Featuring 279 Industry-First Reviews of Fiction, Nonfiction, Children's and YA books

KIRKUS REVIEWS

THE BEST BOOKS OF 2020

SPECIAL ISSUE

The Best 100 Indie Books of the Year + Our Full December 15 Issue
FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK:
The Things That Carried Us Through 2020

BY TOM BEER

Are you ready to say goodbye to 2020? I certainly am.

While this “annus horribilis”—to borrow a phrase from Queen Elizabeth—has been marked by a devastating pandemic, an economic crisis, and a divisive election, there have been bright spots. When we could manage to stop doomscrolling and actually focus on reading, the books we spent time with offered respite from the real world—or helped make better sense of it. I was struck, while watching the National Book Awards ceremony last month, when young people’s literature judge Joan Trygg remarked on the “possibly sanity-saving privilege of having a large stack of books to read” and the lively literary discussions that she shared with fellow judges. “When I look back on the year 2020, a year I’m sure we’d all like to edit, I’m grateful I will have these memories to keep,” Trygg said. Most bibliophiles can relate.

In a previous column, I shared a list of some of the books that brightened my year. This time around, I’d like to recognize some of the other literary phenomena that made 2020 bearable:

E-books and audiobooks. I make every effort to order books from indie bookstores and frequently request physical galleys from publishers when I need that tactile sensation. But living and working out of a small Brooklyn apartment means I simply don’t have the space to house every galley or finished book I might need in the course of doing my job for Kirkus (even with the snazzy wall-mounted Ikea bookshelves I installed this summer). Reading things digitally became a necessity—and I discovered that I actually enjoyed the ability to immediately summon whatever title I needed (not to mention search within it). Meanwhile, audiobooks provided a welcome hiatus from eyestrain. My first love is and always will be the printed book. But isn’t it nice to have options?

Online author events. There’s no substitute for seeing your favorite writer in person and getting a signed copy of their latest book. And surely we’ve all reached maximum Zoom fatigue. But when bookstore events moved online in the spring, it did open up a world of possibilities, no matter where you resided. How else could I have made it to Houston’s Brazos Bookstore to see Edmund White discuss A Saint From Texas (Bloomsbury, Aug. 4) with Kirkus contributor Michael Schaub? Would I have jettied all the way to Portland, Oregon, to catch KerriArsenault in conversation with editor at large Megan Labrise about Mill Town: Reckoning With What Remains (St. Martin’s, Sept. 1) at Powell’s Books? Can’t keep up with all these virtual opportunities? BuzzFeed’s Arianna Rebolini rounds up some of the best every week.

Literary podcasts. Once you’re done reading books and attending virtual author events, what’s a quarantined bibliophile to do? Listen to a podcast. Kirkus’ own Fully Booked, convivially hosted by Megan Labrise, is required listening, of course. (Stick around after the featured author interview for the editors’ roundtable, where my colleagues recommend their favorite new books each week.) But why stop there? Some podcasts that feature among my regular downloads are The Maris Review, hosted by friendly, in-the-know Maris Kreizman (her guests this year included David Sedaris, Silvia Moreno-Garcia, and Brandon Taylor); So Many Damn Books, where hosts Christopher Hermelin and Drew Broussand offer drink recipes and author interviews (Rumaan Alam, Quan Barry, Hilary Leichter); and AAWW Radio, the podcast of the Asian American Writers Workshop (recent guests included Akwaeke Emezi, Elizabeth Acevedo, K-Ming Chang, and Mira Jacob).

Thanks to all the organizers and creators who sustained us in 2020 — and here’s to a brighter 2021.

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Cover design by Kyla Novak
The Kirkus Star is awarded to books of remarkable merit, as determined by the impartial editors of Kirkus.

Kazuo Ishiguro returns with his first novel since winning the Nobel Prize in 2017. Read the review on p. 80.
A debut novel traces the fortunes of a Mississippi family from the 1890s to the 1940s.

The McMolison family of Leaf Creek consists of Bill and Kate and their children, Katherine, Hannah, and Samuel. It is Hannah, the middle child, who carries the story. Early on, Samuel, while just a toddler, is accidentally killed by his brutal, demanding father, and this begins what might be called the McMolisons’ self-inflicted curse. Headstrong Katherine marries Stephen Neal, a preacher whom Bill can barely tolerate. But it is the dutiful Hannah who brings on the real disaster by falling in love with Thomas Stokes, son of Bill’s friend John Stokes. Bill and John are powerful, ambitious men whose word in their families is law. Young Thomas, a student at Ole Miss, is handsome, charming, and callow; Hannah, still in high school, becomes hopelessly smitten. From their one and only carnal encounter, she gets pregnant. The two fathers quickly come up with a plan: a quiet marriage followed by a quick annulment and the adoption of the infant, preferably by a couple far away. The day before a pair from Alabama is due to arrive, Hannah flees with her baby, Joseph, to Katherine and Stephen’s house in Hattiesburg. Bill swears to track them down. Meanwhile, there are family secrets to be revealed.

One would think that Abraham, a talented storyteller, has several novels under her belt, such is the level of expertise shown here. Hannah is a wonderful character who goes against all of her upbringing to defy her father (something that Thomas hasn’t the guts to do). But even more remarkable is Bill. He is a brute and a hypocrite, but perhaps the saddest thing is his rock-solid conviction that his way is the best way, the unquestionable way. He can’t begin to understand that Hannah may not want the surrender her baby so that she can preserve the family and move forward as if nothing had ever happened. By the way, he sees nothing wrong in being unfaithful to Kate—a man has needs, after all. Honor—deadly, corrupting honor—is all. The author offers vivid details about this troubled family and the colorful Mississippi setting. Here is a description of the mayhem as Hannah’s puppy, Lost, romps in the bracken: “Brown, shiny bugs crawled over partially rotten stumps and along secret paths under the weeds. Grasshoppers jumped in every direction to avoid Lost’s big paws, and a bevy of birds flew upward from the bushes while chirping strong frustration at the intruder. The rabbits wisely and quickly moved deeper into the woods to get away from the activity.” Minute descriptions such as these are the rule, not the exception. Finally, the last chapters deliver deep satisfaction, chronicling the fates of the various players and bringing readers right up to the 1940s with a Dickensian conclusion.

An impressive tale of a fractured Southern family with richly drawn characters.
Inyene with endless questions like an interrogator. The book’s final part is decidedly more intense, as an anxious Inyene goes on the run and her village friend and Lagos roommate, Eliza-beth, on the hunt for a possibly-still-living Inyene, is unknowingly being trailed by a private investigator.

A riveting, dramatic story that effectively repudiates the notion of lawbreakers as immoral or inhuman.

**CONCEALED**

**Memoir of a Jewish-Iranian Daughter Caught Between the Chador and America**

_Amini, Esther_

Greenpoint Press (310 pp.)

$34.95 | $20.00 paper | $9.99 e-book

Apr. 21, 2020

978-0-9906194-3-7

978-0-9906194-2-0 paper

Amini's debut memoir chronicles her parents' lives in Iran, their journey to America, and her own coming-of-age.

As the American-born author grew up in New York City, she heard intriguing stories from her immigrant mother, Hana, who married her father when she was just 14 and he was 34. The couple had secretly lived as Jews in the city of Mashhad, where Hana wore the chador in order to pass as Muslim. Upon arriving in the United States, Hana swapped the chador for Oscar de la Renta gowns and her diffidence for unbridled candor, often at the expense of her husband's pride. However, the author apparently didn't inherit her mother's verbosity or sartorial ostentatiousness; instead, Amini struggled to find her voice in a household that didn't value the education or autonomy of women. This is a memoir of Amini's extraordinary journey and of her unflappable love for her family, even when their actions threatened to hinder her dreams—particularly her pursuit of a college education. The author deftly unpacks the complexities of her devout and volatile father, who told her, “It is my responsibility as your father to protect you from Americans and not allow you to become one.” But although he was a formidable figure, he's also shown to have exhibited moments of tenderness when Amini was sick as a child or when she married the love of her life. The author weaves a central theme of concealment and visibility throughout her book with a fine sense of nuance. In a prologue, she asks, “How could I be unseen when seen...could I disappear upon demand?” And toward the end of the memoir, she writes in her journal, “What does it mean to claim me...to make me mine?” She describes how, ultimately, her love of literature, art, and social work allowed her to answer the latter question and finally find her voice. Here, that voice yields a quiet power, examining her world with unflinching curiosity and care.

