her chronically ill cousin who’s confined to her bed in the attic, and a locked garden whose gate can only be opened with a missing key. A fast friendship blooms between Mary and Olive, but when Rebecca, Olive’s domineering stepmother, returns, Mary risks exile to boarding school unless she abides by Rebecca’s rules. Writing in the third-person omniscient primarily from Mary’s perspective, Dimaline reimagines The Secret Garden in Métis territory. Mary, Rebecca, and Uncle Craven are white; most other characters, including Olive, are Métis. Racism, colonization, and a love of nature are central themes gracefully woven into the story. An aching and emotionally immersive queer romance, unhindered by homophobia, unfolds through lush imagery blended with poignant and elegant prose.

A rich and verdant revival of a classic. (Historical fiction. 13-18)
As a country obsessed from afar with the lives of the royals, we love nothing more than to distract ourselves from our own problems with tales of theirs—from the evil tabloid press to the racism of the monarchy and the public, and, of course the evergreen tragedy of Princess Diana. All of these inspire plotlines in Benjamin Dean's saucy debut YA novel, *The King Is Dead* (Little, Brown, July 18), narrated by a 17-year-old boy who ascends the British throne in its first pages.

James and his 8-minutes-younger twin, Eddie, are the sons of a Black queen whom their father married about a year after his beautiful, popular white fiancee, Princess Catherine, was gunned down by a jealous stalker outside a bridal fitting, its secret location having been broadcast by the tabloids. Since his Mum arrived on the scene, James tells us, “the media clung to its hatred of a Black woman ‘infiltrating the Royal Family’ and ‘destroying the monarchy’ ”. Now, with his father's death, “the glare had turned on me instead.... The world could barely cope with the idea of a Black king—they'd lose their heads if they knew he was gay too.”

And they soon will, as one of James’ primary antagonists is a celebrity journalist named Quinn Buckley, the royal correspondent for the *Daily Eye*. Buckley's salacious articles appear at intervals throughout the book, the first headlined “HIS ROYAL CRY-NESS! REVEALED: How the new king crumbled within hours of wearing the crown!”

Dean, 29, lives in London. He spoke to us on Zoom; our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**You come by your knowledge of British journalism first-hand, right?**

I got an internship covering celebrities at BuzzFeed straight out of uni, but we weren't a tabloid. We were a small team trying to get across the news in an unbiased way, but there was plenty of clear bias all around. The reporting on Meghan Markle—in comparison to the reporting on her white counterparts and other members of the royal family—started me thinking about how people would look at a Black monarch. I already had the real-life example of how they wrote about Meghan before she was even an official princess. I started to wonder, what if she was queen?

**So Meghan was an inspiration?**

Well, the first inspiration was Princess Diana. Her story is so heartbreaking. I admit, I watched a lot of documentaries on her during the first and second lockdowns. Like her, the Princess Catherine character is hunted down by the press, and the whole country is obsessed with her every move. Diana really was the start of 24-hour tabloid news and a surge of paparazzi intrusion that has never slowed down. I was so intrigued about what that looks like from the other side of the gates of Buckingham Palace.

**Have you read Prince Harry's memoir? I couldn’t help thinking he and Meghan would love The King Is Dead, since it basically dramatizes all their issues and makes their case.**
If one of them wants to read it, I would love to send a signed copy!

Let’s talk about the scene where the king puts on a black hoodie and almost gets shot by his own guards. I think that’s one of the strongest scenes in the book, but it wasn’t originally planned to end the way it does. While James was always supposed to dress down and sneak off to the park to meet his friend, it was meant to end with a cliffhanger in the park, where they realize they’re being watched.

But when I started to write the scene where he’s running down the Mall, getting toward the gates, it clicked in me straightaway: There’s a Black teenager in a hoodie. The guards are not going to see him as king; they’re going to see him as an intruder trying to get into the palace. It was a heart-racing moment as I realized just a few sentences before what was going to happen. It was really tough to write. Obviously, I’m a Black man, and my staple item of clothing is a black hoodie. I know what it’s like to walk down the street and have people give you a second, third, fourth glance, worried about what you might do.

The scene that really broke me properly was the following one with his mother. She gets really emotional and says, what if they'd pulled the trigger before they asked questions? It doesn't matter if we are teachers, doctors, nurses, even royals—we aren't accepted or seen for who we are.

I love how frank the book is about James’ love life. He has a secret relationship with one of his palace minders, an 18-year-old intern, but when that fizzles (for reasons we can’t discuss without spoilers), he falls for another guy.

I wrote a lot of this during the pandemic, and I hadn't been on a date in ages, and I really immersed myself in remembering what crushes were like when I was a teenager—like, all consuming, at least as important as the business of running a country. Like me, James is a hopeless romantic but, also like me as a teen, very easily distracted. It was very fun to be able to explore that side of James, particularly because the other parts of the book were more serious. Since this was my first YA, I wasn't sure what I was and wasn't allowed to include, so I just wrote what came out and nothing ended up getting cut—in fact, I ended up adding an extra scene for the U.S. edition that didn’t appear in the original U.K. edition, where James recalls a memory of sneaking through the palace for a rendezvous on a stormy night.

Another classic teen character is that cousin of James’, Cassandra. I needed several possible villains who could be behind the sabotage against James—I had Quinn Buckley outside the palace, and from inside the palace, Cassandra emerged. She is white, has a claim to the throne, and is quite popular with the public—she feels like she belongs there. Most of the time, she’s less out-and-out horrendous than quite sharp and cutting—a bit of a Regina George [Rachel McAdams’ character in Mean Girls].

And those party scenes! I literally gasped when they broke the chandelier. Actually, I think that was the first scene that came to mind—I wrote it, and it sold the book. I was thinking of some of the parties that I attended when I was in uni and how they got really out of hand; total chaos. These kids, they’re 17, 18, 19 years old, they’ve got loads of money and power, the world is at their feet. Of course, they’re throwing secret parties in the ballroom at Buckingham Palace, sneaking all their friends in, and of course they get horrendously drunk and break expensive, irreplaceable things. Because there’s always someone to clean up behind them.

What are you working on now?
I’ve just wrapped work on my new YA thriller, How To Die Famous, which publishes in the U.K. in July. It follows an undercover celebrity journalist exposing the dark side of fame, of course inspired by my own days as a celebrity reporter. It doesn’t have a U.S. publication date yet, but hopefully we’ll be able to announce something soon. Then it’s back to the drawing board to see what stories I want to explore next.

Marion Winik is the host of the NPR podcast The Weekly Reader. The King Is Dead received a starred review in the May 1, 2023, issue.
GET STUFF DONE
A Guide to Managing Your Time and Being Productive

Dougherty, Terri
ReferencePoint Press (64 pp.)
$32.95 | Aug. 1, 2023
9781665068444

Productivity tips compiled from secondary sources and delivered in accessible language.

This guide aims to inform young people of the reasons for their lack of productivity and how they can improve their time management skills. Five concise chapters discuss the elimination of distractions and dealing with procrastination, two problem areas teens often face as they manage their busy schedules and technology use. Readers may find some helpful takeaways with recommendations to use productivity apps, such as a screen-time counter or digital planner. The author also presents strategies like the Pomodoro Technique, which involves setting alarms for focused study stints, or the Ivy Lee system of listing six things to do per day in order of priority. This overview of productivity ideas compiles findings from secondary sources, a few interviews with teenagers, and an assortment of blogs, news articles, and websites; actual primary source research studies barely feature. The images used are relatively unhelpful; they mostly feature stock photos of people of various ages and races looking at devices. The colorful but unlabeled drawing of a brain, for example, contributes little and does not support the portions of the book that discuss the significance of different areas of the brain. The writing style is informative but simplistic: The repetition of words like tough, challenge, and challenging may become monotonous to more sophisticated readers.

Some helpful tips buried within repetitive text and an uninspired design. (source notes, further research, index, picture credits) (Nonfiction. 12-18)

AFTER THE SIRENS

Farrell, Sharon
Blackstone (317 pp.)
$18.99 | June 13, 2023
9781665068444

When her parents’ divorce upends her life, a 17-year-old girl decides to spend a year doing something that matters.

Cate Banville had to become a new person when she moved with her mom, leaving behind an Upper East Side private school and entering a public school in Miami. Cate believes that her perfect college plans are no longer attainable with the courses and extracurriculars available at her new school, where they force her to take drivers ed instead of AP calculus, and so she takes her mother’s advice and sets out to make the most of her senior year. After she witnesses a terrible accident while volunteering at a stable, helping children with disabilities ride horses, Cate is inspired by the EMTs who quickly and quietly take charge. Thus begins her journey with the junior EMS program. The supporting cast of characters is believable and likable, and strong bonds develop as, in addition to EMT school, Cate spends 12 hours a week riding in an ambulance, observing procedures and learning from the patients and other crew members. Readers will be drawn in by the sweetly developed romance—and heartache—and other loving relationships. Footnotes and other authorial intrusions feel engaging and bolster the novel’s voice. Cate, who is white, is a reflective and relatable narrator who sets a fast pace. There is ethnic diversity among secondary characters.

A thoughtful, well-executed coming-of-age story offering insights into the impact of pivotal life moments. (Fiction. 14-18)

FOUL HEART HUNTSMAN

Gong, Chloe
McElderry (560 pp.)
$21.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781665905619
Series: Foul Lady Fortune, 2

Several months after losing Orion to Lady Hong in Foul Lady Fortune (2022), Rosalind Lang sets out to save her kidnapped partner.

Since the confrontation at Warehouse 34, a heartbroken Rosalind has remained sequestered in her apartment to avoid reporters who want a glimpse of the Nationalist assassin Fortune. When the Nationalists refuse to rescue Orion and reveal plans to decommission Rosalind, she volunteers to tour the country, using her fame to boost Chinese morale in the face of Japanese military aggression. Rosalind’s true motive, however, is to lure out Lady Hong and Orion, and she sets herself as bait by claiming to possess Lady Hong’s final napped partner.

An impressive, albeit stuffed, conclusion to the duology. (Nonfiction. 13-18)
THE HAUNTED MANSION
Storm & Shade
Gray, Claudia
Disney Press (432 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9781368076067

A girl with anxiety stumbles upon an actual haunted mansion.

Even though her therapy is going well, 16-year-old Audrey Perez isn’t looking forward to the beyond-nerves that her anxiety will give her as she starts a new school, having moved from the suburbs into New Orleans proper. Worse, she won’t have her boyfriend, Chase, there to protect her from the world. Luckily, right off the bat she befriends Tatum, an outgoing girl from Scotland, and Iris, a wryly funny Black girl. When Audrey, whose family emigrated from Spain centuries ago, finds an abandoned manor house in the neighborhood, she lets her new friends in on it. Filmmaker Iris knows she’s found a compelling subject. But after her first brush with the paranormal, Audrey starts to experience happenings outside of the mansion—ghostly possessions that lead her to mysterious keys. As the girls investigate, they notice chills in the air and sense that something bad is coming. This mysterious new threat is dangerous enough that even the ghosts dread it. The paranormal storyline has some strong moments, but readers primarily seeking thrills may feel the story’s action is overshadowed by the characters’ interpersonal dynamics. Audrey and Chase’s relationship reveals red flags alongside moments of genuine sweetness and ends on a healthy, mature, nuanced note. Audrey’s friendships are impacted by her expertly depicted anxiety and showcase healthy bonds. Disney fans will adore the care put in capturing details of the Haunted Mansion.

Come for spooky action, stay for the robust cast. (Paranormal. 12-16)

WHAT STALKS AMONG US
Hollowell, Sarah
Clarion/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 12, 2023
9780063251816

Two teens fight for their lives after becoming trapped inside a nightmarish corn maze.

On a joyride through sprawling Indiana farmland, Sadie and her best friend, Logan, encounter an abandoned corn maze and see an adventure waiting for them. But when they turn a corner and discover a corpse that eerily resembles Logan, they realize that they’re in way over their heads. This maze has a mind of its own, with rules for movement and survival that seem to be set by an unseen creator. And strangely, Sadie can’t shake the feeling that they’ve somehow been through this maze before—perhaps many times. With no choice but to go forward in hopes of finding a way out, the two begin a harrowing, time-bending ordeal that lays bare their secrets and insecurities, putting their friendship to the test. The exposition is light in favor of jumping into the action right away; Sadie’s backstory and personal traits are revealed piecemeal as the experience forces her to confront ghosts of her own trauma from past relationships. Her ADHD is notably portrayed as both a liability and an asset. Sadie is also candid about her fatness and the way she inhabits the world in a larger body. Those who stick out the rushed beginning will root for Sadie and Logan as they find strength within themselves (and each other) to escape the maze. Most major characters are white; Logan is Korean American.

A trippy supernatural thriller. (Horror. 13-18)
A gritty, graphic glimpse of the physical and mental realities of anxiety with a streak of romance. (discussion questions, author interview) (Fiction. 14-18)

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Ten acclaimed YA authors explore the artistry and emotion behind the human instinct to collect. This anthology centers around the question: “Why do we collect things?” Each story features a different type of collection, from the tangible (glass bluebirds and fandom memorabilia) to the experiential (skateboarding in empty swimming pools) and the intangible (misery, doubts, dreams, and moments that you wish could last forever). The characters discover strengths and yearned-for connections to themselves and others through what they collect. When men aggressively pursue her beautiful mother, a Latine teen living in white suburbia protects herself and her home in Anna-Marie McLemore’s “Play House.” In “Take It From Me” by David Levithan, first love makes a nonbinary teen question the purpose and the impact of their collection that’s curated from objects stolen from other collections. Randy Ribay’s “The White Savior Does Not Save the Day” centers a Filipino and white teen who collects scripts from a canceled superhero show and crosses dimensions, searching for clarity about herself and her absent white mother. Cory McCarthy presents “museum of misery,” an emotionally raw, illustrated tour through a museum of trauma and internalized self-hatred. Embracing weirdness, many of the stories defy genre categories, blending reality with fantastical metaphors. Although honest about the weight of complex social themes, including systemic injustice, gun violence, abuse, and self-harm, this anthology balances heaviness with hope. Across the stories, the cast of characters includes a diverse range of identities.

An eclectic, poignant, and introspective treasure trove. (Anthology. 14-18)
A teenager in 1991 faces her father’s battle with AIDS.