A moving, engaging investigation of culture and family.
In a year that required an IV of transportive fiction, Indieland authors provided. The satisfyingly diverting Winter Honeymoon, a short story collection by the prolific Jacob M. Appel, “demonstrated a fascination with the moral conundrums of well-crafted fakery.” In the Lagos-set novel Imposter Alert! a poor villager assumes a dead rich woman’s identity. Our reviewer says author Ud uak Akpabio Umoren tells a “riveting, dramatic story that effectively repudiates the notion of lawbreakers as immoral or inhuman.” The standout Indie genre of 2020, however, was historical fiction, particularly novels about the ways people contended with the troubles of their own eras; here are a few of the year’s best.

In Jill P. Anderson’s Running From Moloka’i, set in the 19th century, Mele Bennett, a girl who’s half Native Hawaiian and half White, learns of a horrific leper colony on Moloka’i in Hawaii. When Mele’s childhood love, Keahi, finds a suspicious rash on his chest, they both are terrified. Our reviewer says Anderson’s novel is “a moving, lyrical tale of a strong young hero dealing with a terrifying disease.”

Nine short stories examine the fictions, compromises, and standoffs people make to cope.

Appel, a physician, attorney, bioethicist, and teacher at the Gotham Writers’ Workshop and the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, possesses such a mind-boggling array of accomplishments, degrees, and awards (including seven Kirkus starred reviews) that he was recently the subject of a documentary, Jacob (2019). In his sixth book for Black Lawrence Press, the author continues to explore situations that test his characters’ abilities to meet such challenges as mortality, disappointment, and failure. Often, their solutions are to invent tales that, to paraphrase Joan Didion, they tell themselves in order to live; much of Appel’s work has demonstrated a fascination with the moral conundrums of well-crafted fakery. In “The Other Sister,” for example, Victoria learns unexpectedly as a girl that she had a twin sister, Oriana, who died when only a few days old. Grown up, Victoria’s sister Sandy becomes “a homely, church-going spinster” who looks upon her more glamorous sibling’s life with envy. Over the years, Sandy has invented a spectacularly fabulous life for Oriana pieced together “from shards of fantasy”: high-society affairs, archaeological expeditions, and a “lemur-watching expedition in Madagascar.” By the end, Sandy newly understands her ethical complicity in essentially wishing it had been Victoria who died. Appel’s own craft includes unforgettable, often very funny
opening lines; the title story begins, “During the final weeks of her husband’s illness, Edith befriended the demented priest in the neighboring bed.” The author, poetlike, can suggest much through little, employing a keenly observant eye, deceptively clear prose, and striking similes. The old priest stumbles “from one setback to another, but courageously, like an imperial army in retreat.” Compassion and intelligence, both cognitive and emotional, shine forth from these stories.

A splendid collection of tales that delivers humor and poignance.

**N*GGA THEORY**  
*Race, Language, Unequal Justice, and the Law*  
Armour, Jody David  
Los Angeles Review of Books (384 pp.)  
$18.00 paper | $9.99 e-book  
Aug. 18, 2020  
978-1-940660-68-4

An acclaimed law professor’s case against the systems and mindsets that undergird mass incarceration of Black men.

As the Roy P. Crocker Professor of Law at the University of Southern California, Armour is one of the era’s most distinguished legal scholars. His book *Negrophobia and Reasonable Racism: The Hidden Costs of Being Black in America* (1998) is a seminal text in critical race theory that anticipated many conversations that are now central to the Black Lives Matter movement. In this book, he lays out his own branch of legal and social theory that challenges not only mass incarceration, but also legal and moral arguments promoted by many self-described “progressives.” He’s particularly critical of the “New Jim Crow narrative” deployed by Black and White reformers that emphasizes unjust sentencing of nonviolent drug offenders. An emphasis on criminal justice reform toward nonviolent criminals appeals to the sensibilities of White liberals and the Black middle class, Armour notes, but ignores the majority of Black criminals imprisoned for violent offenses. The author keeps “attention trained on serious, violent, and guilty wrongdoers,” who he says are demonized by conservatives, by many progressives, and by members of the Black middle class who cling to the “politics of respectability.” By calling his argument “Nigga Theory,” Armour says that he seeks to harness “the ironic uses of the N-word to assert solidarity with Black criminals whom the word seeks to vilify.” The book’s call for “compassion for all wrongdoers” and for resistance to “reveling in the retributive urge” extends beyond violent Black criminals to other convicted people for whom many on the left have sought “draconian” punishments. Armour’s scholarly bona fides are on full display in the book’s ample footnotes, citations of case law, and sophisticated analysis of legal concepts such as mens rea. Yet this is not an esoteric tome written for academics; the author writes in a poetic rhythm that effortlessly blends complex legal theories with rap lyrics and his own personal biography. One is just as likely to encounter Jay-Z or Ice Cube in Armour’s pages as they are to find Karl Marx or W.E.B. Du Bois.

A tour de force argument against entrenched attitudes regarding prison reform.

**THE REVOLVING HEART**  
Augello, Chuck  
Black Rose Writing (244 pp.)  
$18.95 paper | $6.99 e-book  
Apr. 16, 2020  
978-1-68433-477-3

A call from an old friend in need leads a struggling playwright to come to terms with his complex history in Augello’s debut novel.

Donatello “Duck” Marcino is a master pizza chef, an unsuccessful playwright, and a narcoleptic. Amy is a suicidal, alcoholic single mother. The two were...
inseparable in their teenage years, during which they often babysat for the much younger Sarah Carpenter, whose mother was a less-than-ideal parent. A day at the beach in the 1990s changed their lives immeasurably, though, as Sarah went missing. Duck still has no idea what really happened that day, as he fell asleep on the beach as a result of his narcolepsy. It was generally assumed that Sarah drowned, although Amy claimed that the school drama teacher, Michael Ronan, whom Duck idolized, kidnapped the girl. However, police found no evidence that this was the case. Duck later left New Jersey for California, but a distress call from Amy 20 years later draws him back to his hometown to confront old demons. Duck, accompanied by his remarkably tolerant girlfriend, Kelly, immerses himself in the world he left behind and comes to a new, harrowing understanding of the events surrounding Sarah’s disappearance. Augello’s novel is a beautifully crafted fictional study of the long-term impact of neglect and abuse. Although the initial setup is reminiscent of a crime novel, the story gradually settles into a more reflective narrative about the choices that people make, the bonds they forge, and the obligations they can’t escape, however much they might try. The prose style is first-rate, featuring hints of Douglas Coupland and Philip Roth, cut through with the flavor of Beat Generation narratives. Augello shows a knack for sharp, believable dialogue, and his character construction is impressive. The unsettling malice of male aggression simmers throughout the story, as well, without ever feeling over-the-top.

A superb, captivating work from a promising new literary voice.
A poignant picture of a vanished world, which may appeal both to middle-graders and to adults.

**INNOCENCE IN A TURBULENT WORLD**

In her debut memoir, Bardell reflects on her early childhood in the idyllic Estonian countryside before the Soviet Union annexed her country in during World War II.
Christina Chiu
[Sponsored Profile]

CHIU DISCUSSES HER NEW NOVEL EXPLORING THE FASHION WORLD AND TRAUMA

By Walker Rutter-Bowman

After the 2001 publication of her first book, the short story collection Troublemaker and Other Saints, author Christina Chiu set to work on a novel. The more she worked on it, though, the less she enjoyed it. In search of other creative outlets, she wrote another short story, “Bootman.” “Sometimes something you write grabs you and doesn’t let go,” she says. “Bootman” did what her novel couldn’t do: It kept her interested.

For years she felt guilty. She knew she should work on the novel she’d promised the publisher, but all she wanted to do was keep following the protagonist of “Bootman,” Amy Wong. Chiu wrote another story about her. Eventually she realized that these weren’t stories—they were, in fact, episodes in an ongoing narrative. They belonged to a new novel. The realization granted her the freedom to pursue the project completely. “What’s important here is I follow the karmic trail,” Chiu recalls telling herself. That karmic trail led to two main subjects of research—fashion, primarily, but also trauma.

Beauty is the result; “Bootman” became the second chapter in the novel about Amy Wong. In its review, Kirkus calls Amy “a memorably intricate character” and commends the book for capturing the world of fashion with “luminous specificity.” More significantly, though, the novel details a world and an industry “in which complex layers of race, gender, access, and propriety can complicate a woman’s every action.” The book won the 2020 James Alan McPherson Award.

In Beauty, Amy is an aspiring designer trying to find her footing in the world of fashion and struggling to square her sexual desire with her attraction to manipulative men. Amy attends Parsons School of Design, where she flourishes despite the backbiting and casual racism she faces. When Jeff Jones, a member of fashion-world royalty, takes a liking to her, Amy gets involved with him even though she’s well aware that Jeff sees her as an exotic object—an Asian woman.