Danielle, a senior at a prestigious New Jersey boarding school, is shocked to find out her father is HIV-positive. Though she tries to focus on her art school application and her potential relationship with classmate Marco, her father’s diagnosis impacts her life, even making her doubt the point of art. Aside from a modern usage of queer and the conscious invocation of retro music and technology, this book feels like it was written in the ‘90s and sat collecting dust until now. The main character embodies the alt-girl artist vibes of the decade, with her short hair and dresses paired with Doc Martens. The story effectively captures the homophobia and fear of AIDS that permeated the era while also touching on HIV stigma. On the other hand, the way the author treats a trans woman character—including emphasizing her large hands and Adam’s apple, having the character drop her own deadname, and describing her as “sparkly”—might have passed for celebratory in 1991 but reads far less positively in 2023. The result is poignant and informative, celebrating art and individuality, while also feeling dated and failing to speak directly to queer readers despite being about the gay community surrounding Danielle. Black-and-white line art enhances the text. Main characters read white.

Very effective as historical fiction but falls short as a queer story. (Historical fiction. 13-17)

A punchy story radiating zeal and filled with suspense. (Fantasy. 12-17)
NEVER A HERO
Len, Vanessa
HarperTeen (416 pp.)
$17.99 | Aug. 29, 2023
9780063024694
Series: Only a Monster, 2

After unmaking the boy she loved to save her family, Joan Chang-Hunt finds herself pursued by agents of the Monster Court in this sequel to Only a Monster (2022).

In the new timeline that Joan created, Nick Ward is a normal human boy, not a legendary monster-slaying hero. But when Joan is attacked by monsters looking to capture her, Nick steps in to defend her, causing them both to time travel to the near future. They quickly discover that a manhunt is underway for them, led by Aaron Oliver, who doesn’t remember his friendship with Joan in the previous timeline. Joan leads a bewildered Nick through London as she desperately searches for help, all the while avoiding answering his questions for fear of horrifying him with the truth about monsters: They steal human lives in order to time travel. When Joan finally reunites with old allies, she learns that her erasure of the original Nick put into motion a catastrophic end to the timeline. Joan, whose human father is Chinese and monster mother was English, is once again forced to decide where her allegiance lies. She struggles with a complicated mix of feelings toward Nick, including guilt, yearning, and fear, as his heroic potential is evident even without his possessing a hatred of monsters. The introspective third-person narration is occasionally repetitive, but the original magic system, immersive descriptions, and compelling stakes create a cinematic reading experience.

Will keep readers hooked. (Fantasy. 13-18)

HER RADIANT CURSE
Lim, Elizabeth
Knopf (432 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Aug. 29, 2023
9780593300992
9780593301005 PLB

A curse shapes two sisters’ lives. Channi was 2 the day Vanna was born. Adah, their father, tried to sacrifice Channi to the witch Angma in return for saving her mother’s life. When his effort was thwarted by a snake, “the king among his kind,” Angma punished Channi, giving her a face covered in snake scales that her father makes her cover with a mask. Unless Channi delivers her sister to Angma by Vanna’s 17th birthday in just three days’ time, Angma will destroy them. Now 19, lonely Channi is shunned in their village but revered by the island’s poisonous snakes and by Vanna, whose beauty, enhanced by the mysterious golden glow radiating from her heart, attracts widespread love, admiration, and gifts. Adah arranges an auction, inviting local royalty to bid for Vanna’s hand. When wealthy old King Meguh matches the bid of Vanna’s choice, young Crown Prince Rongyo, the dispute is to be settled through combat. Channi leaps into the fray to help her sister, fighting the dragon Meguh puts forward on his side—who she discovers has a connection to her past. Realizing that there is much she doesn’t know, Channi faces even more threats. Fast-paced, frenetic action scenes deliver high body counts. The characterization is occasionally inconsistent, but Lim’s vivid worldbuilding is a unifying, overarching strength, drawing from the landscapes, mythologies, and cultures of Southeast Asia.

Action-fueled fantasy deepened by a compelling setting and well-constructed cosmology. (Fantasy. 12-18)

NIGHTBREAKER
Ma, Coco
Viking (448 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780593621462

A teen seeks to destroy the monsters that hold her city captive.

Fifteen years ago, a dense fog descended on Manhattan, and anyone caught in it disappeared, never to return. The Vanishing also spawned Deathlings, horrific, twisted monsters that kill at nightfall and crave sugary foods and human flesh. Chinese American Rei has been training to win the Tournament, the competition that is the path to joining the ruling Syndicate; that way, she can finally work to purge the city of the Deathlings that brutally slaughtered her parents. But in the televised Tournament, in which Rei begins to discover dark secrets, she cannot trust anyone—not even Kieran, the attractive ex-boyfriend who’s pitted against her as one of the elite student competitors engaging in life-threatening tasks. While Rei’s desolate New York City evokes disturbing reminders of the pandemic lockdown experience, details about the rise of the governing Syndicate feel too thinly fleshed out. Discussions of inequity in a setting where being unhoused brings a risk of falling prey to Deathlings add a realistic layer to the glamorized Tournament. Similarly, the population’s shared losses and traumas give an extra dimension to supporting cast members who are otherwise underdeveloped due to the fast pacing and packed plot. The renewed romance between Rei and newly buff Kieran seesaws between insta-lust and heartwarming flashbacks, entertaining banter, and rebuilt trust.

Gripping, grim, and entertaining despite feeling a bit formulaic. (Dystopian fantasy. 14-18)
“An un-put-down-able, bittersweet whodunit.”

SUDDENLY A MURDER

Muñoz, Lauren
Putnam (320 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9780593617533

Seven teens celebrate their graduation at a weeklong, 1920s-themed party where one friend is murdered and the others become suspects.

When Mexican American faculty kid Izzy Morales and her rich white best friend, Kassidy, graduate from their posh Maine private school, Kassidy surprises Izzy with a weeklong, all-expenses-paid stay at Ashwood Manor, the mansion on a private island that was once the set of their favorite black-and-white mystery movie. The exclusive guest list includes only five others: their classmates Blaine, Kassidy’s white playboy boyfriend; Fergus, also white, a gay theater nerd and Blaine’s best friend; queer Black elite athlete Ellison; Chinese American valedictorian and lacrosse player Chloe; and Greek American literary gazillionaire Marlowe, who’s Izzy’s crush. For authenticity’s sake, Kassidy orders her guests to surrender their cellphones and clothes, which will be returned to the mainland; she’s provided them with customized vintage outfits for the week. As growing tensions and interpersonal dramas derail the party, Blaine is discovered dead in his room. Two homicide detectives arrive on the scene to investigate and try to determine which of the 18-year-olds committed the murder. Alongside the central mystery, the author successfully explores a host of serious issues, including substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and the armor of socioeconomic privilege (the apartment Izzy lives in is worlds away from her classmates’ lifestyles). The puzzle will keep readers engaged as it unfolds through multiple third-person perspectives and flashbacks.

An un-put-down-able, bittersweet whodunit. (Mystery. 14-18)
A BRITISH GIRL’S GUIDE TO HURRICANES AND HEARTBREAK
Namey, Laura Taylor
Atheneum (320 pp.)
$19.99 | Sept. 26, 2023
9781665915335
Series: Cuban Girl’s Guide, 2

Wrapped up in a tempest of grief and guilt, an English teen escapes to Florida to recalibrate.

Flora Maxwell, younger sister to Orion, the romantic lead from A Cuban Girl’s Guide to Tea and Tomorrow (2020), is feeling unmoored. “She’s a hurricane, that one,” her family’s always said. While she used to find empowerment in that label, in the months following the death of her mum, Flora feels as if she only embodies destruction. Grief, doubt, and the shame of mistakes she’s made compel Flora to lash out and pull away from those who love her, including Gordon, the old friend who could be something more if she weren’t so afraid of ruining another good thing. Heading into self-exile, Flora moves up the date of her flight to the Miami wedding of Pilar Reyes, sister of Lila, her Cuban American friend. A striking photo at a craft fair that catches the eye of keen photographer Flora might just bring the visceral jolt she’s looking for, particularly when it brings her into the orbit of attractive Cuban American Baz. Namey continues to poignantly explore facets of grief, capturing Flora’s complex heartache. Classic rom-com hijinks maintain the levity. Flora’s voice, informed by her passion for photography, is full of evocative imagery, much of it nature related. Her journey of self-discovery, as well as her growth in her confidence in her craft, makes for a satisfying arc.

A compelling torrent of emotion and healing. (Fiction. 13-18)

THIS WINTER
A Heartstopper Novella
Oseman, Alice
Scholastic (128 pp.)
$17.99 | Sept. 5, 2023
9781338885132
Series: Heartstopper

When Charlie returns home from in-patient anorexia treatment in a psychiatric ward, he and his older sister, Tori, navigate a difficult Christmas with their family in this Heartstopper novella.

Tori thought her parents might learn to open up after Charlie started treatment, but they—especially Mum—still avoid discussing anything serious. Now that Charlie is home from the hospital, all Tori wants is to spend time with him, but the pressure of the holiday increases family tensions and threatens to drive Charlie away. Set during unexplored moments of Volume 4 of the Heartstopper graphic-novel series, this three-chapter novella zooms in on Christmas Day. Each chapter moves the story forward from a different perspective, shifting from Tori to Charlie to their 7-year-old brother, Oliver. Nick, Charlie’s boyfriend, makes an appearance as a source of comfort, but the conflict focuses on Charlie and his family. As Tori tries to support Charlie, she wrestles with guilt and loneliness. Meanwhile, Charlie and his mum, who both want a normal holiday, keep clashing. Although the story handles heavy themes of mental illness, Oseman balances the fraught emotions with tender moments and a hopeful but honest outlook on recovery that emphasizes the value of therapy. There will be greater emotional impact for those familiar with the original stories, but as a bonus entry, this novella has high appeal for devoted fans. Occasional illustrations add to the charm.

Short and sweet. (resources) (Fiction. 14-18)

SECRETS NEVER DIE
Ralph, Vincent
Wednesday Books (368 pp.)
$12.00 paper | Sept. 26, 2023
9781250882158

A group of friends learn that secrets can be dangerous when a mysterious stalker turns their lives upside down.

Former child star Sam and friends Haran, Dom, Elisha, and Lauren have a Halloween ritual: They go to a hut in the woods near their hometown of Hayschurch and take turns inside it confessing their darkest secrets. They always leave feeling better, but this year someone overhears them and starts tormenting each member of the group: throwing blood-filled eggs at the hut, sending menacing texts, leaving dolls’ heads in their lockers, and surreptitiously following and taking videos of them. One of the videos includes an image of the mystery sender wearing a creepy mask, and Sam is sure he’s seen it before. Once he remembers the connection, the teens realize that their situation is part of something bigger and darker going back long before they were born. The friends show a great deal of ingenuity as they investigate the few clues they have to work with. Genuinely suspenseful scenes keep the tension ratcheting up, and short chapters, plenty of well-timed twists, and an unexpected ending make this a quick, satisfying read, though readers may question whether the teens’ secrets are really terrible enough to justify the lengths they go to protect them. Contextual details point to a British setting, and names offer the only clues to ethnicity.

Fans of thrillers and stories about small-town secrets will be turning the pages late into the night. (Thriller. 12-18)
A young woman faces her past to discover the truth about one of her nation’s heroes.

When Effy Sayre, the only female architecture student at her university in Llyr, wins the competition to design Hiraeth Manor for the estate of the late Emrys Myrddin, national literary figure and her favorite author, it is the perfect opportunity to leave behind a recent trauma. She arrives to find the cliffside estate is literally crumbling into the ocean, and she quickly realizes things may not be as they seem. Preston, an arrogant literature student, is also working at the estate, gathering materials for the university’s archives and questioning everything Effy knows about Myrddin. When Preston offers to include her name on his thesis—which may allow her to pursue the dream of studying literature that was frustrated by the university’s refusal to admit women literature students—Effy agrees to help him. He’s on a quest for answers about the source of Myrddin’s most famous work, Angharad, a romance about a cruel Fairy King who marries a mortal woman. Meanwhile, Myrddin’s son has secrets of his own. Preston and Effy start to suspect that Myrddin’s fairy tales may hold more truth than they realize. The Welsh-inspired setting is impressively atmospheric, and while some of the mythology ends up feeling extraneous, the worldbuilding is immersive and thoughtfully addresses misogyny and its effects on how history is written. Main characters are coded white.

A dark and gripping feminist tale. (Fantasy. 14+18)

Two teens come of age during the Salem witch trials. After losing their father on the ship from England, Thomas, a 15-year-old Quaker, has just arrived in Salem, Massachusetts, with Grace, his younger sister. It’s February 1692, and they reach their new home just as girls exhibiting abnormal behavior are believed to be bewitched. Kai has been justifiably angry since his father left his family, and some readers may identify with his anger management struggles and resentment toward Rick; others may find caring, well-intentioned Rick more sympathetic. Although the premise is exciting and the fast pace will keep pages turning, the emotional resolution happens too quickly to feel earned. Characters are minimally described; their names may cue ethnic diversity.

A mixed bag. (Fantasy thriller. 12-18)

A teen and his stepdad fight off a monster in this novel for reluctant readers.

Seventeen-year-old Kai Lee is not happy about going into the wilderness with his new stepfather, scientist Rick Ortiz. He doesn’t like Rick and is definitely not interested in spending two weeks helping him with his research despite his mom’s hope that the two of them will bond. Kai hates the floating research station and finds the dark water oppressive. Even worse, his phone has no reception. The only bright spot is that he got to take his dog, Alfie, along. Rick is investigating why the last underwater robot mapping some underwater caves vanished; he’s going to send another one into the water. However, it’s difficult for Rick to stay focused when Kai takes off running into the woods with Alfie and comes back telling a skeptical Rick that he was chased by a monster. When the monster returns, Rick has quite a shock, and he and Kai work on a plan to try to stop the monster from wreaking havoc. Kai has been justifiably angry since his father left his family, and some readers may identify with his anger management struggles and resentment toward Rick; others may find caring, well-intentioned Rick more sympathetic. Although the premise is exciting and the fast pace will keep pages turning, the emotional resolution happens too quickly to feel earned. Characters are minimally described; their names may cue ethnic diversity.

A mixed bag. (Fantasy thriller. 12-18)
THE GRIMMER
Ruthnum, Naben
ECW Press (300 pp.)
$19.95 paper | Sept. 26, 2023
9781770447045

A high school student joins forces with an unconventional duo to battle against evil.