They get married soon after and have a son together. But the marriage is doomed. Amy tries to raise her son, keep her career afloat, and find the sexual outlets she craves even though that desire is often violently used against her. In talking about the intersection of sex and power, Chiu says, “This is one of those taboos that we need to take apart. At this point, we just can’t afford to not talk about certain things. And so I went after it. And I didn’t talk about sex just in the erotic sense.”

Amy makes career compromises to accommodate the egos of men in her life. But her creativity never leaves her; it simply goes dormant for a time. In these passages, she’s ensconced in Jeff’s life of status and suburban wealth, wondering how she got here:

There’s something inside me, something important I need to say right now, if only I could figure out what it is. Only three years ago, I was an aspiring designer fresh out of grad school. I combed through fashion collections, reading up on various designers and working straight through the night, testing fabrics, cutting, pinning, and sewing.
Amy misses working, but she also misses the camaraderie and friendship she shared with other aspiring designers. They used to stay up late, “savoring delicious cups of coffee,” she recalls:

“We took turns commenting on each other’s work. We gossiped about lovers and partners, talked about books and movies, and discussed life—what it was, and what it possibly could be—as if we were at the beginning and it would last forever.

But then, Jeff and I moved to a house in the suburbs.

“A boy needs space enough to throw a football,” Jeff said.

“You don’t even like football.”

Years ago, Chiu took a class with the writer Jessica Hagedorn, who told her writing could be about anything. Chiu has taken that advice to heart. In *Beauty*, she’s made the world of fashion and the ongoing battle with trauma the subjects of her focus.

“There’s a tendency to call things hobbies when women are doing them,” says Chiu. “And I felt that it would be a really good challenge for me to write about something that seems superficial and trivial. First of all, [fashion] is not superficial or trivial. But secondly, I wanted to bring fields that women are in, or associated with, into the realm of literature, where I feel they belong.”

Chiu is a meticulous researcher: To write *Beauty*, she took a class on shoemaking. “You have no idea about the layers of things until you are in that realm,” she says. She delights in such processes of discovery, and fashion has proved a worthy subject of study. “It’s given me a different avenue to explore,” she says. “Life is really just this constant path of exploration.”

*Beauty* also demonstrates Chiu’s interest in and intent to explore trauma. She cites *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D. as a seminal text on the subject and a huge influence on *Beauty*. In the character of Amy, Chiu says she wanted to investigate “the reason why things get perpetuated again and again.”

“You see people making the same mistakes over and over,” she says. “It’s because they’re still in that trauma, whatever it is, whatever they held on to. They just can’t get out of that cycle.” In *Beauty*, Amy learns a lack of self-worth from her father, who abandoned the family. A pattern of self-loathing forms.

Chiu says her next book will be another novel. In fact, she’s revisiting the very book she set aside to write *Beauty*. Chiu doesn’t think of it as a return to an old project, though; she says she’s “reconstructing” it from memory and finding an energy in the writing that proved so elusive all those years ago.

An active member of the literary scene, Chiu is a founding member of the Asian American Writers’ Workshop, hosts the virtual Let’s Talk Books series, and curates and co-hosts the Pen Parentis Literary Salon in New York City. Winning the James Alan McPherson Award reinforced her commitment to being a nurturing and generous member of the writing community.

“From what I gather, [McPherson] was a very wonderful person who helped a lot of people of color,” Chiu says. “He made such a huge difference in so many people’s lives. That’s the kind of person I want to be: in a position to help others.”

Walker Rutter-Bowman is a writer and teacher living in Washington, D.C.
In 1938 Bardell's parents built a small farmhouse in a pastoral setting near the Baltic Sea in Estonia. “Everyone knew each other and there were no strangers,” the author writes. Prior to World War II, Bardell’s childhood was peaceful. She was very independent, entrusted to walk over two kilometers to fetch yeast from a neighbor’s when she was just shy of 4 years old. Her dress caught on fire from a hearth twice, but she sees such incidents as small ones caused by “my misunderstanding of how the world worked.” War came to the Raudsepp family when the Soviet Union occupied Estonia in 1940, followed by a German invasion in 1941. Bardell's father was conscripted into the German army but escaped and hid in the forest behind the farm. Her family was in danger: “My blissful life had abruptly changed....All that had been joyful was no longer as it was.” The Raudsepps packed what they could carry, and in September 1944 made a perilous 52-hour voyage in a leaky fishing boat to Sweden. After their arrival, they realized it was Bardell’s fifth birthday and sang the prescient traditional birthday song “Sa Elaga,” or “You shall live.” Although the Soviet Union tried to repatriate refugees, her family successfully relocated to Canada. Her parents never went back to their homeland. But Bardell visited Estonia after the fall of the Soviet Union found many places just as she remembered them. She calls her brief, episodic memoir “a fond reflection” but paints a poigniant picture of a vanished world, which may appeal both to middle-graders and to adults. Reminiscent of Laura Ingalls’ Wilder’s The Little House on the Prairie series, the book abounds with uncredited soft, upbeat watercolor illustrations in the spirit of Garth Williams’ beloved artwork for those tales or the paintings of contemporary artist Lauren Castillo. Vintage black-and-white and more recent color photos add to the appeal of this reminiscence of a county underrepresented in children’s literature.

A fond remembrance of a rural childhood in Estonia charms with its story and pictures.

HEART-SHAPED FRIENDSHIP
Barros, Andrea
Illus. by Dol, Thalita
Self (40 pp.)

A child discovers that friendship can overcome the challenges of language and differing abilities in this debut picture book. Hope, excited about the first day of school, is startled by a collision with a girl on a scooter. The rider, Summy, says, “Ooo... Eee...,” which her mother explains means “Sorry.” Hope finds out that Summy has trouble learning words. Their teacher devises a task. Each student will teach Summy one word, and then the class will have a Popsicle party. Because Hope and Summy love hearts, Hope decides to teach the word heart, but no technique works. When Summy overhears a conversation between Hope and a classmate, who says dismissively, “My parents told me everything about kids like her,” Summy’s feelings are hurt. After Hope rescues Summy, who's stuck on a climbing wall, she apologizes for hurting the girl’s feelings. Summy then explains what heart means to her: love. Barros’ straightforward narrative style is from Hope’s point of view; the vocabulary is accessible to early elementary school readers. Although Barros never explains the reason for Summy’s difficulties, the descriptions of her eyes and speech—as well as a note that the author has a child with Down syndrome—indicates that Summy has the syndrome. Hope’s understanding and love for Summy, despite the prejudices of others, are a wonderful model of acceptance of those with different abilities. Dol’s beautifully detailed cartoon illustrations feature a diverse group of students.

A winning story of acceptance and love, especially for those who are different.
Jewish families pull apart under the strain of war, persecution, and longing in Berkman's story collection.

This set of stories explores the Jewish experience in a wide variety of historical settings. “Passion” paints a plangent yet exuberant portrait of 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, whose rationalist questioning of Scripture gets him banished from Amsterdam's synagogue. Several stories follow Eastern European Jews enmeshed in early-20th-century disasters. In the harrowing “Vilna,” two brothers in World War II-era Lithuania separate; one escapes to America while the other weathers the Nazi occupation as it destroys the local Jewish population. “In the Time of Dreams” follows a woman living in the Soviet Union's Jewish colony in Siberia in the 1930s as it devolves from socialist idealism to a Stalinist nightmare; and in Miracles: A Novella, a family of Ukrainian Jews flees a pogrom to New York City—a strange new world that makes them seem like strangers to one another. A suite of stories are set in post-war California among middle-class Jewish suburbanites; for them, the Holocaust is a distant memory that barely shadows their comfortable but discontented lives. In “Ghosts,” a woman who fled Nazi Germany in childhood is estranged from her adopted daughter and mentally ill son; in “Grisha,” a son reconnects with his cantankerous mother after she moves to Jerusalem, where she finds her roots and a soul mate; and in the title story, a young mother’s affair with her rabbi upends two families but enables her to discover her true self. Berkman’s characters are wanderers—often physically, as they migrate to escape poverty and violence (“we said good-bye as though we would never see each other again,” is a typical refrain), but also spiritually, as they pursue desires that run up against social expectations or fraying relationships. Her stories are grounded in a realism made poetic, but they also have an aching sense of evanescent mystery, as in “Ghosts”: “There was a shadow family and shadow cousins and aunts and uncles, and a shadow place with a strange name where her mother had grown up.” The result is an engrossing fictional world with real literary depth.

Luminous tales of exile and loss that bequeath new life.
**Best Indie Fiction & Literature**

Independent publishing has been growing steadily for more than a decade; 1.7 million books are now self-published annually. Kirkus Indie reviews approximately 4,000 of those titles. Here’s a shortlist of Indieland’s best fiction this year.

**Sorrow** by Tiffanie DeBartolo: In DeBartolo’s novel, an aging, stalled musician ponders where he went wrong while falling for his boss, who’s a performance artist. As their relationship takes off, a set of life-changing circumstances presents itself. “DeBartolo...plays expertly with the scope of her story: It’s both a clever love triangle and a deeper inquiry into art, communication, and the meaning of success,” says our reviewer. (Review on page 26)

**The Orphan’s Daughter** by Jan Cherubin: Set in Baltimore and New York, Cherubin’s novel follows one Jewish family through the 20th century: “It’s a Dickensian story of cold, hunger, loneliness, frequent beatings, and sexual abuse, but it’s lit with friendships and intellectual ambitions,” notes our reviewer. “An alternately dark and luminous, wounded and affectionate portrait of a family in crisis.” (Review on page 20)

**The Laundress** by Barbara Sapienza: Lavinia, a young Italian woman abandoned in San Francisco, tries to forge her own way in a city crowded with lawyers to sculptors. “Sapienza’s writing is delightfully descriptive as it evokes the streets of the Mission District.” (Review on page 55)

**The Encampment** by Stephen Davenport: Sylvia Bickham, a New England prep-school girl, stumbles across an Iraq War vet’s makeshift shelter on her fancy woods-ed campus. She and a friend try to help the man prepare for a Connecticut winter. When his camp is destroyed, however, they need another plan, and the girls face moral decisions that will have long-lasting consequences. Davenport “presents readers with a slow-burning, gripping novel that will reward their patience,” observes our reviewer. (Review on page 24)—K.S.

Bond’s yarn, the first in his Third Chance Enterprises series, features crack-jack action scenes as well as a sly parody of the symbiosis between activist movements and the corporatocracy, all in vividly evocative prose: “His bones didn’t seem quite fit, elbows and knees jangling liquidly,” Molly observes of the oddly charismatic Josiah. “He was impossible to look away from, his gait hypnotic, his kaleidoscopic limbs slashing the space between us.” The characters are colorful but rendered with complex nuance: Quaid, for example, is an obsequious, morally flexible showboat who’s confident that he can talk his way out of almost any situation; Durwood is a laconic technician with a slow-burning, gripping novel that will reward their patience,” observes our reviewer. (Review on page 24)—K.S.

**DEAR DURWOOD**
Bond, Jeff
Self (190 pp.)
$13.99 paper | $0.99 e-book
Apr. 5, 2020
978-1-73225-529-6

A paramilitary do-gooder defends a Texas town from corporate skulduggery in this rollicking adventure tale.

This is the second novel in Bond’s Third Chance Enterprises series about a trio of private-eye security specialists. It’s a solo outing for...
Durwood Oak Jones, an ex-Marine contractor and West Virginia sorghum farmer with a sideline in righting injustices for people who respond to his ads in Soldier of Fortune magazine.

One such letter comes from Chickasaw, Texas’ Democratic mayor, Carol Bridges, who thinks the Hogan Consolidated factory, a mainstay of the local economy, is being forced by lawsuits into a buyout that will result in mass layoffs. Nosing around corporate paperwork and court filings isn’t a typical project for Durwood, who usually solves problems with his fists, an M9 semiautomatic, and his arthritic hound dog, Sue-Ann. But Carol, an attractive, redheaded Iraq War vet who can quote Scripture, appeals to him, and the apparent villains—a 28-year-old CEO and some lawyers—are so loathsome that he feels compelled to get involved. The case leads to violence that gets Durwood framed for murder after he uncovers evidence of double-dealing (and a bit of BDSM); the case later takes a swerve that makes him question everything he thought he knew about the case.

Bond’s tale features his usual lean, laconic, and evocative prose and mixes vivid character development (“He fared poorly when talking just to talk. Every useless word felt like some tiny roofing nail you’d spilled and had to go hunting through the grass for”) with gripping procedural and fight scenes (“Durwood punched his spine again. Harder….Holcomb, on his knees, was sinking like a slab of butter left out overnight”). It also has unobtrusive political themes, as Durwood feels himself a defender of honest capitalism against those who decry it and the “Wall Street sharks” who parasitize it. Eventually, however, he finds himself second-guessing his own heartland ethos; at one point, he muses that “The story had looked simple, black lines on white paper,” causing him to nurse “his own righteousness like the worst men of the age.” The result is an energetic page-turner with intriguing social commentary.

An entertaining, richly imagined action yarn with intellectual bite.

THE JOLLY BUPBUP
Borrmann, Ann P.
Tellwell Talent (26 pp.)
$5.99 paper | $2.99 e-book
May 27, 2020
978-0-228-82830-3

A girl does her best to cheer up when her beloved sailboat is washed away in the rain in this delightful children’s book. Somewhere in the cold north “not very long ago,” a little girl—the jolly Bupbup—lives with her two cats, black and yellow, in her brick house next to the woods. Bupbup looks as jolly as her nature, with rosy fair skin, a round body and big round eyes, and red-orange hair that sticks straight up. But one day, “a very dreadful thing” happens. Heavy rains make the river rise so much that Bupbup’s sailboat floats away. Having no umbrella, she can’t retrieve it, and the cats are no help since they hate getting their feet wet. Afterward, Bupbup heads outdoors to splash around the river in her puddle boots, taking care not to step on any fish: “That would not be kind.” She discovers something hiding under a big tree and wonders if it’s a Twinkle—elusive but good-natured creatures. But instead, it’s her boat, which a thoughtful duck helps her disentangle from the branches. Bupbup, her cats, and the duck go for a nice sail, hoping to partake in a Twinkle tea party. In her debut book, Borrmann shows a light, deft hand and an agreeably old-fashioned tone, cozy but not sentimental. Bupbup’s cheerfulness and compassion together with the story’s humor are greatly appealing. Borrmann uses repetition well, such as the phrase “dreadful thing,” to build anticipation and create rhythm. The opening page shows Borrmann’s facility with verse as well as prose: “Twinkles are glee-hearted, / Just as pleasant as can be, / And you cannot fail to notice that / On Thursdays they take tea.” The kinetic, stylized illustrations (uncredited) are beguiling, composed with skewed proportions that nicely echo the text.

Combines masterful storytelling with fun and affection; deserves to be a children’s classic.
Briskin’s photos are visually striking and have a near-palpable texture.

**STORIES TO SING IN THE DARK**
Bright, Matthew
Lethe Press (288 pp.)
$17.00 paper | $6.00 e-book
Oct. 20, 2019
978-1-59021-704-7

Ghosts, space travel, and murderous movie censors are among the obstacles to gay love in these phantasmagoric tales.

In his first short story collection, Bright (co-author: *Between the Lines*, 2019) mixes strands of magical realism, SF, steampunk, noir, gothic horror, and homages to literary classics, filtering it all through a gay sensibility. These tales are boldly imaginative: A new hire at a cosmic library indexes lost works recovered by time-traveling collectors—never finished novels, a teenager’s poetry jottings, books burned by Nazis—and begins an affair with French writer Jean Genet; a scientist in a seedy Los Angeles applies his anti-gravity technology to a string of lovers; a modern-day Dorian Gray moves uninfected and forever young through San Francisco’s AIDS epidemic while his partners die off. In a rollicking takeoff on the children’s book *The Wind in the Willows*, a tough-talking rat, mole, badger, and gender-bending toad ricochet through a furry criminal underworld. In other inventive tales, a man realizes that he is the stereotypical tragic gay character in an Edwardian period movie whose other characters panic when he declines to commit suicide as scripted; the lesbian concubines of a Chinese empress travel in her tomb on a steam-powered voyage to a distant planet—and consider cannibalism when the food runs out; and a tomb raider and her brothel madam daughter hitch a ride on an airship and dodge British soldiers and zombies to purloin a pharaoh’s soul. A striking concluding novella finds an Englishman accompanying his lover to a shadowy family manse in Germany, where he unearths a past of perverted cruelty. Bright combines vigorous narratives with prose that is atmospheric, slyly humorous, and saturated with evocative imagery. (“If my phantom watchers in the windows opposite are looking, they will see us as we rise into the sky, one man clinging tight to another as they ascend like balloons that have slipped from your grasp, until the atmosphere becomes rarefied and thin, and breath freezes before our faces.”) The result is a wildly entertaining set of yarns that combine thrills with soulful reflection.

**IRAN BEFORE...**
Briskin, Dennis
Photos by the author
Self (56 pp.)
$72.00 | Nov. 20, 2019
978-1-73409-880-8

The soulful Iran of a half-century ago comes to life in these luminous photographs.