After spending two years at a Vancouver Island boarding school, 15-year-old Indian Canadian Vish Maurya is back in mainland British Columbia living with his parents—much to his annoyance. It's 1996, and his psychiatrist father is recovering from an addiction to prescription pills. Vish resents his parents for sending him away to school while his father entered rehab and got clean. Although his insulated, overwhelmingly white boarding school wasn't a paradise, Vish isn't looking forward to an entire summer pretending his peers don't know about his father's struggles. When heavy metal fan Vish visits the local bookstore, he's expecting to catch up on his favorite ghost stories, not become the target of a ghastly parasitic creature from German folklore who harvests souls. Vish soon realizes that magic is real and learns that more than 12,000 ravenous souls may be unleashed on his sleepy town of Kelowna. Together with bookstore owner Agastya and young bookstore employee Gisela, he's drawn into a battle for survival. This briskly paced horror novel offers cinematic imagery and suspenseful intrigue. The narrative grounds the rules of magic in the laws of science, and details about identity and marginalization are thoughtfully incorporated while providing deeper insight into Vish's worldview.

A satisfying supernatural tale centering a reluctant hero who discovers the universe's time-bending secrets. (Horror. 13-18)

ALL THE FIGHTING PARTS
Sawyerr, Hannah V.
Amulet/Abrams (400 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9781419762611

This page-turning novel in verse shows a 16-year-old Baltimore girl's resilience after surviving a sexual assault by a powerful church leader.

Amina Conteh's father credits her late mother, "a woman who knew her rage was as powerful as her love," for her fighting spirit, something he doesn't always approve of. After Amina gets in trouble at school for standing up to a disrespectful classmate, he decides she'll help out at church as punishment, which ultimately leads to Pastor Johnson's raping her. Amina has an emotionally and physically fulfilling relationship with Deon, the pastor's adored nephew. He and her best friend, Talia, a queer, fashion-conscious Dominican girl, provide relief from her strained relationship with her strict, highly religious father. But as she endures the aftermath of her trauma, Amina, the daughter of immigrants from Sierra Leone, finds that her relationships and confidence suffer. Interspersed throughout the stunning verse are journal entries, text messages, police interview transcripts, and news articles that highlight various people's perspectives, intricately building suspense when the news breaks of another victim of Pastor Johnson. The expectations for women at Amina's church are oppressive and sexist, though the Black church community provided Amina's parents with comfort, adding complexity as she wrestles with whether to speak out. Amina's emotional growth and experiences in therapy feel authentic, leading to a satisfying ending that is properly earned.

An unforgettable story of healing told through phenomenal poetry. (author's note, resources) (Verse fiction. 14-18)
TIM BURTON’S THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS
Shepherd, Megan
Disney Press (304 pp.)
$18.99 | July 4, 2023
9781368094214

The Pumpkin King of Halloween Town misguided tries to give Santa an enforced rest.

Joining pop-up, picture-book, movie novelization, video game, and multiple manga versions of the original film, not to mention a heavily illustrated 2021 deluxe adaptation and a YA sequel (Shea Ernshaw’s Long Live the Pumpkin Queen, 2022), this effort to squeeze the last drop of market juice from the macabre holiday classic presents a clunky prose rendition set within wide black borders, unadorned with atmospheric spot art, original illustrations, or even stills. Shepherd does largely preserve the film’s plotline and dialogue, if not always with literary flair: “Almost moving as one amorphous blob, the crowd pressed even closer,” and “All his renewed confidence moved aside in one fell swoop.” Readers are likely to find her gothic tweaks, which range from a reference to the “possessed gunshot-ridden duck” that Jack-as-Santa delivers to an unsuspecting household to villain Oogie Boogie’s lecherous assault on rag doll Sally (“He ran his sack hand down the curve of the leg and tossed off its black boot…”), discomfiting—and not in a good way. Ultimately, the tale stumbles to a close with the Undead Ensemble serenading “everyone who treasured the beautiful darkness of Halloween.”

An ill-wrought, not to mention superfluous, tie-in. (Holiday fantasy. 12-14)

THERE’S NO WAY I’D DIE FIRST
Springer, Lisa
Delacorte (304 pp.)
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Sept. 5, 2023
9780593643174
9780593643181 PLB

A group of horror-loving teens are in for the thrill of their lives.

Black 17-year-old Noelle Layne is a self-proclaimed Final Girl who feels she would easily survive if she were in a horror movie. To celebrate the first anniversary of Jump Scares, the online horror movie club she founded, she decides to host a party at her family’s estate while her parents are away. She invites the 12 most influential people at her private school in hopes of boosting her follower count in preparation for launching her podcast. Noelle and her guests come from wealthy backgrounds, and she plans a luxurious party that includes extravagant decorations and catering. The hired entertainment consists of a creepy clown who leads them in a game of hide-and-seek. Things take a turn when the first body is found—one of the guests has been murdered—and the clown reveals his plan to take them all out. The teens must rely on their wits and skills to survive the clown’s numerous traps and tricks. The book does an excellent job of building suspense at every turn; each chapter begins with a quote from a horror movie that gives a hint as to how events may unfold. The book goes beyond these scares to delve into deeper ideas around classism and racism as the night goes on and the teens’ secrets get revealed.

A page-turning, nail-biting story with some new twists. (character list) (Horror. 13-18)

THE SOCIETY FOR SOULLESS GIRLS
Steven, Laura
Delacorte (448 pp.)
$12.99 paper | Sept. 19, 2023
9780593703915

Students find themselves in the middle of a mystery connected to a history of gruesome deaths on the campus of their English boarding school, Carvell Academy of the Arts.

The North Tower murders go back over a century and are infamous; they even shut down the Northumberland school for a decade. After arriving at the newly reopened campus, 19-year-old Lottie Fitzwilliam from Sevenoaks in Kent quickly finds herself drawn to the tower and its unsolved deaths. Her unapproachable roommate, Alice Wolfe, who is from a nearby Northumberland town, distances herself from Lottie. In a desperate attempt to keep her rage at bay, Alice, who is waging an internal war, performs a ritual from a school library book that seems to tear her soul in two, stripping away her wrath and leaving reason and calm behind. But history seems to be repeating itself, as there’s another death, and the unsolved murders appear connected to a larger, more sinister plot. The roommates’ complex relationship is as compelling as the central mystery; they are opposites who are magnetically drawn together. Steven deftly touches on deeper societal issues concerning patriarchy, paternalism, and the unacceptability of women’s expressions of anger. The storyline delicately and believably portrays young adults discovering their sexuality. Readers will enjoy the twists and turns as well as the satisfying resolution. The roommates are cued white, and there is ethnic diversity in the supporting cast.

An engrossing mystery with well-drawn characters. (Mystery. 12-17)
HEARTBREAK HOMES
Treggiari, Jo
Nimbus Publishing (304 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Sept. 12, 2023
9781774711163

Three teens from different walks of life find themselves entangled in a locked-room murder mystery.

It starts with a back-to-school party at Malcolm Bradley’s showroom mansion in Heartwood Homes, a failed housing development dubbed Heartbreak Homes after it financially ruined many in the community. Among the party’s attendees are Frankie, whose best friend, Jessa, has recently started dating Mal and hanging out with the popular kids; Martin, whose father lost everything in the bad real estate deal and who used to be part of the in crowd but now is sitting outside looking in, wanting to reconnect with old friends; and Cara, the de facto leader of a group of four unhoused girls who are squatters hoping to steal from the privileged kids in attendance. The party ends with Mal’s being found murdered inside a locked room, with Jessa lying unconscious on the floor nearby. With a first-person narrative that alternates among the viewpoints of Frankie, Martin, and Cara, this whodunit is less about the mystery of who killed Mal and more of a character-driven story focusing on the three protagonists and their rich, complex life stories that eventually converge as they get closer and closer to the murderer. The story also features a sympathetic take on different kinds of families and addresses topics such as justice and accountability. Cara and Frankie are lesbian and develop a romantic relationship. Most main characters are cued white; Jessa has brown skin.

A thoughtful, character-driven puzzle. (Mystery. 14-18)

THE CELTIC DECEPTION
Varga, Andrew
Imbrifex Books (320 pp.)
$19.99 | Aug. 15, 2023
9781945501869
Series: A Jump In Time, 2

Teen time jumpers Dan and Sam go back in time to Roman Britain.

Four months after the attack on his still comatose father and his discovery that he’s a time jumper, 17-year-old Dan and his new best friend, Sam, are biding their time in their quest to stop Victor Stahl and his team of ill-intentioned time travelers from altering the timeline. When a new time glitch sends them to the Welsh island of Anglesey in the first century C.E., just as the Roman invaders are about to decimate the local Celts, they find themselves enmeshed in a battle they know they cannot win. As they encounter another time jumper who needs their help, the duo forms enduring bonds of friendship but also experience betrayal, tragedy, and the possibility of being stuck in the past forever. This second series entry is another inconsistent offering. On the one hand, there is the fun immersion in the world of the Celts and the lives of endearing characters the two protagonists come to know as well as plenty of fast-paced, bloody action sequences. However, the voice reads more tween than teen, female characters are objectified, the jarring gender bias toward female time jumpers persists, and the worldbuilding around the warring time-jumper factions remains baffling. Most characters read white.

Another bumpy, uneven ride back in time. (Historical notes) (Historical fantasy. 12-18)

HOW TO FIND A MISSING GIRL
Wlosok, Victoria
Little, Brown (400 pp.)
$18.99 | Sept. 19, 2023
9780316511506

A trio of teen detectives attempts to solve the mystery of two girls who are missing from their small Louisiana hometown.

Iris Blackthorn is many things, including pansexual, an amateur sleuth, and the younger sibling of cheerleader Stella, who has been gone for over a year. In pursuit of this mystery, Iris becomes friends with Sammy Valdez-Taylor, a lesbian hacker, and Imani Turner, a dedicated costume designer who uses they/them pronouns. Together they start a detective agency. Heather Nasato, the ex-girlfriend Iris is on amicable terms with, asks the agency to investigate her boyfriend, as she believes he is cheating on her. Shortly after they report proof of his infidelity to Heather, she also goes missing. With the stakes even higher, Iris and her team desperately look for any clues that Heather may have left behind, including any hidden in How to Find a Missing Girl, the podcast Heather made about Stella’s disappearance. Along for the ride, whether Iris wants her there or not, is Lea Li Zhang, student journalist and the bisexual, polydactyl ex–best friend Iris has complicated feelings about. The characters’ distinct personalities seamlessly blend into the twisty narrative. Along with lots of action and suspense, the portrayal of managing realistic emotional trauma brings introspective depth that will have readers thinking as they devour pages to get to the exhilarating conclusion. Names and physical descriptions cue racial diversity in the cast.

A suspenseful, emotionally charged mystery that hits the mark. (resources) (Mystery. 14-18)
TO A HIGH COURT
Five Bold Law Students Challenge Corporate Greed and Change the Law
Proto, Neil Thomas
FriesenPress (348 pp.)
$35.99 | $22.99 paper | April 14, 2023
9781039180499
9781039180482 paper

TO THE BOY WITH FOUR EYES
A Memoir of Life in the Ozarks in the 1930s and 1940s
Allen, Gene
iUniverse (106 pp.)
9781663247049

A man recalls his formative years in 1930s and ’40s Missouri in this memoir.
Nonagenarian author Allen notes that he initially didn’t want to go back to his hometown of Neosho, Missouri, in 2022, given that his family, friends, and classmates were deceased. Yet he also says that he “needed to examine my own small-boy thoughts before my lurching through life caused them to disappear forever.” Allen then shares how his mother, Bessie Marie Allen, was an unwed teenager living in Mount Vernon, Missouri, when she became pregnant with him; he was born in 1928. When a fire destroyed the small city’s mill, where Allen’s grandfather worked, the family moved to Neosho. Allen’s mother then met and married a man named Claude Gray, who was “constantly looking for the greener pasture that he was sure must lie on the other side of some fence, somewhere.” While in grammar school, the bespectacled Allen went to live with his grandparents to stay in Neosho’s schools while his mother, stepfather, and stepsiblings relocated to a nearby farm. He joined the school band and eventually formed a jazz group that played gigs at a local resort.

At memoir’s end, the author tells of setting off to attend Oklahoma A&M in 1945 as the first in his family to attend college. Allen, who went on to work in radio and TV in Oklahoma, has written a charmingly wry memoir celebrating his Ozarks childhood. Typical of his tone is a passage in which he tells of being baffled by the fact that a teacher dubbed him “Gene A” for clarity, because a female schoolmate was named Jean. Indeed, Allen’s style is reminiscent of another Jean—famed humorist Jean Shepherd—particularly when he references a decoder ring, which also appears in the Shepherd-narrated classic 1983 comedy film, A Christmas Story. Allen also provides material with a more serious dimension, including sharp portraiture of his grandmother (“She had few enemies, but she cherished the ones she had”) and a touching epilogue, set at his mother’s deathbed in 1994.

Appealing musings from an insightful raconteur.
HURRICANE CANOE
An Adirondack Wilderness Thriller
Brock, Richard M.
Bogie Road Publishing, Ltd. (314 pp.)
$25.95 | $15.95 paper | $5.95 e-book
June 21, 2023
9798987875704
9798987875711 paper

Two mismatched men fight the elements on a camping excursion gone awry in Brock’s thriller.

Gilbert Willards and Trent Leno, soon to be brothers-in-law, embark on a seemingly innocuous Adirondack wilderness camping trip. The author deftly establishes Trent as the moodier, more intimidating presence and Gilbert as a more timid man who begins to regret accepting his camping invitation. From the opening scene, a canoe launch in which both men seem to be fishing more for takes on each other than for trout, narrative tension and suspense begin to build. The trip devolves as a capsized canoe on Long Lake leads to makeshift fireside camping on a small island, where Trent proceeds to grill Gilbert about his loyalty to his wife, Jeannie. A suspicious Gilbert sleeps with one eye open. Meanwhile, an ominous storm barrels toward the Atlantic coastline, and they awaken to find themselves engulfed in the tempest’s fury. In between the camping scenes, the author fills in a good amount of backstory involving Gilbert’s fumbled involvement with the mob and his incrementally building unease about the confrontational Trent’s suitability as a match for his wife’s sister. Playing out against the majestic peaks and lush valleys of the Adirondack Mountains, Brock’s yarn unfolds at a brisk clip, driven by the men’s will to survive despite the violent whims of Mother Nature. The tension is palpable and built upon the precarious, volatile nature of human relationships as both men fight back the urge to panic (the hungry wildlife doesn’t help) as a devilish, terrifying game of cat and mouse ensues (“He made a show of stretching his arms and yawning, but never took his eyes off of Trent, not needing to be a psychic to see the machinations taking shape behind his cold eyes”). Ultimately, the narrative meets the challenge of keeping the suspense level taut and the details crisp throughout this long novel, maintaining the intensity at a fever pitch from its arresting start to a shocking conclusion readers won’t see coming.