Briskin was a Peace Corps volunteer in Iran in the late 1960s and took many black-and-white photos in the capital, Tehran, and the cities of Arak, Kashan, Hamadan, Esfahan, and Qom. His various subjects illustrate an older, poorer, less urbanized Iran of small villages and modestly scaled towns powered by animals and human sweat. Many of the images capture everyday work: a barefoot man straining to push a cart piled high with watermelons, a porter teetering along with a platter of food on his head, a silversmith carving a delicately filigreed design of an ancient Persian winged bull on a tray, a youth welding a window grate without face mask or gloves to protect him from the geyser of sparks. There are quiet pastoral scenes of shepherds with their flocks and boys threshing hay as well as bustling scenes of shoppers in bazaars and crowds thronging religious festivals. Women appear, working in headscarves and practical trousers in the countryside and shrouded in demure chadors in cities. And there are numerous grand shots of mosques, with vast arches opening onto cavernous interiors that dwarf worshippers kneeling in prayer. Briskin’s photos are visually striking and have a near-palpable texture. One can almost feel the gnarled, rough-hewn surfaces.
of a grindstone and wooden axle in a mill or the decorative tiles bubbling out of a mosque wall. The region he photographs is a semiarid plateau, and the landscape of billowing, rocky hillsides is a singular presence in his exterior shots. The ambient light is even more extraordinary in his interiors. Many photos depict dramatic contrasts of dim, shadowed workshops, arcades, and mosque spaces pierced by dazzling shafts of sunlight. The people he photographs are endlessly fascinating—absorbed in their labors; lost in religious transports; trudging through snowdrifts; staring back at the camera with expressions that convey boredom, tension, wariness, and occasional flashes of joy.

A vibrant portrait of Iran combining documentary realism with visual poetry.

THE MIT MURDERS

Bruneau, Stephen L

iUniverse (334 pp.)


Nov. 4, 2019

978-1-5320-8738-7

978-1-5320-8737-0 paper

A series of brutal murders in Boston tests the police and terrifies a book club.

As Bruneau's debut mystery begins, Augusta "Gussie" Watkins races to her fifth-floor Cambridge apartment after work because she will host book club that night. Reaching her building, she takes the elevator, which suddenly stops between floors. A hatch atop the lift opens, and a hand emerges. That night, police find Gussie's body with her eyes cut out. Near the body is scrawled the message, "Justice is blind." Two days later, an elite runner is discovered dead in Boston Common with a knife in her back. A note nearby reads, "Justice is swift." Chief Homicide Investigator Dimase Augustin realizes he's hunting a serial killer, and he soon discovers both murdered women were in the same book club—a club that has more members, and they all are in danger. The killer, revealed early on, dishes out-payback for an injustice he felt was dealt to him years ago when he was a university biology professor at MIT. Financed by "angel investors" in his work on a cure for Alzheimer's, much of his research involved mice dissection. Did mutilating Gussie bother him? No, he "just thought of her as a big mouse." For years he planned the murder while he played the long game in terms of going off the grid. Now, when Augustin suspects the former prof, he's gone without a trace. Bruneau doesn't rush the book club members' backstories, likes, and routines. The reader feels they know these women, which raises the stakes. A believable time frame, intelligent dialogue, an abundance of twists, and escalation in the psychopath's violence lead to quick page turns. Characters are intelligent, and a mix of races is represented. Augustin, a smart, albeit chain-smoking, middle-aged African American chief cop, deserves prominence in a sequel.

A sharp-witted detective hunts a psychopath schooled in murder; highly recommended.

WHERE the CREEK RUNS

Mary Abraham

"...vivid details about this troubled family and the colorful Mississippi setting."

="...the last chapters deliver deep satisfaction, chronicling the fates of the various players and bringing readers right up to the 1940s with a Dickensian conclusion."

"An impressive tale of a fractured Southern family with richly drawn characters."

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)
As in other years, the best Indie poetry collections in 2020 varied widely in style and subject. A talking 19th-century automaton narrates brooding poems in one collection. In another, a poet devotes his entire book to examining one paradoxical idea—a moving river serving as a stationary boundary. There is verse depicting struggle and redemption, flora and fauna. Here are several standouts.

**The Miracle Machine** by Matthew Pennock: In Pennock’s inventive poetry collection, exhibits owned by P.T. Barnum tell their stories. “Throughout the collection, winner of the Gival Press Poetry Award, beauty and the idea of beauty are corrupted by Barnum’s huckster grotesquerie,” notes the reviewer. “The mermaid is no lovely creature but a monstrous joining by someone who ‘smells of linen passed between unwashed hands, and—strangely—of buttered popcorn’...Uncanny, heart-wrenching, and beautifully crafted poems by an original voice.” *(Review on page 50)*

**The Liquid Border** by Jonathan Reeve Price; illustrated by the author: Price’s poems consider the nature of a real but invisible border in the middle of the Rio Grande. Our reviewer says, “Price’s volume seeks to map that liminal space in imagery and verse. Roughly half the book is given over to digital images; in them, the artist stitches together cartographs, photographs, and satellite images, many of them altered, to evoke the strange space between the two countries.... A mournful, beautiful, and original synthesis of word and image.” *(Review on page 52)*

**Trace** by Melanie Figg: In her debut collection, Figg juxtaposes disparate ideas and images, from the tragic to the euphoric. Our reviewer raves, “Figg’s poetic timing is spot-on, and her lines, though often dark, remain powerfully musical...But there’s light here, as well, as in an image of goddesses who chew laurel leaves for prophecy, and Figg’s contemplative voice consistently casts a strong, soft glow.” *(Review on page 28)*

**Unearth [The Flowers]** by Thea Matthews: In her debut collection, Matthews begins each poem with a flower’s common and Latin names. The author exhumes and reworks painful experiences using “compact, powerful language, skillful technique, and striking images of sinewy beauty,” says our reviewer. “A fine collection of works that are rooted in darkness but open in sunlight.” *(Review on page 45)—K.S.*
Flights of verbal fancy hint at the deep strangeness ahead.

**THE CHAOS COURT**

Burnett, Jake  
South Window Press (270 pp.)  
$12.99 paper | $2.99 e-book  
Mar. 8, 2020  
978-1-73466-420-1

In this middle-grade debut, a girl leaves her country home for the city and learns about a secret faction of mischief-makers.

Patience Fell has seven siblings. On her 12th birthday, she leaves the family farm to lighten the burden on her parents and to find her place in the world. Armed with only a broom, she rides a turnip cart to the bustling town of Whosebourne. In an alley beside The Crock and Dice inn, she finds a girl crying on a kitchen stoop. When Patience asks if she can help, the girl cryptically replies, “You’re all mad and I won’t fix it!” Suddenly, a whirlwind of trash approaches. While the girl runs away, Patience tries to fend off the trash with her broom. An extended battle reveals a “tiny filthy man” inside the whirlwind. This is the offaltosser. Patience is spared too much thought on this strange phenomenon by the inn’s cook, Miss Alys, who hires her as broom girl. Her first task is to bring breakfast to Miss Crowquill, a poet who lives in the attic. The madwoman possesses a book called *The Chaos Court* by Johnny Factotum, which describes the offaltosser and other strange creatures. A week later, Patience is picked up by a man in fancy-but-frayed dress named Reynard, who drives her to Pennywhack Manor. She meets the man who runs Whosebourne, the intimidating Keyreeve. In his office, under glass, is “The Key to the Town.” He also owns a copy of *The Chaos Court*. As far as Patience’s seeing the offaltosser, Keyreeve insists that she repeat, “I saw nothing unusual at all.”

Burnett brings a bit of Dickensian flair to his fantasy novel, creating silly names that are a joy to stumble across, like Shivtickle and Cobblemauler. These flights of verbal fancy hint at the deep strangeness ahead, which may remind readers of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, albeit with one foot more firmly in reality. At first, Reynard appears to be a sympathetic companion for Patience. That role soon falls upon Linus Pennywhack, Keyreeve’s nephew and a blossoming young scientist. Though the narrative isn’t overtly concerned with romance, when Linus shows Patience the stars through his telescope, the characters’ mutual enchantment is palpable. The collective comings and goings of magical creatures serve as a fantastical tide that regularly swells over Whosebourne, as in the scene in which Patience and Linus bounce across the rooftops with the gabledancers. Patience is a charming, determined hero, with an adorable catchphrase uttered in excitement (“Fox in a bonnet!”). The story’s main theme of finding one’s “place in the world” is echoed in the goofy Chaos Court denizens’ names. The creatures have carved out unique niches, a feat to which Burnett’s readers should aspire. The finale offers a meta solution to the plot and creates the potential for further adventures.

Effervescent and captivating, this middle-grade tale boasts a big heart.
both his career and his personal life despite having a loving wife, Abbie, and a reliable best friend, Paul Vartan. This stifling stagnancy is most apparent in the classroom, where he ends lectures prematurely and doesn’t penalize lazy students for late assignments. He lacks motivation to shake things up and dejectedly contemplates the movie posters gracing his office walls as he resents his arrogant academic colleagues. In this brisk novel about the hazards of idle hands, debut author Carry carefully and coyly sets the stage for the unbridled mayhem to come. The stultified professor’s situation is irrevocably altered by the unexpected arrival of teaching assistant Stacy Mann, a bisexual, e-cigarette–smoking film-program undergrad who swoops in and upends everything in Danny’s life. Danny finds himself in Stacy’s apartment getting drunk and stoned until they get in a fight that becomes so violent that he strangles her to death. A foolproof coverup scheme has police convinced of his innocence, but when another student suspects foul play, Danny adds another corpse to his body count and “intractable situation.” Blatant infidelity also enters the plot, but it’s never fleshed out, as Danny has bigger situations to resolve. He ultimately turns out to be an expert at playing “the man with nothing to hide.” Over the course of this novel, Carry cleverly keeps things crisply detailed and moving at a brisk pace. Readers will find the story to be gripping from beginning to end as Danny struggles to get away with his crimes and further twists complicate matters. Carry has managed to produce a story that’s brief enough to finish in one rapt sitting, and it will be engrossing for classic film buffs, teachers, and other readers who appreciate protagonists who wade into the murkier waters of life.

A thoroughly entertaining, spring-loaded tale of one man’s lethal remedy for middle-age boredom.
Chiu’s prose rolls like fabric and pricks like a pin.

BEAUTY

THE SIKH HERITAGE
Beyond Borders
BY DALVIR S. PANNU

“An illustrated history of important sites in Sikh history in Pakistan.”

“...stunning color photos by the author.”

“A substantial and visually arresting guide to five centuries of Sikh shrines.”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)


FOR ALL INQUIRIES, PLEASE EMAIL
info@thesikheritage.com
Sometimes a high-stakes thriller with a twisted predator is the best distraction from life’s travails. These top picks of Indieland’s mysteries and thrillers have something for everyone—an eco-thriller set in Alaska, a wrongly imprisoned mother on death row, a hacker group that has upended the United States, and an ex-biology professor-turned-psycho killer who expertly wields a scalpel.

**Rinn’s Crossing** by Russell Heath: The author was an environmental protection lobbyist in the Alaska legislature, and he puts that experience to good use in this eco-thriller set partly in the Tongass National Forest of Alaska. With shades of Richard Powers’ *Overstory*, Heath incorporates “many contemporary hot-button issues into his narrative, such as Native Americans’ attempts to claim overdue rights and the enduring fight between woodland conservationists and political and corporate entities bent on developing precious forestland for profit.” (Review on page 38)

**Burning Justice** by Marti Green: In Green’s legal thriller, a mother wrongfully convicted of murdering her three children is sentenced to death. An attorney working at the leading wrongful-conviction organization takes the case. “Green is a masterful storyteller, and her narrative fascinates from the first page to the last as she describes the uphill battle faced by those who try to prove the innocence of convicted felons.” (Review on page 34)

**Anarchy of the Mice** by Jeff Bond: A band of hackers/anarchists called Blind Mice destabilizes the U.S. “Bond’s yarn, the first in his Third Chance Enterprises series, features crackjack action scenes as well as a sly parody of the symbiosis between activist movements and the corporatocracy, all in vividly evocative prose.” (Review on page 13)

**The MIT Murders** by Stephen L Bruneau: A Boston book club is terrorized by a serial killer—an aggrieved former bio professor at MIT—who cuts out victims’ eyes. “A believable time frame, intelligent dialogue, an abundance of twists, and escalation in the psychopath’s violence lead to quick page turns,” raves our reviewer. (Review on page 17) —K.S.

THE PELTON PAPERS

Coates, Mari

She Writes Press (328 pp.)

$16.95 paper | $9.95 e-book

Apr. 7, 2020

978-1-63152-687-9

Coates’ debut biographical novel chronicles the life of modernist painter Agnes Lawrence Pelton (1881–1961).

The story begins with Agnes as a
child in Germany, where she was born to American parents; both had fled tragedies and scandals in their respective families. She’s a sickly child, and her parents eventually return to Brooklyn, New York, where her mother opens a music school. As a teenager, Agnes studies art at the Pratt Institute, which leads to a job teaching art in Massachusetts. Later, she spends an exhilarating year in Italy, studying under former Pratt instructor Hamilton Easter Field. She’s asked to exhibit her work in the famed Armory Show of 1913 when another mentor sees her work at Field’s gallery. After exhibiting alongside Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, Agnes finds herself at the center of the art world, and she rents a studio in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village. Along for the ride are her wealthy friends and patrons, including Mabel Dodge, who invites her to visit Taos, New Mexico. Later, she lives in a windmill in the Hamptons, painting portraits for wealthy families, but she finds it unsatisfying. A trip to Hawaii rekindles Agnes’ desire for spiritual growth, and when a friend invites her to live in a California artists’ commune, she jumps at the chance: “I knew that something was being born inside me, and without having to think about it, I knew what colors I would use.” Coates’ thoroughly researched novel, told from Agnes’ first-person point of view, succeeds beautifully at re-creating the emotional life of this once-obscure artist whose legacy has lately become the subject of renewed interest. The characters are resolute and unshakeable, from Agnes’ stalwart mother to wealthy women who host political radicals and artists in their Fifth Avenue apartments. Coates draws Agnes’ character with care, depicting her as longing for success and acceptance in the art world but also craving solitude. The author also describes the artist’s unique spiritual journey and the inspiration for her later, abstract works in vivid prose that’s worthy of the artist.

An in-depth, highly personal portrait of a remarkable talent.
A riveting book, dramatically powerful and historically astute.
THE STORYTELLERS

Corrigan, John F.
iUniverse (520 pp.)
42.99 | $28.99 paper | $3.99 e-book
Jul. 11, 2019
978-1-5320-7755-5
978-1-5320-7755-1 paper

A fantastical reimagining of Gen. George Armstrong Custer's bloody defeat at Little Bighorn, told from the perspective of an investigating detective.

Capt. Thomas Weir—one of the survivors of the massacre at Little Bighorn over which Custer presided—dies suddenly in New York and without an obvious explanation, a hale man in his 30s. His death is ruled to have been caused by "congestion of the brain," but the private detective summoned to inspect the scene of his demise, Mr. DelCol, notices the look of unalloyed terror on his face. DelCol is hired by the New York Life Insurance Company to investigate the matter further, more particularly what precisely happened at Little Bighorn; many of the officers who died were bearers of insurance policies, and apparently there is reason to believe that "something happened out there—something beyond the ordinary, beyond the official tale," a suggestion chillingly described by author Corrigan (Aslan, 2005, etc.). DelCol contacts his uncle—Lt. Col. Paris DelCol—who helps him join an Army detail sent to recover the bodies of the soldiers of the 7th Cavalry who perished that fateful day, an opportunity to interview survivors. The deeper DelCol digs, the more certain he becomes that the prevailing wisdom about Custer's debacle is suspicious. As one officer incredulously puts it: "Hell, how does an entire regiment—an entire crack regiment; hell, the crack regiment—go in against a band of savages and get annihilated?" DelCol also begins to suspect that whatever did happen that day might require an explanation that defies the possibilities of both science and ordinary experience and that his inquires very well might endanger his life. Blending Custer and others with fictional characters like DelCol, the author's tale is not a conventional rehashing of a well-known story so original it becomes entirely renewed. Also, Corrigan is impressively skillful at blurring the line between the plausible and supernatural. This is a riveting book, dramatically powerful and historically astute.

A brilliant literary reworking of a familiar historical story.

MISS HAVILLAND
Daly, Gay
The Sager Group (352 pp.)
15.95 paper | $9.99 e-book
A riveting book, dramatically powerful and historically astute.

A mathematician finds her life upended by World War I in this historical novel.

Daly, the author of Pre-Raphaelites in Love (1989), recounts the events that led her protagonist, Evelyn Havilland, away from her Northern California hometown and eventually back home. The book opens in 1919 as Evelyn accompanies her shellshocked cousin, Billy, home from Europe, where he was a nurse during the war. In flashbacks, readers learn of Evelyn's youth as a mathematical prodigy in a working-class home, where she has a contentious relationship with her mother. She goes on to study at Stanford University and becomes a cryptographer during World War I; along the way, she has a romance with a Boston Brahmin and fellow cryptographer named Arthur Bayard. Evelyn hopes to move to the East Coast to marry him and pursue her own career, but, later, her loyalty to her aging parents and to Billy, who's still suffering from his traumatic wartime experiences, keeps her in California. She takes a job teaching math at her old high school, and although she and Arthur attempt to make their relationship work, he ends up marrying a fellow Bostonian while Evelyn remains single. A later reunion, however, puts lingering questions to rest. Daly does a fine job of capturing her main character's challenges as she balances familial loyalty and personal independence. (Evelyn is based on the author's distant relative.) Arthur is a strong romantic foil, and despite what he and Evelyn go through in their relationship, he's never portrayed as a villain. Even Evelyn's mother, the most hostile character in the story, is presented sympathetically. The book also ably grapples with the realities of war, particularly when middle-aged Evelyn sees her own students become casualties. Overall, this book is thought-provoking without being excessively contemplative, and the solid plot offers a satisfying resolution.