An exhilarating exercise in suspense, with perils both natural and human-made.

THE SHORT STORY is the ideal vehicle for a particular, eerie literary mood...that uncanny, unsettling feeling reliably summoned by masters of the form including Ray Bradbury, Stephen King, Patricia Highsmith, and Shirley Jackson. The abbreviated length of short stories intensifies the impact of the creepiness; there isn’t time to acclimate to their weird landscapes before they’ve left you disturbed, excited, and wondering what just happened to you. It’s there and gone, like a waking dream or the brush of a stranger’s hand in the dark. Some of the most exciting recent Indie fiction fits snugly into this tradition—these left-of-center collections brim with atmosphere and narrative verve.

The 2022 collection Banana Factory and Other Stories by Jon Fotch suggests the work of David Lynch with its queasily surrealistic touches and impossible-to-pin-down tone. Populated by the likes of an office worker who totes a severed head around the cubicles, a mother who lays horrific, bloody eggs for Christmas, and the surly workers manufacturing fruit at the titular plant, these stories cast a unique spell. Our reviewer says, “The material leans toward the fantastic, surreal, and macabre, and its often mystifying nature immerses the reader in Fotch’s eerie dream world all the more deeply.”

Bruce McAllister’s Stealing God and Other Stories (2022), which earned a Kirkus Star, gets its hooks in readers instantly with intriguing, baffling lines like “because she had four arms and a six-fingered hand on each arm, Sandy could look for four-leaf clovers faster than I could.” Our reviewer says this sui generis combination of biology, religion, and the supernatural is “fascinatingly textured—sometimes coldly scientific and at other times diving headlong into mythology and faith.”

Entry Level (2022) by Wendy Wimmer maintains a strong aesthetic throughline as the author touches on such varied subjects as dementia, piracy on the high seas, and roller-rink music—an elegant, wry, evocative voice animates these tales that range from the wistful to the terrifying. Our starred review praises the “vivid, thought-provoking stories” in which “even the book’s most sardonic narrators balance their misanthropy with a touch of curiosity.”

Arthur Smith is an Indie editor.
Carruth presents a series of meditations on key Christian precepts in this nonfiction debut.

The author’s “prayerful journey” found its ultimate origin in *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, and much like that classic work, Carruth’s book is intended to cast light on “the path of divine enlightenment for the disciple who wants to receive understanding concerning the ways of God.” The author, a retired anesthesiologist, takes readers through a familiar series of homilies on core Christian concepts, from the importance of humility to the challenges of giving your life to Christ. Each of the book’s sections begins with a scriptural passage, with Carruth present at every turn to both stress the demands of a Christian life and encourage his readers in their struggle to live that life. “Let us constantly turn to our God and receive His gracious love, mercy, forgiveness, and strength,” reads one such exhortation among many, “so that we are empowered to support, console, help, counsel, and advise one another in times of difficulty.” The author repeatedly returns to the central importance of maintaining a meek attitude when facing the burdens of Christian life: “A humble heart is required to receive the peace of God,” he contends, arguing that the faithful please God “as peacemakers rather than troublemakers.” Carruth’s book is attractively designed, and his rhetorical passion for restating the basics of modern Christian practice is very appealing; Christian readers in all stages of their faith journeys will find this bracing stuff. Those same readers may find particular reassurance in the author’s frequent references to his beliefs that faith is an inherently joyful thing and that earning God’s favor is a freeing experience rather than a guiltily performed duty.

A clear and passionately delivered Christian call to be “God’s true image bearers.”

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**THE LOST BOOKS**

**Romance and Adventure in Tudor Times**

Conlan, Mo

Atmosphere Press (290 pp.)

$17.99 paper | $7.99 e-book | April 4, 2023

9781639888009

Tudor-era sweethearts gather a crew of “Holy Pirates” to push back on tax corruption and retrieve stolen monastery treasures in Conlan’s romantic historical adventure novel.

Morwenna Goodwin, who’s 19 and “now of wife age,” receives courtship gifts from her childhood pal Henry Truelove, the 20-year-old son of a family wealthier than hers, residing in Truelove Manor near her family’s small freehold farm. Morwenna puts the gifts—which begin with a partridge in a pear tree and proceed as in the anachronistic song “The Twelve Days of Christmas”—to practical use. She uses some of the bounty to hire former monk Tom to teach her how to write and learn about equitable marriage contracts. Henry, who’s been away at court, returns home after learning that his father is facing ruinous taxes; he brings eight milkmaids along with him. Daisy, one of them, becomes a servant in nearby Blount Hall, helping to expose and resolve the misdeeds of the tax collector and his oafish son. Blount servant James, a former monastery student, shows Tom a bejeweled holy book given to him for safekeeping after monasteries were disbanded under Tudor rule. A former abbot also arises, having stashed a cache of books and other stolen treasure in the area. All’s well by novel’s end thanks to a festival play created by the town’s wealthy sisters that results in several marriages and an opportunity for the main couple and their band of “Holy Pirates” to spirit away the books to a protected new home. In this amusing, action-packed tale, Conlan effectively combines the loving parody of William Goldman’s classic *The Princess Bride* (1973) with the feminism of Karen Cushman’s *Catherine, Called Birdy* (1994). It encompasses a colorful cavalcade of characters, who also include an actual ex-pirate; a formerly enslaved sailor; and displaced nuns, one of whom was once a pirate hostage. Many of these characters get to express snarky social criticism during their adventures, including Tom, who notes that church officials are “sneaky and venomous as snakes, and ever changing what be true and what heresy.”

An exuberant fairy-tale homage with sly commentary about gender, class, church, and state.
“A richly textured, luminous saga that treats harsh realities with emotional complexity.”

ROSE ALONE

NEVERSCAPE
Cox, Kevin
Silvettica (308 pp.)
$13.99 paper | $0.99 e-book | May 15, 2023
9789886636849

A skilled operative finds herself in a new world and must protect its denizens from her own mortal enemies in the third book in Cox’s SF series, following Shadowsphere (2022).

Malidora is the last agent of the Sinavus, an organization that controlled her home world of Isodonia with manipulation and violence. Her traumatic past has taught her she’s dangerous to anyone who grows close to her. On Isodonia, the Shadows invaded and manipulated her to kill her own family. After she defeated a particularly strong Shadow, she was brought into the mindstream, where stronger beings lurk. She escaped and found herself in the Hollow—a universe between worlds—and learned the truth of the Gaith, cosmic gods who intend to destroy her world and others like it. She learns to harness her own energy but barely escapes with her life into the world of Kandom, where the land is split into light and dark areas, with warring peoples on either side. She meets the handsome, strong, and wary Dabradian, a soldier for the light side who takes her prisoner to help him investigate unusual animal attacks. By Dabradian’s side is Evala, a rebellious, perceptive orphan with the ability to detect lies. Malidora quickly realizes the Shadows have arrived in Kandom, and if her new companions don’t heed her warnings, their people won’t survive. Cox returns to the Bewilderness series with a vibrant third installment that will thrill and surprise returning readers. Malidora is a strong Shadow, she was brought into the mindstream, where stronger beings lurk. She escaped and found herself in the Hollow—a universe between worlds—and learned the truth of the Gaith, cosmic gods who intend to destroy her world and others like it. She learns to harness her own energy but barely escapes with her life into the world of Kandom, where the land is split into light and dark areas, with warring peoples on either side. She meets the handsome, strong, and wary Dabradian, a soldier for the light side who takes her prisoner to help him investigate unusual animal attacks. By Dabradian’s side is Evala, a rebellious, perceptive orphan with the ability to detect lies. Malidora quickly realizes the Shadows have arrived in Kandom, and if her new companions don’t heed her warnings, their people won’t survive. Cox returns to the Bewilderness series with a vibrant third installment that will thrill and surprise returning readers. Malidora is a refreshing, confident, and entertaining main character who effectively drives the story and has compelling relationships with other players. Her reaction to and decision in the Hollow are particularly powerful and provide an engaging foundation to her interactions with the people of Kandom. Her curiosity effectively introduces elements of Cox’s intricate worldbuilding, as when Evala explains the light and darkness of her home planet: “Kandom is tidally locked. We always face the sun, just like Underveil is always in the dark, facing away from it.” After an ending that’s both harrowing and heartwarming, fans will eagerly await the next installment.

A complex and intriguing series entry.

ECHO OF THE EVERCRY
Dawson, E.J.
Literary Wanderlust (328 pp.)
$15.99 paper | $4.99 e-book | July 1, 2023
9781956615159

A teenage girl faces an awakening ancient god in Dawson’s YA fantasy novel.

Once upon a time, evil god Evercry and its magic corrupted the world until it was defeated by the Fair Lady, a godlike guardian figure. For a thousand years since, the warrior sisters of the Fair Lady’s order in the medieval-like city of Lathore have protected the world from the lingering tendrils of the Evercry’s essence by slaying those who fall under its spell. Larissa is about to be tested by the Fair Lady, and once she passes her trial, she will one day—like her mother and countless women in their family before her—hear the call to slay her enemy. But when Larissa fails her Empirical (a sort of final graduation test), she is placed within the secretive caste of the darkkins, the only ones within their order who are allowed to study and even wield magic to face the Evercry (“They studied magic, the tool of the Evercry, to better understand and defend against their foe. Sisters warned all acolytes to steer clear of them; they bore taint for their meddling with magic”). When she is called to go on an unexpected mission, she and her friends Jyan and Valare, who are knights, embark on a dangerous journey that may change everything. The story brilliantly juxtaposes Larissa’s friends’ prowess in fighting in exciting action sequences with Larissa’s more scholarly nature. Her studies as a darkkin unveil the truth about her heritage, the history of her world, and her role in it, as she learns, “The world is not a stagnant history book. It changes all the time, with every passing day, and many of us are never aware.” Satisfying character arcs, a deeply felt sense of sisterhood between Larissa and her friends, and a bit of romance are the cherries on top.

A strong beginning for a promising fantasy series.

ROSE ALONE
DeCosse, Sheila Flynn
CALEC TBR Books (372 pp.)
$17.99 paper | March 1, 2022
9781616071664

An Acadian refugee in Colonial New York struggles to regain her family and freedom in DeCosse’s plangent YA historical novel.

This tale re-creates the 1755 expulsion of French-speaking Acadians from their Nova Scotia villages by British Gov. Charles Lawrence, who suspected them of supporting French troops in the French and Indian War. The narrative follows teenage Rose from when British soldiers force her and her family onto a ship. She endures a nightmarish, weekslong voyage, eating stale bread and maggot-ridden pork in an overcrowded
hold where disease is spreading. In the chaos, her mother, Cécile; sister, Madeleine; and boyfriend, André, are swept onto a different ship bound for parts unknown. Further tragedy ensues, and in New York, Rose is separated from the rest of her family and sent to Long Island, where she’s sold as an indentured servant to a weaver named Jonas and his sickly, pregnant wife, Abigail. Speaking little English, Rose weathering exhausting chores and xenophobia. However, she finds unexpected kindness from strangers, including handsome carpenter Nate. Rose finally gets a chance to find her loved ones, but she must reckon with a solemn promise she made and consider a tempting proposal. Over the course of this novel, DeCosse effectively steeps readers in colorful period details, from the daily ordeal of grinding corn into edible mush to the perils of whale hunts. It’s also a moving portrait of loss and uprootedness, and it’s one that’s told in subtly evocative prose, as when Cécile explains the situation to her family members early on: “Running her hand over the faded squares, [Cécile] picks the quilt up and kisses it. Then as we watch, she gets up from the bench, gathers the quilt and throws it into the hearth-fire…. ‘It is gone,’ she says, ‘the old life. We cannot live in that time anymore.’ ” Readers will root for Rose as she treads a winding path to an uncertain destination, choosing between her old family and a new one.

A richly textured, luminous saga that treats harsh realities with emotional complexity.

THE SEEKING TREE
Dee, Jodi
Illus. by the author & Kaya Oldaker
Self (36 pp.)
$17.99 | $4.99 e-book | March 1, 2023
9781736209325

A tree waits...and waits...for humans to pay attention in Dee’s picture book.

In the late 1700s, a sapling wants to enjoy the presence of all other living creatures. But while most animals will stop and sit with the small tree, one group will not: humans. Represented by a group of Native hunters, then by European settlers in covered waggons and Puritan home builders, the humans go about their own business, never stopping to sit with the tree. In a repeated refrain, the seeking tree asks, “Will you sit with us?” An older voice of the forest answers, “They are busy, Young One.” Each time, the tree grows more frustrated, until the forest is cleared away, first for farmland, then a city, and finally a futuristic megalopolis. In this last setting, the tree stands alone and is finally approached by a human family in space suits, who sit with the tree and gather its seeds, hopeful for the future. Dee and Oldaker create beautiful painted illustrations; the natural world’s beauty is highlighted even as it diminishes in each spread until it is overtaken. The impact of the images, and of the frustration in the seeking tree’s repeated text, ably communicates the message of how important it is to commune with the natural world.

An accessible call to appreciate nature.

SEEN
Delegal, Julie G.
Self (366 pp.)
$24.95 | $15.00 paper | $7.99 e-book
Aug 21, 2021
9780578958209
9780578962917 paper

A Black teenager is wrongfully accused of murder in Delegal’s novel. Fifteen-year-old Jason Royals is given a rare opportunity by his mother—the chance to skip church on Sunday to prepare for a job interview at a local Beau Rêve, Florida, pharmacy with his new crush, Kim. Dressed in nice khakis and with an added spring in his step from his air-bounce sneakers, Jason rushes across the street to beat traffic only to be stopped and forcibly arrested for “running while Black.” He shortly finds himself in the custody of John Marshall, a 10-year veteran of the police force anxious to end his tenure in homicide. Pressured by his role as an “upstanding” Black man, haunted by too much violence committed by too many young offenders, Marshall has no trouble believing that the high school student before him is a murderer. Worse, after a threatening trip into the woods with Marshall and his white partner, the traumatized Jason confesses to the crime. His only hope in a system stacked against him is that his attorney, Aaron Hampton, known as a “fierce advocate,” can get his confession dismissed and ensure that his time in jail only means a future delayed, not one denied. This timely novel is a vivid panic attack on the page, a fictional account of the real-life horror story too many young Black men face every day. Inspired by an actual crime in Jacksonville, Jason’s plight illustrates how rushed, abusive police work and racism override justice at every turn. Correcting such mistakes is a long, frustrating process, and the book places readers right there, in the cell and courtroom alongside its protagonist, to struggle with him and feel his anger, hopelessness, and sorely tested faith. The narrative excels at empathy and doesn’t only reserve it for Jason; Marshall isn’t portrayed as some stock serial villain, just another flawed character in an even more flawed system.

A crushingly relevant story that puts its readers in the shoes of the accused.

HIBERNACULUM
Doyle, Anthony
Out of This World Press (248 pp.)
$29.95 | June 5, 2023
9781957224084

In Doyle’s SF novel, humanity turns to hibernation as a solution to Earth’s ills. In 2045, the Earth supports 8 billion people and counting, many of whom live in abject poverty and hunger. Human hibernation has become an accepted mechanism to counter many of the world’s
We must ‘winter’ belowground, incubate the buds of change."

This cerebral, high-concept novel features an epistolary narrative that collects a myriad of materials to sketch in the background of the events that shaped the reality of the narrative and to indicate the personal and societal expectations around the hibernation solution. Excerpts from the blog of a young man named Seth Macy, whose entries are meandering and philosophical, are interspersed with magazine and newspaper articles about the people who hibernate, documents that relate to the Hibernation Program, a dream diary from a patient who awoke to then experience sleeping troubles, audio file transcripts from a husband who waits for his wife to wake up, and more. Not centering characters in a traditional way, the collagelike story effectively conveys how the Hibernacula started as a brilliant tool to make a future viable for humankind only to evolve into something more sinister.

Thought-provoking SF delivered in an intriguingly panoramic form.

DAMNED CHILIS

Poop jokes abound in this picture book about a future comedian and his friends.

Justin may get in trouble for his uncouth habits, but as long as he can make his friends laugh, he doesn’t care. When their amusement at his antics seems to wane, he needs a new plan: "Why are they not laughing more?" Justin grumbled with regret. "I’ll have to take it up a notch and be my most disgusting yet!" But when he eats out of the garbage bin, the joke’s on him; his stomach can’t handle the grossness, and he has an explosive bathroom episode that leaves his friends concerned instead of entertained. Everywhere he goes, healthy veggies “made him fart” and that he can do prat falls just as easily if he’s clean as when he’s filthy. Frank captures the sheer delight that some early independent readers find in grossness; fun, unfamiliar words like “pongy burps” are clear from context but may stretch young readers’ vocabulary. Add some light nudity (butt jokes in both the text and illustrations) and this is sure to be a book that may turn off many adults, but some youngsters will certainly enjoy it. Vamos’ Disney-like, full-color cartoon illustrations perfectly capture Justin’s attitude and the over-the-top humor.

A winner for families that enjoy a heavy dose of gross-out humor.

Gebien concludes her trilogy about the journey of a washed-up rock star in this novel.

Damen Warner, the frontman for the band OBNXS, is back in his final story about trying to make it as a rock star. Throughout the novel, numerous obstacles are put in Damen’s way: his grandmother’s will, a custody battle, pit bulls, viral videos, and more. He has fallen into a deep alcoholic depression: Damen “looked like ten pounds of shit in a five-pound bag. Thirty years old. Too tall, too thin, too angry, too mean.” Damen’s relationships with his girlfriend, Melody, and her daughter, Vico, are in trouble: Melody’s ex, the “Baby Daddy,” wants custody of their daughter, and Damen ends up in the middle of the conflict. Additionally, Melody is meeting with her former clients from a strip club for extra money, which makes Damen uncomfortable. Then Damen runs into Evangeline, a girl he met on the road, a social media–savvy evangelical Christian willing to help the band with their image—for a fee. She arranges protests against OBNXS to gin up publicity, generating sufficient interest to allow the band to continue working on their album. Though Damen finds it easy to create the image that the internet demands, he drifts further away from who he is as an artist (“As much as I wanted to believe my career was rallying due to the overwhelming magnetism of my musical genius, the truth was most of my notoriety now came from videos of me doing stupid shit on the internet, including such hit singles as ‘Arrested Naked’ (feat. TSA), ‘That Guy Who Kicked Over A Piano,’” and “Strip Club Riot”).

The author is able to evoke raw emotions with a depth of sincerity (and a bit of embarrassment) through her cast of quirky characters. Damen has moments of tenderness with Vico balanced by his characteristic raw, raunchy humor and distinct voice. The narrative is paced well, moving quickly from one episode to the next. Gebien’s vivid descriptions transport readers into each scene and expose Damen’s naked feelings—as he struggles with the urge to drink one night, he leaves Melody in bed and goes to the kitchen, where he sees that “the abandoned chilis still lay on the cutting board like small, shriveled, scorched hearts. [He] knew how they felt.” These moments of revelation help make Damen an empathetic character. The sequences in which the band collaborates and riff are strengths of the novel, allowing the reader to see more of Damen’s artistic process. Describing the album the band is working to complete,
Damen notes that the “range of new sounds we planned to include was a lot wider than any of our previous work, slalomming wildly from hard rock and metal to dark country to absurd pop to achingly earnest to melodic impressionism.” Or, as Mungo Gordon, the band’s producer, sums it up, “chaotic,” a word that could also describe the feel of the novel—though it’s chaotic in a purposeful way, like OBNXS’ music.

An engaging rock novel about a complicated antihero.

ASHES IN THE PINES
Gibbs, Chad Alan
Borne Back Books (378 pp.)
9798985675757

Teenage detective Izzy Brown and her sidekick Elton Jones-Davies are back, investigating a cold-case murder in small-town North Carolina.

It’s 2009, and 16-year-old Izzy, her mother, and her brother have moved yet again—this time from Florida to Ashes in the Pines, a touristy locale in the North Carolina mountains. There, Izzy’s twin sibling, Axl, can take advantage of a prep school football scholarship. “The truth was,” narrates snarky Izzy, “we’d just moved our poverty north a few hundred miles to a milder climate.” Izzy gets a kitchen job at Fuller Farms, a summer camp catering to the very rich. Soon, her best friend unexpectedly shows up: Elton, a brilliant teen with autism. Back in 1992, Vance Fuller, the scion of the wealthy Fuller family, was killed—shot full of arrows. His father, Wellington, knows Izzy’s amazing reputation for crime-solving, so he hires her to find his son’s killer; he’s even arranged for Elton to join her. Specifically, he wants them to confirm that archery instructor Buster McClellan was the murderer. It turns out that there’s a plethora of other colorful suspects. Readers learn over time that Fuller Farms, a redoubt of Christian values, may not be what it appears to be. Izzy, as a character, is a wonderfully conflicted creation and not a Nancy Drew clone. For one thing, she has an opioid problem, facilitating her sidekick Elton Jones-Davies is back, investigating a cold-case murder in small-town North Carolina.

An engaging rock novel about a complicated antihero.

THE DEVIL’S GLOVE
Grindle, Lucretia
Casa Croce Press (344 pp.)
9781960610010

Grindle presents a historical novel of witchcraft and war in Colonial America.

In the tightknit and often claustrophobic world of a coastal Maine village in 1688, teenage Resolve Hammond lives with her mother, an herbalist whose knowledge is often called on by her neighbors, though some of them are suspicious about the origins of her skills. In the book’s opening chapter, Resolve’s mother is unable to save Avis Hobbs, a woman who has been poisoned by her 10-year-old daughter, Abigail. Abigail develops a fixation on Resolve that threatens to become dangerous, but they face a more immediate threat when leaders of the colony’s militia instigate war against the local Indigenous tribes. Resolve and her mother, who spent time living with one of the tribes during King Philip’s War a decade earlier, attempt to mediate and avert bloodshed, which puts their standing in the town at further risk. The war brings Abigail’s older brother, Thaddeus, back to town, and, as he and Resolve grow close, she learns more about the harm Abigail has done. But a crucial moment brings her into alliance with Abigail and reveals mysteries about the abilities they share. The book’s first half meanders, particularly as it tiptoes around questions of Abigail’s culpability, the supernatural, and various village personalities, but the pacing solidifies by the narrative’s midpoint, when the looming war claims much of the focus—the second half is a page-turner. The often elaborate prose may not appeal to all readers (“A tiny coracle, I bob in her wake as she crosses the village, her long hair a single plait swinging down her back”), though all can appreciate the detailed and evocative imagery that brings the setting to life. Grindle’s approach to the complex historical background of the story rewards knowledgeable and curious readers without overwhelming the plot. The book explores questions of freedom and independence, offering a compelling perspective on the earliest days of New England’s history.

An uneven but ultimately enjoyable tale of Colonial New England.

THE RELUCTANT VISIONARY
Groover, Datta
Deep Pacific Press (372 pp.)
$9.97 e-book | Sept. 6, 2023

In Groover’s dramatic paranormal thriller, multiple members of a family grapple with strange and startling visions. In modern-day Center Point, Texas, Jessica Atwood, a 29-year-old Black woman, lives on a failing farm with her brother and stepfather. She has haunting,
As she endeavors to find peace and the strength to be a hero, Groover introduces an account of Anna Mae Cole, Jess' grandmother, growing up in the mid-1960s with the same unique, frustrating powers. The author expertly weaves together the premonitions of young women being kidnapped in their town. As she endeavors to find peace and the strength to be a hero, Groover introduces an account of Anna Mae Cole, Jess' grandmother, growing up in the mid-1960s with the same unique, frustrating powers. The author expertly weaves together the women's dire struggles to do what's right and also their trials and tribulations as they attempt to come into their own in the 1960s and in the present day. As Jess strives to keep her farm afloat while dealing with annoying neighbors and mysterious men interested in buying her property, Anna Mae navigates a broken family and finding and losing love. Strong themes of generational trauma, family bonds, and finding one's truth coexist in a well-paced plot, and as readers connect with Jess' or Anna Mae's narratives, they'll find themselves engaged by an intriguing mystery.

A smart supernatural tale that delves deeply into its main characters' lives.

**How to Draw Awesome Stuff: Chilling Creations**

Holmes, Catherine V.
Library Tales Publishing (309 pp.)
May 2, 2023
9781956769791
9781956769807 paper

Holmes delivers a step-by-step guide to drawing various oddities.

The work begins with some drawing fundamentals, including shading, types of pencils, and the use of kneaded erasers; then comes the "awesome stuff" promised by the title. Early entries include "An Awesome Flower," which appears to be of unearthly origin, a "Baby Head Spider," which is literally the body of a spider with a baby's head, and a "Cat Crab," a fierce-looking creature with a crab's body and a cat's head. The Cat Crab begins with a simple circle for a head; by Step 4, a claw shape is being refined; by Step 8, the monster is in full form. Occasionally additional tips are included, such as advice on using charcoal ("Charcoal can be messy; so make sure to work on a surface that can be easily cleaned or covered."). Aside from such practical concerns, whimsy is the name of the game. A shark with sunglasses, a man with lobster hands, and the more abstract "Nightmare Face" number among the more memorable subjects. The book engagingly tackles many such bizarre grotesqueries, which helps to distinguish it from other drawing guides. Who would want to draw a normal crab when they could learn how to draw a Cat Crab? The initial crash course in technique may prove challenging to the complete novice—those who have never worked with the subtleties of shading may find that it is not as easy as it looks. Nevertheless, for a book that caters to a range of abilities, the subject matter has more than enough to offer. The beginner may not expect to exactly replicate something as complex as, say, the "Polka Dot Lady," yet the book provides an encouraging place to start.

**Chilling Creations: A Welcoming Guide to Drawing More Than Just the Average Still Life.**

Horn, David
Illus. by Judit Tondora
Self (90 pp.)
$4.99 paper | $2.99 e-book | May 24, 2023
9781736677476

The fourth entry in Horn's chapter book Eudora Space Kid series finds the plucky hero playing matchmaker.

Eudora Jenkins lives on a spaceship, the AstroLiner *Athena*, with her "perfect" older sister, Molly, her Powian mother, who looks like "a beautiful gray wolf standing up straight," and her Powian father, who has an "octopus-like head, arms, hands, and feet" (Eudora and Molly are human girls). One day Eudora sees the normally cheerful ship's captain looking frustrated and yells a lot. Like when kids try and sneak onto his bridge. He yells, 'Get this kid off my bridge!'. Captain Jax soon confesses to her that he wants to ask out Eudora's teacher, Miss Allison, but he is too shy. Being the helpful third grader that she is, Eudora suggests the pair go on a double date with Eudora and her best friend, Arnold, to make the prospect less intimidating. She quickly discovers, however, that romance is never predictable, as their double date in the ship's cafeteria is interrupted by Dr. Jimmy Ratz, the new doctor in charge of MedBay. Dr. Ratz confesses his own feelings for Miss Allison, but, as one might expect in an early reader chapter book, the love triangle is quickly and (mostly) painlessly resolved. Interspersed throughout the book are cartoonish black-and-white illustrations by Tondora that do justice to the goofy nature of the text. The book ends with a Planetary Republic Court transcript, an interview in which Dr. Ratz hilariously objects to the real-life author's plot decisions and takes issue with how Tondora illustrates him.

Eudora's stories toe the line between adventure and big life lessons in a way that proves both fun and educational. Her dynamic with Molly in particular manages to evolve beyond a stereotypical contentious sibling relationship when Eudora goes to her for advice about romance. It's then that Molly admits that she goes above and beyond to show her parents that she's responsible so she'll be allowed to date, a confession that deepens the sisters' bond in an unexpected moment of tenderness in the course of an otherwise silly narrative. The straightforward plot,
relatively short page count, and simple vocabulary make this ideal for new readers looking to make the jump beyond children’s books. There are deeper themes present as well: Even though the planet Qlaxonia means to take over the galaxy, Eudora’s ship welcomes those Qlaxons who have chosen to defect. This kind of acceptance of all alien species is handled in a nonchalant manner but nevertheless speaks volumes, contributing to the book’s overall message of love and friendship. There is also plenty of kid-appropriate humor, as when Eudora describes her parents’ jobs: “Mom is in charge of the brig, which is like the jail on the ship for naughty passengers. And my dad is a marine biologist. But we’re not allowed to make octopus jokes. At least not to him.” While this is technically the fourth Eudora Space Kid entry, readers new to the series won’t have a problem picking this one up first—it works perfectly well as a stand-alone book.

A well-illustrated and very satisfying horror tale.

THE COUSINS ARE COMING!

Jones, Kay
Illus. by Peter Trimarco
Notable Kids Publishing (32 pp.)
$18.95 | May 23, 2023
9781735853543

Adventures begin when relatives arrive in this debut rhyming celebration of kid-centered family time.