An enjoyable work that explores one woman's path to adulthood.

THE ENCAMPMENT
Davenport, Stephen
West Margin Press (316 pp.)
A riveting book, dramatically powerful and historically astute.

During a harsh winter, an Iraq War veteran with PTSD takes refuge in the woods surrounding a prestigious girls boarding school in this novel.
In Connecticut, 18-year-old Sylvia Bickham, who’s led a fairly sheltered existence, is due to graduate from the highly selective Miss Oliver’s School for Girls and take the next steps on a privileged but rather purposeless path. When she encounters Christopher Triplette bathing naked in the river that runs through the school grounds, it comes as something of a shock to her; for him, it’s a moment of profound humiliation. He’s a former Marine sergeant with four tours in Iraq behind him. An incident involving the death of a young girl during his service has left him unable to cope with civilian life. He’s jobless and lives in a makeshift lean-to in the forest, but as the brutal Connecticut winter draws closer, his chances of survival are diminishing rapidly. For Sylvia, it’s unconscionable that someone is struggling to survive on the grounds of a wealthy school, so, aided by fellow student Elizabeth Cochrane, she starts providing Christopher with food, clothing, and money. When the weather begins to turn and Christopher’s shelter is vandalized and destroyed, it becomes clear that more drastic measures are needed. Two things are guaranteed to get you expelled from Miss Oliver’s: stealing and allowing men into your dormitory—and Sylvia and Elizabeth are soon guilty of both. In this third installment of Davenport’s Miss Oliver’s series, following No Ivory Tower, he presents readers with a slow-burning, gripping novel that will reward their patience. The dilemma that Sylvia and Elizabeth face involves making the subtle but important distinction between doing the correct thing and doing the right thing, and it’s one that plays out convincingly over the course of the story. The author also handles homeless veteran Christopher’s plight with sensitivity and insight. Davenport is an accomplished stylist with a keen ear for nuanced dialogue; he also has a knack for making serious political points with a light touch that makes them broadly accessible.

A thoughtful and compelling account of the responsibilities that come with privilege.
A clever love triangle and a deeper inquiry into art, communication, and the meaning of success.

Sorrow

DeBartolo, Tiffanie
Woodhall Press (270 pp.)
$19.95 paper | $9.99 e-book
Oct. 20, 2020
978-1-949116-30-4

A lost soul confronts a lifetime of regrets and the power of art in this novel. At age 37, Joe Harper has never lived up to his potential. Despite his gift for the guitar and his promise as a philosophy student, he leads a solitary life in Montana, mullling over choices he’s made. A flashback to three years ago sees Joe already starting to grapple with failure when he meets October Danko, a striking performance artist who hires him as her assistant, bringing him back to his hometown of Mill Valley, California. Among the redwoods of his youth, and under October’s empathetic gaze, Joe reflects deeply on his teenage years: the tragic death of his older brother, his difficulty communicating, and his close friendship with Cal Callahan, who helped him find his voice through music. As Joe becomes romantically involved with October, he can’t stop thinking of Cal, who’d urged him to follow his dreams and move to New York City; Joe didn’t take that chance, but Cal went on to find fame. A shocking twist of fate causes Joe’s past and present to collide, and he faces a difficult choice. DeBartolo, the author of How To Kill a Rockstar (2005), plays expertly with the scope of her story. It’s both a clever love triangle and a deeper inquiry into art, communication, and the meaning of success. The central romance feels relatable as the emotive October struggles to help Joe open up, and Joe’s self-deprecating manner makes him a likable narrator. At the same time, descriptions of conceptual artworks, partly inspired by real-world artist Marina Abramovic, lead to big, contemporary questions of human connection. Joe’s squandered potential sparks profound, bittersweet moments, including his acceptance of Cal’s notion that “...will swallow me whole” as a kind of presence. The book’s open structure, including sporadic empty spaces, allows Dunlop to trace the nonlinear, fragmented paths of mourning. As she asserts in her customarily plain yet evocative language: “Your many last words / are memory maps.” Addressing Ray directly, she shows how his verbal legacy remains a part of her life in the form of reclaimed speech: “ ‘Carry On Canada’ / I heard myself say today, / your phrase, your voice / giving you back to me.” Likewise, visual reminders can catch her off guard, as seen in the breathless quality conveyed by these short lines: “Today it was / an old man / bundled against / the cold March wind / in his wheelchair / being pushed / across the intersection / that took me by the throat / as I sat safely / inside the hard shell / of my car.” Everyone has emotional defense mechanisms, Dunlop implies, and no one is immune from sorrow. She's able to balance these universal themes with elements that are particular to her lived experience, as in how she refers to Ray as “little sparrow” or “tender sparrow” throughout the text. At the end of the poem, she suggests that writing is not just a way to memorialize, but also an act of survival. Dunlop envisions her own mortality (“the big silence / will swallow me whole”) as a way to reunite with Ray in some form. Anyone who's watched a loved one fade away will be able to connect with this accessible, plainspoken poetry.

A simultaneously gorgeous and gut-wrenching tribute to a lost companion.

Dear Ray

A Love Poem for Raymond Souster

Dunlop, Donna
Contact Press Toronto (87 pp.)
Dec. 16, 2019
978-0-9938210-2-8

A sharp outpouring of grief in free verse. Dunlop is a Canadian poet, novelist, and singer/songwriter based in Toronto. In this single, long poem, she reflects on the passing of fellow poet Raymond Souster, the precious time that they spent together during the last decade of his life, and the deceased poet’s painful absence, which is, paradoxically, a kind of presence. The book’s open structure, including sporadic empty spaces, allows Dunlop to trace the nonlinear, fragmented paths of mourning. As she asserts in her customarily plain yet evocative language: “Your many last words / are memory maps.” Addressing Ray directly, she shows how his verbal legacy remains a part of her life in the form of reclaimed speech: “ ‘Carry On Canada’ / I heard myself say today, / your phrase, your voice / giving you back to me.” Likewise, visual reminders can catch her off guard, as seen in the breathless quality conveyed by these short lines: “Today it was / an old man / bundled against / the cold March wind / in his wheelchair / being pushed / across the intersection / that took me by the throat / as I sat safely / inside the hard shell / of my car.” Everyone has emotional defense mechanisms, Dunlop implies, and no one is immune from sorrow. She's able to balance these universal themes with elements that are particular to her lived experience, as in how she refers to Ray as “little sparrow” or “tender sparrow” throughout the text. At the end of the poem, she suggests that writing is not just a way to memorialize, but also an act of survival. Dunlop envisions her own mortality (“the big silence / will swallow me whole”) as a way to reunite with Ray in some form. Anyone who's watched a loved one fade away will be able to connect with this accessible, plainspoken poetry.

A simultaneously gorgeous and gut-wrenching tribute to a lost companion.

Dating Makes Perfect

Dunn, Pintip
Entangled: Teen (400 pp.)
Aug. 18, 2020
978-1-68281-497-0

In this YA romantic comedy, a Thai American teen from a tightknit family starts dating—on her parents’ terms. Orravin “Winnie” Techavachara is entering her final semester of high school in the Chicago suburbs without a boyfriend. Her parents don’t allow her to date, a rule that started with her beloved older sisters, Ari and Bunny, now in college several hours away and happily independent with no thoughts of settling down, much to Mom’s dismay. Fearing the same fate for their youngest daughter, Winnie’s parents change the rules. Winnie is now allowed to date, but it’s not quite that simple. First, Winnie’s mom will dictate the dates’ locations, each of which will pay tribute to beloved rom-coms, like Always Be My Maybe and When Harry Met Sally. Second, she’ll also dictate the boy. And it won’t be Winnie’s crush, Taran, the new guy in school who also happens to be Thai, but Winnie’s former best friend, Mat Songsomboon, who’s been Winnie’s sworn enemy since an epic falling-out in junior high. Also, kissing is verboten. Mat’s father ups the ante for his reluctant son: For every date Mat and Winnie complete, he’ll add a day to Mat’s post-graduation solo backpacking trip through Asia.
What starts as an awkward car ride to school soon becomes much more as Winnie realizes her feelings for Mat are more complex than she once believed, and Mat makes a startling revelation about his feelings for Winnie. But what’s a good Thai daughter to do when she’s not actually supposed to fall in love?