Three siblings watch the window and the clock, impatient for their cousins’ arrival. Finally, the two cousins arrive to celebratory hugs. There’s no time to slow down now that the cousins are here—even when the youngest begs the older kids to wait. They must make costumes to put on a show, then spy on the adults, and look through family photos. Soon, the tired family members pile onto a single bed: “Dreaming sweet dreams of the day that has been... / knowing tomorrow we’ll do it again.” Jones captures the frantic excitement of spending time with beloved family members who might only visit a few times a year. The rhyming couplets vary in rhythm, making the scansion elusive, but newly independent readers will find the language accessible. Trimarco’s full-color cartoon illustrations aptly capture the chaos, though they’re light on detail and shading. Illustrations of family photos are more realistic than other images, which lean toward caricature—an appropriate style for the story’s tone. The siblings are portrayed with blond hair and pale skin; the cousins have brown hair and brown skin.

A nostalgic picture book that distills the energy of an extended-family visit.


Kareen, Lexie
Illus. by A. Simioni
YGTMedia Co. (98 pp.)
$17.95 paper | June 14, 2023
9781998754250

Kareen presents an illustrated chapter book for children about being creative and being yourself.

Bernadette, nicknamed B, describes herself as “an ordinary ten-year-old girl” who marches “to the beat of [her] own drum.” In this book, she narrates a series of accounts of her life experiences and reveals the lessons she learned about being adventurous, patient, and a role model for others. In “B Adventurous,” she goes with her family to a sushi restaurant, where the owner is very busy. After B orders her usual California roll, she’s concerned when she receives something different: “Big fat fish eggs, this slippery eel-looking thing, baby octopus, and these teeny tiny red eggs.” She doesn’t want to eat the meal, but she also doesn’t want to bother the busy owner. A little girl at a neighboring table taps her on the shoulder and says the fish eggs are
Kirkus Reviews has praised Kasdan's debut memoir, *Roll Back the World: A Sister's Memoir*. The book explores Kasdan's older sister Rachel's harrowing struggle with mental illness in this debut memoir. Kasdan recounts her sister's story, drawing on her newfound worldliness, to understand her sister's diagnosis and, in doing so, finds self-forgiveness for being unable to save her.

Kasdan's writing is intelligent and probing. In trying to understand why one sibling develops a mental illness when another does not, she refers to the science of epigenetics: “High levels of stress during a child’s early years are believed to be a major factor in expression of rogue genes.” The author's shrewd hypothesizing is carefully balanced with sororal tenderness, as when recalling her desperate plea to her sister: “Don’t leave me, Rachel. Don’t disappear into being crazy.” Kasdan's inclusion of her sister's poetry (which resembles the work of Sylvia Plath) offers an engaging first-person perspective on the stultifying nature of Rachel's mental illness. In a poem entitled “Water,” Rachel writes, “I go down deep till bright waters / roll over and over / the sinking hulk of my body / covered by each wave one by one.” The memoir poignantly discusses how Rachel's memory and poetry inspired the author to write as an act of catharsis. Kasdan's description of how the act of writing now links the two sisters is profoundly moving: “When I sit down to write, I still hear the clatter of her typewriter ringing across the bedroom of our youth.” Although the narrative explores the unbearable pain of having a sibling with schizophrenia, it also recognizes how Rachel's creativity was fueled by her illness and how that passion proved to be inspirational. The author delves deeply into memory and family dynamics to understand her sister's diagnosis and, in doing so, finds self-forgiveness for being unable to save her.

Intricate and affecting, Kasdan's debut finds hope in the saddest of stories.

Kasdan recounts her older sister’s harrowing struggle with mental illness in this debut memoir. When the author’s 19-year-old sister, Rachel, returned from a kibbutz in Israel, she radiated “beauty and sophistication.” Drawing on her newfound worldliness, she dazzled friends who stopped by the family home. Three years later, in 1965, Rachel was hearing “frightening voices” and was soon diagnosed with schizophrenia. After multiple hospitalizations, Rachel died at the age of 59, 36 years after her first psychotic episode. Kasdan writes of her admiration for Rachel during their childhood and describes a family under pressure; moody and defiant, Rachel fought intensely with their parents. The author also conveys their trepidation about being members of a Jewish family with socialist values in the era when the Rosenbergs were executed for espionage. The memoir attempts to excavate the roots of mental illness and to come to terms with the guilt she felt for being unable to save a sibling. A long-term resident of St. Louis State Hospital, where the family felt she received insufficient care, Rachel was raped during her discharge to a boardinghouse. The family decided that she would receive better care on the West Coast, but the plan backfired, leaving Rachel isolated from her family. Drawing on her sister’s letters and poetry, the author attempts to “shine a light” on the “horror and wonder” of Rachel’s life, including “hospitalizations in open and locked wards,” “mind-numbing, tremor-causing medications,” “assaults in hospitals and on the streets,” and homelessness.

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Intricate and affecting, Kasdan's debut finds hope in the saddest of stories.
“Poems that will be perfect for animal lovers, with gorgeous illustrations worthy of framing.”

YOU STOLE MY NAME
McGregor, Dennis
Blue Star Books (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Aug. 8, 2023
978-1941325988

Pairs of animals show their similarities and differences in this illustrated collection of short poems on shared names.

The kangaroo and the kangaroo rat have a lot in common, so the kangaroo doesn't mind that the rodent uses the same name. The chicken is a bit less keen on sharing hers with the predatory chicken hawk, however. Across these pages, animals show their matching colors—including the parrotfish and the parrot and the zebra finch and the zebra—or give details that highlight their differences. At one point, a dog entertainingly addresses a dogfish in an aquarium: “You don't wag and you don't bark. / You're no dog! You're a shark!” The poems vary in theme, with some in the voices of animals wondering why they’ve been named after another creature. The paintings are consistently enticing throughout; McGregor, a talented artist, uses minimal backgrounds to help bring out the details of each highly realistic creature. Children who’ve graduated from John Butler’s similarly beautiful animal-themed books will be ready for this slightly more complex text. The short poems have some lovely alliteration (the cowbird’s style choices are said to “feature feathers over fur”), making this well suited for emergent readers.

Poems that will be perfect for animal lovers, with gorgeous illustrations worthy of framing.

A WOMAN’S GUIDE TO SEARCH & RESCUE
Moore, Mary Carroll
Riverbed Press (344 pp.)
Oct. 24, 2023
9798987531709

Moore presents a novel about two sisters who must face their shared trauma after dangerous circumstances reunite them.

Red Nelson, the lead singer of the rock band Sleek, is on the run after finding her manager and ex-husband, Vern, unconscious backstage at a North Carolina show. His attacker tried to hurt her, as well, but she was able to get away. It appears that her old boyfriend Billy Cotton was behind the incident, so she steals Vern’s plane to get as far away as possible. She travels near the Adirondacks, where her long-estranged half sister, Kate, lives. However, Red’s piloting skill fails her, and she crashes in Panther Gorge. Injured, isolated, and desperate, she texts Kate’s 22-year-old daughter, Molly, who’s also not getting along with her mother. Molly rescues Red and houses her in a cabin on Kate’s property. As she begins to heal, she confronts her history of tumultuous relationships. On the other side of the sizable property, Kate is also struggling. She’s a keen pilot, as well, but because she’s had a series of severe blackouts recently, she’s been barred from flying. She also happens to be a member of a local search-and-rescue team investigating the recent plane crash at Panther Gorge. Before long, a media frenzy builds around Red’s sudden disappearance, as she’s a suspect in the attack; Billy also appears, just released from prison. The sisters must make tough choices—between fighting and fleeing and between self-preservation and forgiveness—to protect their family and clear Red’s name. Moore’s engaging offering not only gets across the ruggedness of the Adirondacks setting, with its “jagged cliffs and craggy trees,” but also presents a touching tale of siblings. The author ably brings her characters to life; each woman is flawed and vulnerable, which makes them feel realistic and relatable. Red is shown to be shortsighted in many of her decisions, and Kate is depicted as using steadfastness and regimentation as emotional armor. The sisters complement each other and form a strong bond; together, they forge a believable path forward.

An exciting work of survival fiction with strong female characters.
Nielsen argues that fathers are just as competent, devoted, and central to kids’ well-being as mothers in this nonfiction work. The author, a psychology professor at Wake Forest University, takes aim at the conventional wisdom that considers mothers the mainstays of child rearing and relegates fathers to a supporting role as breadwinners and child care assistants who can be dispensed with after a divorce. On the contrary, she asserts that dads are essential, stating that kids raised with their father in the home are healthier and better adjusted, have higher graduation rates, and are less prone to delinquency, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, depression, and anxiety. Fathers’ hands-on parenting is just as important as the income they provide, Nielsen contends. The author further reports that babies and toddlers with attentive dads sleep better and receive cognitive benefits from a father’s tendency to engage in play that’s more stimulating and challenging and that fathers provide reality checks that hold kids accountable and teach them to overcome problems and cope with frustration and failure. She offers proposals for shoring up fathers’ positions, including increased paid paternity leave, 50-50 shared custody arrangements, and a plea for wary moms to embrace a more integral parenting role for dads. The author cites a wealth of sociological statistics and scientific studies but also probes the cultural conventions we apply to fatherhood, exploring everything from the caricature of uncommunicative, emotionally clueless husbands in pop-psychology tomes like *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* to the parade of incompetent, absentee, and deadbeat dads in movies. She writes in a lucid, down-to-earth style that’s free of academic cant and replete with tart wisdom (“The main reason most husbands do less of the work in and around the home is the same reason they don’t get to spend as much time with the children as their wives: their jobs…. [T]hat doesn’t justify villanizing men as lazy bums who do nothing more than lift their legs off the floor so their wives can vacuum”). Dads and moms alike will find much to ponder here.

**A fresh, eye-opening reexamination of the father’s role in the family, full of stimulating contrarian insights.**

Oliver offers a comprehensive guide to one of the world’s most important programming languages in this nonfiction work. As the author points out in this new addition to the excellent QuickStart Guide series, the Python programming language is fundamental to our current world, from Google to Spotify to IBM to wide-reaching governmental systems (he enthusiastically extols Python as “an awesome programming language that lets you do a wide variety of tasks—everything from system utilities to business programs to games to website backends and even artificial intelligence”). Focusing on Version 3 of Python, Oliver presents his readers with a series of demonstrations and hands-on exercises. He starts with the basics—the installation of Python on a computer (not a phone or tablet)—and proceeds from there to outline the basic functions of Python, progressing to advanced functionality, statistics, and internet interaction, always advancing the complexity of Python “expressions.” As with all QuickStart guides, this one comes replete with bullet points, charts, and inset sections, and Oliver also includes increasingly complicated programming exercises for readers to do. He accompanies these exercises with technical commentary about the material he’s chosen to include: “While this is a perfectly acceptable way to handle this issue,” he writes, “it uses more lines and is more complex, so I opted to perform the casting inline.” Cumulatively, this choice to personalize his material emerges as the book’s greatest strength; it accentuates the signature feature of the entire QuickStart series of guides: the detailed approachability that thoroughly explains a subject without condescending to the reader. Oliver’s book is very much not for dummies or complete idiots, and his methodical, step-by-step walk-through is sure to calm the anxieties of entry-level programmers, although it might also shed light on some aspects of Python even for longtime users of the program. Readers looking to deepen their understanding of this ubiquitous programming language will find this book invaluable.

**A lively and engaging Python-centered entry in the QuickStart Guide series.**
An enjoyably readable and fascinating day-by-day account of a landmark Supreme Court case.
Frank does a favor for an old private investigator friend and French term “Garou,” as it doesn’t call to mind “tacky and dreams as well as the ghosts that he often sees—including flashbacks provide riveting subplots about Frank and his ago, he was turned into a werewolf, though he prefers the control. However, it’s soon apparent that someone—possibly another lycanthrope—is threatening Frank and the few people who are close to him, including Andy. Saulness’ debut takes a deep dive into Frank’s prolonged history; extended flashbacks provide riveting subplots about Frank and his little sister’s experience with an abusive father or Frank’s romance with his late wife; of course, the book also covers his Garou origin. These moments showcase a tortured soul, which makes it easier to sympathize with the troubled Frank of 1995. As the narrative progresses, readers will catch signs of Frank’s heightened senses and get insight into his vivid lucid “wolf-dreams” could be memories of his Garou seizing control. However, it’s soon apparent that someone—possibly another lycanthrope—is threatening Frank and the few people who are close to him, including Andy. Saulness’ debut takes a deep dive into Frank’s prolonged history; extended flashbacks provide riveting subplots about Frank and his little sister’s experience with an abusive father or Frank’s romance with his late wife; of course, the book also covers his Garou origin. These moments showcase a tortured soul, which makes it easier to sympathize with the troubled Frank of 1995. As the narrative progresses, readers will catch signs of Frank’s heightened senses and get insight into his vivid dreams as well as the ghosts that he often sees—including that of his wife. It’s more contemplative than action-oriented, as it’s primarily a tale of the hero learning about himself and his beast within. Still, the tension effectively rises as the villain inches closer to the spotlight. This full-bodied character study wraps up much of its narrative to great effect; Saulness’ potential sequel.

In Saulness’ urban fantasy, a jaded werewolf helps a girl in trouble while going up against a killer who may be a “turnskin” like himself.

Frank Shepard, in 1995 Bellingham, Washington, looks like an ordinary man in his 30s. However, his age is just shy of 100; decades ago, he was turned into a werewolf, though he prefers the French term “Garou,” as it doesn’t call to mind “tacky and dreams as well as the ghosts that he often sees—including flashbacks provide riveting subplots about Frank and his little sister’s experience with an abusive father or Frank’s romance with his late wife; of course, the book also covers his Garou origin. These moments showcase a tortured soul, which makes it easier to sympathize with the troubled Frank of 1995. As the narrative progresses, readers will catch signs of Frank’s heightened senses and get insight into his vivid dreams as well as the ghosts that he often sees—including that of his wife. It’s more contemplative than action-oriented, as it’s primarily a tale of the hero learning about himself and his beast within. Still, the tension effectively rises as the villain inches closer to the spotlight. This full-bodied character study wraps up much of its narrative to great effect; some questions linger, however, that could be addressed in a potential sequel.

A thoroughly engrossing and reflective lycanthropic tale.

THE PACK
Saulness, E.C.
Self (426 pp.)
$18.99 paper | $7.99 e-book | April 5, 2023
9798199247730

In Saulness’ urban fantasy, a jaded werewolf helps a girl in trouble while going up against a killer who may be a “turnskin” like himself.

Frank Shepard, in 1995 Bellingham, Washington, looks like an ordinary man in his 30s. However, his age is just shy of 100; decades ago, he was turned into a werewolf, though he prefers the French term “Garou,” as it doesn’t call to mind “tacky and dreams as well as the ghosts that he often sees—including flashbacks provide riveting subplots about Frank and his little sister’s experience with an abusive father or Frank’s romance with his late wife; of course, the book also covers his Garou origin. These moments showcase a tortured soul, which makes it easier to sympathize with the troubled Frank of 1995. As the narrative progresses, readers will catch signs of Frank’s heightened senses and get insight into his vivid dreams as well as the ghosts that he often sees—including that of his wife. It’s more contemplative than action-oriented, as it’s primarily a tale of the hero learning about himself and his beast within. Still, the tension effectively rises as the villain inches closer to the spotlight. This full-bodied character study wraps up much of its narrative to great effect; some questions linger, however, that could be addressed in a potential sequel.

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After Wynnfrith’s father—the trusted adviser to the king—became ill and passed away, she was unofficially adopted by King Goodliwink and Queen Olivia, who loved the little girl as much as their own child, Prince Oliver. But after the queen passed away, the children’s safety—and the safety of the entire populace of the kingdom—was at risk. The king’s new adviser, the tyrannical Lord Ugsome, starts a coup, and the young royalties barely escape with their lives. Wynnfrith, 12, and Oliver, 5, struggle to survive in the wilderness and avoid Ugsome’s henchmen. They fateful meet a “pretty and plump” healer named Mistress Plummety Peache who welcomes the children into her home and cares for them. As Ugsome’s army of miscreants comes closer to locating the two—and killing the young heir to the throne—Wynnfrith embarks on a journey of self-discovery, finding her own strengths and weaknesses: “She had learned she could be both afraid and brave at the same time. This knowledge would always comfort and guide her. Knowing this, she could face anything the future held.” Although fueled by a fast-paced, action-packed storyline, it’s the edifying themes (compassion, acceptance, etc.) and lessons learned by the two youngsters that make this such a memorable read. The power of the written word—in both songs and poetic incantations—is a valuable lesson for young readers. Peache says it aptly, “Words can do everything.”

A page-turning fantasy adventure for kids that enlightens, entertains, and, ideally, empowers.

COPY DESK MURDERS
Searle, Newell
Calumet Editions (268 pp.)
9781959770442

In the first novel in Searle’s planned trilogy, two brothers—a cop and a journalist—investigate two suspicious deaths in 1984 rural Minnesota.

Boston Meade itches to return to Chicago as editor-in-chief of the major newspaper American Outlook. The divorced journalist has lately served as interim chief of small-town Minnesota newspaper the Alton County Statesman since his father, the paper’s owner and editor, died. While pursuing a bootlegging story, intern Peder Norgaard discovers the bones of the long-missing Minneapolis detective Max Kaplan. Peder digs into the mystery, and soon, his own body is found at the bottom of a ravine, and his notes have gone missing. The same day, World War II veteran Elliot Ferrall is found dead in his truck, a possible suicide—but there are no fingerprints on the gun and no blood in the cab. Suspicious as the deaths are, county sheriff Jack Meade finds no hard evidence to declare them murders. Jack, who’s biracial, was an 8-year-old orphan when Boston’s white family adopted him; he and Boston have been best friends ever since, but now they’re divided by Jack’s handling of the investigations. Boston’s hired a new editor for the paper—Ginger O’Meara, whom he dated in high school—but vows to stick around until there’s
“A high-stakes, highly entertaining interstellar adventure.”

**THE CRYPTO SHAKEDOWN**

Sigler, Scott

Aethon Books (585 pp.)


**WHAT’S NEXT?**

Short Fiction in Time of Change

Ed. by Skeeter, Sharyn

Green Writers Press (326 pp.)

$19.95 paper  |  Feb. 21, 2023
9781950584864

The editor, who also contributes a story of her own, gathers an extraordinary collection of tales, rich with relatable character portraits that the authors tackle in numerous ways; several stories draw in readers with second-person narrations. In the case of Donna Miscolta’s “Mother, Mother, Mother, Mother Earth,” the English alphabet helps relay the journey of a mother raising her daughter (“M is for make-believe we are fine”). Even the more extreme scenarios manage to hit home: In Clarence Major’s “Innocence,” the narrator witnesses a double murder but seems more perturbed by the apparent confirmation that a lover has been unfaithful. While this collection has its share of standouts, there’s simply no lull in the run of stories. They’re teeming with compelling figures, like Jake in Joseph Bruchac’s “Vision,” an Indigenous man who’s a former special forces soldier and an aspiring novelist. There are also delightfully light-hearted turns; in Joanna Scott’s “Teardrop,” a woman spends a memorable day with her 6-year-old niece, Jody, whose innocent and frankly hilarious vandalism leads to disastrous results. The prose throughout is consistently sound: As Shannon Sanders (“The Good, Good Men”) writes, “Lee had met their father at a District jazz lounge that no longer existed, a place Miles had long imagined as dark and deliciously moody like the man.
“A deliberately paced mystery that always stays one step ahead of its readers.”

**THE STEPFAMILY**

**Traymore, Bonnie**

Pathways Publishing (314 pp.)

$12.99 paper | $2.99 e-book | April 19, 2023

9781478427512

A tech-startup VP suspects that someone is trying to kill her in Traymore’s thriller.

Things are looking up for Laura Foster. After seven years of marriage to Peter, who, she’s sure, loves her, and being stepmother to his two children—who, initially, didn’t like her—the 39-year-old has just been given a big career opportunity. She’s the new vice president of monetization at a company about to launch an app aimed at prospective college students. But things start to go downhill rapidly when she discovers brake fluid leaking from her car. Would jealousy drive someone to kill over a promotion? Her fevered imagination goes into overdrive when she suspects that something sinister is afoot with Peter. However, when Peter seeks out a private investigator to look into the incident, he denies it. “I’m sorry to disappoint you,” Peter insists, “but we’re happily married. There’s no story there....” Okay, out of a burning building, the story makes the newspaper the next day. He finally confides in members of his extended family, who own an apple orchard in New York. It turns out Adam has a gift: He is psychically connecting to actual people experiencing fear and helping them to “do something heroic.” The situation may be as serious as a car crash or as prosaic as a girl suffering bullies at school. If he really tries, Adam can dream about a specific person—like a kid who’s recently gone missing. The author’s well-developed cast is this paranormal tale’s brightest light. Adam struggles with knowing how to help, since he can’t instantly fix problems through his psychic dreams; sometimes, he can’t do anything. He’s surrounded by vibrant characters with their own engaging subplots: Adam’s cousin/best friend/roommate, Chris, is questioning his sexuality, and Adam’s older sister, Ellen, eyes a college that their parents may feel is too far from home. The story treats the psychic ability with subtlety, almost as if Adam gets mere glimpses into others’ lives. Further details, however, prove riveting, as Adam learns he’s not the only gifted one and that his ability has the potential to harm him. Starace’s simple prose complements the brisk narrative, and Adam’s love of cinema gives him the perfect excuse to habitually cite older films most readers his age won’t know (“Did you ever see the original movie Night of the Living Dead? The one from the 60s? It’s in black and white and it’s scary as hell”).

This superfamily rural drama boasts a first-rate cast and paranormal touches.

The Invisible Bridge. Press (314 pp.)

Starace, Tom

Fiddler’s Bridge Press (314 pp.)


9781737918905

In Starace’s debut YA novel, a teen uses his special ability to give others the courage they need.

For years, 16-year-old Adam Decker has stayed mum about his scary dreams, in which he seems to inhabit someone else’s body and become a voice inside their head. The scariest part is the way these dreams seem so real; when he guides a boy himself, with threads of light piano melody curling through the air between sets.” Such passages electrify narratives that readers will surely savor.

An impressive, dynamic host of spectacular stories filled with engaging characters.

**HERO MAKER**

**INDIE**

**Donnie Trymore**

Fidler Bridge Press (314 pp.)

$12.99 paper | $2.99 e-book | April 19, 2023

9781478427512

A Psychological Thriller

Things are looking up for Laura Foster. After seven years of marriage to Peter, who, she’s sure, loves her, and being stepmother to his two children—who, initially, didn’t like her—the 39-year-old has just been given a big career opportunity. She’s the new vice president of monetization at a company about to launch an app aimed at prospective college students. But things start to go downhill rapidly when she discovers brake fluid leaking from her car. Would jealousy drive someone to kill over a promotion? Her fevered imagination goes into overdrive when she suspects that something is bothering Peter. Does it have to do with his job at a biotech company that is anxiously awaiting U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval for a new cancer drug? Is the seeming attempt on Laura’s life conjuring up memories of his late wife, whom she loved, and being stepmother to his two children—who, initially, didn’t like her—the 39-year-old has just been given a big career opportunity. She’s the new vice president of monetization at a company about to launch an app aimed at prospective college students. But things start to go downhill rapidly when she discovers brake fluid leaking from her car. Would jealousy drive someone to kill over a promotion? Her fevered imagination goes into overdrive when she suspects that something is bothering Peter. Does it have to do with his job at a biotech company that is anxiously awaiting U.S. Food and Drug Administration approval for a new cancer drug? Is the seeming attempt on Laura’s life conjuring up memories of his late wife, who died in a fatal hiking accident? A friend of hers suggests that something sinister is afoot with Peter. However, when Peter seeks out a private investigator to look into the incident, he denies it. “I’m sorry to disappoint you,” Peter insists, “but we’re happily married. There’s no story there....” Okay,
AI and robots, the nature of machine learning, and the ways

... Then, Nothing in your present,” the PI says, “What about your past?” That’s when things really start to get interesting. Traymore, most recently the author of Little Loose Ends (2022), provides readers a sympathetic hero in Laura, who tends to bury her feelings; with the kids grown and out of the house, she’d dearly love to move from the house that Peter shared with his ex-wife. The chapters alternate between her first-person perspective and third-person narration of Peter’s side of things. Dueling perspectives, à la Gillian Flynn’s bestselling Gone Girl (2012), might have ratcheted up the suspense a bit more, but that would have required an immediate explanation of an anonymous email sent to Peter: “I know what you did. I won’t tell anyone.” However, Traymore deftly handles revelations and twists throughout.

A deliberately paced mystery that always stays one step ahead of its readers.

YOUR BRIGHT FUTURE WITH AI
How To Make Artificial Intelligence Work for You
Wall, Lucas Ernesto
Smart Data Track (194 pp.)
March 15, 2023
9789887602706

Wall assesses both the perils and promises of artificial intelligence in this nonfiction book.

The author, a successful entrepreneur, is not a blind cheerleader of artificial intelligence—he cautions that, if used improperly, it could “amplify our worst instincts and tendencies.” To counteract its dangers, he recommends a “human countermeasures.”

To meticulously anatomize these incentives, he analyzes the business models of companies like Apple, Google, and Tesla, all of which are heavily invested in AI’s future. The author’s knowledge of the AI landscape is channeled into the radical improvement of markets, labor, and society. In unfailingly accessible terms, Wall articulates a broad overview of the field aimed at readers with little to no expertise; he makes plain the basic differences between AI and robots, the nature of machine learning, and the ways in which machine learning both mimics and augments brain function. Wall argues that the proper employment of AI will be dependent upon the establishment of appropriate economic incentives that push technological innovation to “help us live longer and better lives.” To meticulously analyze these incentives, he analyzes the business models of companies like Apple, Google, and Tesla, all of which are heavily invested in AI’s future. The author’s knowledge of the AI landscape is impressive, and he is especially effective at outlining the fundamental features of the technology. He convincingly explains, with admirable clarity, the distance between machine learning and human intelligence and why artificial intelligence is not consciousness, nor anything resembling human sentience. The reader can’t help but wish that Wall devoted more time to the issue of AI causing considerable unemployment, particularly since he so unflinchingly acknowledges that one of its essential purposes is to “replace human effort.” He also has a tendency to traffic in a vague moralism that seems to offer little more than platitudes: “When principles are clear, founders, owners, and leadership find it very simple to follow what they believe in.” As a single-volume introduction to the subject, though, this is a concise and helpful offering.

A thorough and thoughtful primer on the future of AI.

HENRIETTA HUNG THE MOON
Williams, Anderson W.
Illus. by Lily Clarke
Self (220 pp.)
$18.95 paper | June 17, 2023
978883089862

In Williams’ novel, a young girl’s persona shift as the tensions of a small town are revealed.

The story centers on the Appalachian town of Summerton and a 9-year-old girl named Henrietta Moon, who appears in starkly different guises in loosely interwoven plotlines. Readers first meet her as a fourth grader at Neil Armstrong Elementary School, where she dreams of becoming the first woman to land on the moon and designs a rocket booster to take her there. While volunteering at a retirement home, she bonds with 86-year-old Gerald Harris over their love of space flight. A second storyline probes Summerton’s darker side through the perspective of Henry, a writer whose bestselling novel Mountain Hailer explores the town’s criminal underworld; he ponders the town’s fraught history after racists burn a cross on the lawn of the Black provost of a nearby university. In this storyline, Henrietta is Henry’s infant daughter and dies two days after her birth, leaving the writer into a spiral of anger and despair. Henrietta is then reimagined by Robert Montgomery, a lonely widower who mourns at her graveside and then writes a graphic novel for kids—including here, complete with Clarke’s vivid full-color cartoon illustrations. It depicts her as a socially awkward schoolgirl whose parents suggest that she slow down and savor life. In Henrietta’s intertwining plotlines, Williams delves into themes of innocence and ambition, unhinged grief, continuity, and remembrance. His prose is supple and as changeable as Henrietta herself, shifting from dreamy lyricism (“if he stared at the moon long enough and he let his eyes relax just so, the moon blurred and transformed from a light in the sky, a satellite, into a hole—a hole in the darkness through to something brighter”) to gritty realism full of evocative details: “The flames were lipping higher than his roof. The crackle and snapping sounds made him nauseous. Like breaking bones or the crack of a whip.” The result is a captivating read that’s poignant and magical.

A beguiling and luminous tale of loss and hope.
In Wiseman’s third series installment, Sherlock Holmes delves into a baffling case of apparent death by magician. In 1894, three years after his confrontation with Professor Moriarty at Reichenbach Falls, the famed sleuth of London’s 221B Baker St. is tackling a new case—a highly peculiar one involving apparent blackmail. Someone has been sending wealthy widow Margaret Jones what appear to be diary entries in her own handwriting that allude to her brief extramarital affair. However, she swears she didn’t write them, and oddly, the sender has made no demands or threats of any kind. Meanwhile, magician Percy Simmons, who had the affair with Jones, has his own troubles: He believes that another unknown conjurer is somehow sickening and killing people connected to Simmons’ secret theosophy order. Soon, the ever dependable Dr. John Watson lends his expertise and social graces to becoming a prospective member of Simmons’ group. Meanwhile, Simmons’ talk of “evil” unsettles Holmes, who seems particularly distraught over the fact that he’s at least partially responsible for Moriarty’s demise. Wiseman’s latest series installment is a worthwhile, intricate whodunit. Holmes investigates dual cases with an “unseen enemy” or two and varied crimes, including murder and burglary. The mystery deepens as the body count rises and alleged feats of magic, like astral travel, seem to defy Holmes’ cherished logic. Readers will likely predict some of the final-act events, but there’s more than one turn they may not expect. The sleuth’s mental turmoil in this story is convincing and effectively shows his humanity; it also coincides with his typical, familiar anti-social behavior. Watson, although he doesn’t fill a more familiar role as narrator, is an endearing counterpart to Holmes, and he meticulously relays to the detective his own experiences and observations. Throughout, the author’s measured prose is comparable to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s literary style: “Cooing and consolation might have tipped my client over into hysterics, whereas my uncompassionate question had a sobering effect.”

A smartly written and riveting detective story.

**SHERLOCK HOLMES & THE SILVER CORD**
Wiseman, M.K.
M. K. Wiseman (198 pp.)
$22.50 | $13.99 paper | $2.99 e-book
Aug. 1, 2023
9781734464177 paper
9781734464160

In Wiseman’s third series installment, Sherlock Holmes delves into a baffling case of apparent death by magician. In 1894, three years after his confrontation with Professor Moriarty at Reichenbach Falls, the famed sleuth of London’s 221B Baker St. is tackling a new case—a highly peculiar one involving apparent blackmail. Someone has been sending wealthy widow Margaret Jones what appear to be diary entries in her own handwriting that allude to her brief extramarital affair. However, she swears she didn’t write them, and oddly, the sender has made no demands or threats of any kind. Meanwhile, magician Percy Simmons, who had the affair with Jones, has his own troubles: He believes that another unknown conjurer is somehow sickening and killing people connected to Simmons’ secret theosophy order. Soon, the ever dependable Dr. John Watson lends his expertise and social graces to becoming a prospective member of Simmons’ group. Meanwhile, Simmons’ talk of “evil” unsettles Holmes, who seems particularly distraught over the fact that he’s at least partially responsible for Moriarty’s demise. Wiseman’s latest series installment is a worthwhile, intricate whodunit. Holmes investigates dual cases with an “unseen enemy” or two and varied crimes, including murder and burglary. The mystery deepens as the body count rises and alleged feats of magic, like astral travel, seem to defy Holmes’ cherished logic. Readers will likely predict some of the final-act events, but there’s more than one turn they may not expect. The sleuth’s mental turmoil in this story is convincing and effectively shows his humanity; it also coincides with his typical, familiar anti-social behavior. Watson, although he doesn’t fill a more familiar role as narrator, is an endearing counterpart to Holmes, and he meticulously relays to the detective his own experiences and observations. Throughout, the author’s measured prose is comparable to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s literary style: “Cooing and consolation might have tipped my client over into hysterics, whereas my uncompassionate question had a sobering effect.”

A smartly written and riveting detective story.

**TALES FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY SOLE**
Yeh, David Kingston
Guernica Editions (200 pp.)
$17.95 paper | $9.95 e-book | Oct. 1, 2020
9781771835411

A gay medical student juggles the needs of his partner, family members, friends, and former lovers while trying to find his own path in Yeh’s sequel to *A Boy at the Edge of the World* (2018).

Daniel Garneau, the narrator, is in medical school, although readers rarely see that part of his life. His partner, David Gallucci, is a bicycle mechanic and a creative, thoughtful soul who comes from a family steeped in culture; his Italian Catholic mother, Isabella de Luca, is a well-known art critic and writer. The action kicks off when David’s estranged sibling, a trans man named Luke, shows up at the couple’s front door. David and Luke’s mother has no idea that one of her sons is gay and the other trans, although a family reunion is on the horizon. Meanwhile, Daniel is trying to integrate his seemingly stable relationship with David into a social life bursting with friends and several significant exes. Before David heads to Italy for two months on a family trip, the couple decides that their relationship will be “open” during that time—an idea that feels “weird” to Daniel. Yeh’s cosmopolitan and sexy novel is mainly plot-driven, but it gives the 20-something central couple enough nuance to make their relationships worth exploring. The narrative is brisk with occasionally abrupt scene shifts, but the characters are consistently appealing in their searches for love and purpose. Parties, rendezvous, and cabaret visits unfold in Toronto, although the Italian vacation might change everything for Daniel and David. The large, multiethnic, and sexually fluid cast of characters is emotionally generous with one another, and they grow and change in authentic ways. Daniel’s sensibility as he learns how relationships can morph and still hold is particularly well rendered. Some may find it tempting to compare the novel to Armistead Maupin’s Tales of the City series, but Yeh’s theme of “love and ridiculous gratitude” for this “entire ephemeral life” stands as its own beautiful creation.

A bighearted novel of yearning and human decency.
TRUE STORIES OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEATER

Yerucham, S.
XlibrisUS (792 pp.)
$50.99 | $32.99 paper | $3.99 e-book
Jan. 10, 2023
9781669857310
default-199
9781669857303 paper

Yerucham's memoir chronicles sex, drugs, madness, and spiritual questing. The author revisits his life from 1981 to 2022, starting with his move from Wyoming to New York City at the age of 18 to be a writer. Yerucham had to make a living, and the book opens with his stint working at the City Lights Bar in the Windows on the World restaurant atop the World Trade Center, characterized by the author as a hothouse of grizzled immigrant bartenders, gay waiters, and atmospheric jazz. Dead-end security jobs followed, along with a marriage (at the age of 21) to Gabriella, which slowly unraveled due to incompatibility, ill-advised polyamorous adventures, enervating pot-smoking, and mental illnesses (suffered by both Yerucham and Gabriella) that culminated in the author's hospitalization in Bellevue's psych ward for near-catatonic depression. Fleeing New York, Yerucham regrouped while working on a Wyoming ranch, then embarked on meth-fueled wanderings through the West that featured flophouses, homelessness, and a death march in the Mexican desert. After another unsuccessful attempt to establish himself in New York, the author lit out for India, where he studied at ashrams, steeped himself in meditative yoga and Jain philosophy, and met the Dalai Lama, who "received [him]...with a handshake and a painful fixed promotional grin, and displayed a hollowed deep sadness in his eyes." A six-month detour to Israel reconnected him with his Orthodox Jewish roots; he then returned to India before moving on to Malaysia and finally to Thailand. While nourishing his soul he was also looking for a wife, which resulted in quixotic relationships with a German ashram tourist (who turned out to be gay) and a Chinese woman in Malaysia. He finally married a Siamese woman and tussled with the United States immigration bureaucracy to get her and their daughter to California.

Yerucham's narrative rambles through many labyrinthine twists and digressions, often with no clear destination in sight; along the way, he invokes philosophers from Socrates to Sartre to glean nuggets of wisdom from his misadventures ("Suffering is the fire that burns the debris of past foolishness from the mind...From the furnace of suffering, I gathered charred relics of goodness from the remains of the mess of my twenties, and began piecing them together"). It's a baggy, sprawling saga, but even at nearly 800 pages, it never grows tiresome thanks to the extraordinary quality of the writing. Endlessly curious and sympathetic, the author renders the parade of people he meets in subtle, evocative colors ("Dew entered wearing a simple and clean homemade dress, and exhibited a face which, in contrast to her previous innocent chipmunk face, was that of a lovelier suave mature woman, but cool and cunning and stately")—and sometimes takes on a gonzo, hallucinatory quality worthy of Hunter S. Thompson ("He gave his best performance as devil's right-hand man with his odd attractive laugh, mad grin, and head with high bony cheeks mounted like an idol atop his skeletal body. Roasting in the heat, he looked as if he'd been hammered and bronzed in hell furnaces for centuries"). Going everywhere yet getting nowhere, Yerucham's journey makes for a fascinating read.

A brilliantly written nonfiction account of a man's search for meaning in the odd picaresque of his life.

“The author renders the parade of people he meets in subtle, evocative colors.”

TRUE STORIES OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEATER
**Book To Screen**

**FILM AND TV ADAPTATIONS IN THE WORKS**

**BY MICHAEL SCHAUB**

**NINE PERFECT STRANGERS WILL RETURN FOR SEASON 2**

*Nine Perfect Strangers* will come back for a second season, with Nicole Kidman returning to the series, *Deadline* reports. New to the cast this season are Murray Bartlett (*The Last of Us, The White Lotus*) and screen icon Liv Ullmann (*Persona, Cries and Whispers*).

The Hulu series, which aired its first season in 2021, is based on the 2016 novel by Liane Moriarty. The book follows nine people who congregate at a health resort only to find that the experience isn’t what they expected. A critic for *Kirkus* wrote of the novel, “Fun to read, as always with Moriarty’s books, but try not to think about it or it will stop making sense.”


The second season will see Kidman returning as the health resort’s director, Masha Dmitrichenko. In addition to Bartlett and Ullmann, new cast members include Maisie Richardson-Sellers (*The Originals*) and Dolly de Leon (*Verdict*). Kidman will also return as an executive producer.

Richardson-Sellers announced news of her casting in the series on Instagram, writing, “S1 of this show blew my mind on so many levels. Joining this team, cast and universe is a dream come true. Mysterious magical haunting thrills coming your way soon.”

**COLLEEN HOOVER DEFENDS IT ENDS WITH US CASTING**

Colleen Hoover is defending the casting of *It Ends With Us*, the film adaptation of her blockbuster 2016 novel, *People* magazine reports.

At Book Bonanza, her annual literary fair in Grapevine, Texas, Hoover responded to fans upset by the actors chosen for the lead roles in the film.

Hoover’s novel, which follows Lily, a businesswoman who falls for Ryle, a neurosurgeon, but soon learns that he’s abusive, became a huge bestseller after readers on TikTok embraced it. A critic for *Kirkus* gave the book a starred review, writing, “Packed with riveting drama and painful truths, this book powerfully illustrates the devastation of abuse—and the strength of the survivors.”

Some readers were upset that the role of Lily, who is 23 in the book, will be played by Blake Lively, 35, and that Ryle, 30 in the novel, will be portrayed by Justin Baldoni, 39.

“Back when I wrote *It Ends With Us*, the new adult [genre] was very popular,” Hoover said. “You were writing college-age characters. That’s what I was contracted to do. I didn’t know that neurosurgeons went to school for 50 years. There’s not a 20-something neurosurgeon.”

She said that she asked the filmmakers to “age them out” in the film. She also predicted readers would enjoy the movie, saying, “You guys are going to be so happy. I’m extremely happy and now my expectations are up and I’m going to keep them there.”

The film version of *It Ends With Us*, written by Christy Hall and directed by Baldoni, was in production until being paused this spring due to the Writers Guild of America strike.

*Michael Schaub, a journalist and regular contributor to NPR, lives near Austin, Texas.*
While memoirs by mothers occupy an ever growing bookshelf and have a cute name—“momoir”—there’s no easy way to say “a memoir about being my mother’s daughter.” Because our culture is reflexively protective of motherhood (What’d you say about my mama?), these books can be uncomfortable to read, particularly if they take a warts-and-all approach. Inevitably the reader begins to fret: Is the mother alive? Has she read this? In creating Oh My Mother!: A Memoir in Nine Adventures (Penguin Random House Audio, 5 hours and 3 minutes), fashion journalist Connie Wang cut this problem off at the pass. As she announces in her introduction, her mother, Qing, was the first person to read each chapter as it was written, with full editing rights. Concerns that this process could take all the juice out of the story prove unfounded, and the drama of the more difficult revelations and scenes of conflict—meltdown in Disney World, lockdown in China—is intensified by Wang’s plainspoken narration. Qing Wang is a deeply stubborn, pragmatic, sometimes angry woman, often mystified by the culture of a country she never meant to immigrate to in the first place—and her American-born daughter is generally prouder than she is frustrated by her.

A daring approach to the long war of mother-daughter relations is taken by Honey, Baby, Mine: A Mother and Daughter Talk Life, Death, Love (and Banana Pudding) (Hachette Audio, 7 hours and 40 minutes), in which actors Laura Dern and Diane Ladd literally act out and relive their past skirmishes. Back in 2014, when Ladd was diagnosed with a severe lung condition, Dern persuaded her to accept the doctor’s recommendation of long walks by promising to record their ambulatory conversations for posterity. Those exchanges were edited for publication, and now the two are playing themselves in the audio version. Though you don’t get all the beautiful photographs in this format, the spine-tingling sense of eavesdropping on real life counterbalances that. Ladd’s age and frailty are sometimes brutally evident, as she coughs and wheezes and begs again and again in her honeyed drawl to take a break from walking. When they relive a 14-year-old fight they had when Ladd told Dern’s son he looked like a girl and took him for a haircut, the raised voices and interruptions make it clear this ax was never truly buried. “I nevah, nevah, nevah said that!” shouts Ladd. “Nevah!” “You’re totally full of it!” retorts Dern. Within minutes, they’re back to lovey-dovey reassurances. Sound familiar?

“Well, I can’t decide if the happiest day of my life was the day I lost interest in sex or the day my second dog died and I was finally free of dogs,” Alexandra Auder quotes her mother as saying—to a family at a Quaker Meeting House parents’ event. Her mother, the Warhol “superstar” Viva, is a monstrous diva and proud of it. Daughter Alex does not hesitate to throw her under the bus in Don’t Call Me Home (Penguin Random House Audio, 8 hours and 5 minutes), but she climbs right under there with her, describing her recurrent matricidal urges in graphic detail. There’s plenty of love to go along with the hate, though; as our critic put it in a starred review; “Auder makes the most of her magnificent mess of material, celebrating her bohemian upbringing and her crazy mother in style.” The author’s reading makes the many funny parts even funnier as she imitates her fazzair’s Frensh accent and her mother’s whiny, melodramatic pronouncements. “I’ll wind up penniless and homeless. You’ll abandon me and send me to a nursing home. I know it!” Viva says more than once. But for all the trash talk between these two, it’s perfectly clear: ain’t gonna happen.
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