New York Times–bestselling author Dunn, a first-generation Thai American, takes on the enemies-to-lovers romance trope with punchy dialogue and adorable twists while paying tribute to the culture’s prioritization of food and family: One of the novel’s best scenes plays out at the Songkran festival, a celebration of the Thai New Year. Both Winnie and Mat are intelligent, sympathetic characters with genuine chemistry in the throes of mutual eye-rolling–turned–puppy love, and Winnie’s family members are finely drawn and nuanced, with aspirations, conflicts, and dreams of their own.

A laugh-out-loud YA romance with a smart cast.

The Secret Diaries of Juan Luis Vives
Ellis, Tim Darcy
Tellwell Talent (272 pp.)
Aug. 3, 2020
978-0-228-83437-3
978-0-228-83436-6 paper

A historical novel about the great 16th-century humanist Juan Luis Vives.

In the framing device of Ellis’ novel, an electrician in the present-day College of Bruges in Belgium opens the wall of a study and finds a centuries-old book. It’s the secret journal of one of the city’s most famous citizens: Juan Luis Vives, who was born in Spain in 1493, spent most of his life in the Netherlands, and made a fateful and contentious visit to Henry VIII’s England in the early 1520s. Vives was friends with fellow humanists Erasmus and Thomas More, and during the first part of his time in England, he was a tutor to King Henry VIII’s daughter Princess...
Mary (“this was to be my catapult to greatness, the chance to realise my dream,” Vives thinks when More arranges the position for him). Ellis’ tale follows the adventures of young Vives as he leaves his native Spain and encounters the strange world of England, where he must become accustomed to his new Anglicized name (“John Lewis of Oxford”) and the shifting tensions between Henry and Queen Catherine of Aragon, whose turbulent marriage becomes the central topic of the land. Henry seeks to have his marriage to Catherine annulled, claiming that she’d previously had sex with his late brother, Arthur, which she adamantly denies—to Henry. However, she impulsively tells Vives that the claim is true and also that her baby boy, fathered by Arthur, was taken away from her on the pretext of it being stillborn. As the narrative moves forward, Vives must juggle his own domestic struggles with the possibility that he has “talked [himself] into treason.”

Ellis writes all of this with marvelous gusto that’s more reminiscent of Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* (2009) than of a more traditional Tudor novel. *Vives* not only addresses his diary as though it were a person; it also sometimes seems to address him right back. As a confidant of the queen, Vives refused to accept the validity of the king’s annulment and, as a result, he only narrowly escaped England with his life; in Ellis’ telling, the danger was compounded by the fact that Vives was also secretly an adherent of Judaism. As the story goes on, Ellis can’t resist the occasional bit of heavy-handed foreshadowing. When Vives visits the shrine of Thomas Becket with More, for instance, More says, “See how even the king’s greatest friend, his most favoured subject, can fall? But if God is with me, whom should I fear?” Months later, of course, More himself would be executed on the orders of his friend the king. However, the boisterous vivacity of Vives as a character remains appealing throughout. Early on, he discovers that he is “human rather than humanist,” and this canny emphasis is the guiding light of the book, allowing readers to avoid the orders of his friend the king. However, the boisterous vivacity of Vives as a character remains appealing throughout. Early on, he discovers that he is “human rather than humanist,” and this canny emphasis is the guiding light of the book, allowing readers to avoid

In this debut poetry collection, Figg kindles broken, dying embers into a roaring memorial for the voiceless.

“God save the devils, afflicted / and tumorred. Speech stalled / in their cursed throats,” writes Figg in her deeply insightful collection’s first poem, “The Measure of Things.” From there, readers are led into a world of remnants; in one poem, for instance, the ashes of insane asylum residents are kept in long-forgotten canisters. Figg is adept at combining contrasting images; for example, in “Stitching a World,” the natural world intertwines with the highway, but it’s unexpectedly revealed how nature’s beauty—represented by kudzu blocking the sunlight—is deceptive. Throughout, the poems’ speakers share the pain of the forgotten and the damned. In “Interview With Sister,” a mentally ill woman interviews her sister, or perhaps she interviews herself; each line begins with the word “Sister,” as if the two are one. Figg gently scatters themes of loss, loneliness, and rejection throughout her poems, and these sharp shards sparkle. Take, for example, “Refuse,” a poem with an unsettling fireplace image in which “the birch / collapses into the fire’s belly.” That same poem also replaces birdsong with the shocking noise of birds hitting windows: “He mistakes / the sounds of their necks breaking / for visitors knocking.” There’s a fear of insignificance here, too; in “The Trace of Nothing,” a woman steps away from a wall and simply vanishes. Figg’s poetic timing is spot-on, and her lines, though often dark, remain powerfully musical. In “Once Was,” the sound of words melts into a bluesy moan of a
woman “on the ground, the asphalt hot and soft / from the sun and slowly caving in to cover her edges and set her firm.” But there’s light here, as well, as in an image of goddesses who chew laurel leaves for prophecy, and Figg’s contemplative voice consistently casts a strong, soft glow.

Hauntingly beautiful pieces that will leave deep impressions.

ROOT AND BRANCH
Fleming, Preston
PF Press (423 pp.)
$16.95 paper | $4.99 e-book
May 26, 2020
978-0-9994418-5-5

A security contractor learns that the U.S. government is using his company’s technology for sinister purposes in a new thriller from the author of Maid of Baikal (2017).

After electromagnetic pulse attacks cripple much of the U.S., the country endures an intifada—predominantly, jihadi bombings and shootings. The Department of Homeland Security implements emergency security measures (ESM), ultimately selecting Zorn Security as a contractor for its Triage system. This threat-assessment algorithm rates questionable citizens by category to determine a “propensity to commit political violence.” Unfortunately, Zorn Security CEO Roger Zorn spots trouble right away. DHS is essentially tweaking Triage so that myriad people, including non-Muslims who have protested the ESM, rank in a high category, marking them for deportation. After Roger, who formerly worked for the CIA, hears that an old agency friend’s teenage, Muslim-supporting daughter is missing, he’s determined to find out what’s happening to deportees. This entails hitching a plane ride to a detention facility on a Caribbean island and, later, checking on detainees on another continent. Seems the only thing more alarming than the deportees’ treatment is the government’s apparent plan for the ESM to be the new security standard. Readers familiar with Fleming’s prior work will likely anticipate keen characterization.
A fine collection that gives grief the tonic sting of saltwater.

**TO THE MAN IN THE RED SUIT**

*Poems*  
Fulton, Christina  
Rootstock Publishing (86 pp.)  
$14.95 paper | May 5, 2020  
978-1-47869-027-5

A collection of poems explores the aftermath of a father's suicide. This volume was a finalist for the Anne Sexton Poetry Prize and the Laura/ Frasca Prize for Poetry, and several pieces have been previously published in literary magazines. As a note from Fulton explains, her father committed suicide in 2011, followed a day later by the catastrophic tsunami in Japan. Images of watery disruption and disaster—seawater, tears, amniotic fluid—weave throughout the book. The opening poem, “The Transcontinental Flight of My Father’s Ghost,” explicitly links personal and geological upheavals: “The nuclear mucus / of a shared pain / was the rift / between our two faults.” This linkage is underscored by words that chime or repeat sounds: nuclear mucus; aftermath/aftermath/afterbirth; disenchanted/disinfected. A flood-stranded man “looked like you. / Soaking in the salty bits / of weightless doubt.” Similarly, double meanings and mysterious correspondences haunt many poems. In “Magazine Shreds,” for example, the father’s boating magazine and his death have spooky resonance with his descent into darkness, emphasized by lines that stair-step down the page (“Dive, / Dive, / Dive”), while the final line, “in your wake,” again combines the watery and the funereal. Alongside the poet’s grief is her sardonic anger, as in “Snippets,” in which the speaker’s mother phones for “my husband’s / autopsy report.” Perhaps she’s in the kitchen, one inhabited by betrayal: “Bad faith lives in an ice cube tray.” The report’s clinical tone and the kitchen’s nurturance find confluence in the poet’s “egg shell nip- ples” over her “left ventricle,” hinting at what’s cracked open. In another egg reference, the father’s abandonment of his family “was over easy”—the familiar phrase made scathingly bitter by its context. Yet, as Fulton makes powerfully clear throughout this book, her pain is as true as her anger.

**THE MOURNING WAVE**

*A Novel of the Great Storm*  
Funderburk, Gregory  
Koehler Books (282 pp.)  
$28.95 | $18.95 paper | $7.99 e-book  
Sep. 29, 2020  
978-1-64663-176-0 paper

After barely surviving the Great Storm of 1900, an orphanage boy searches for hope in this debut historical novel.

On Sept. 8, 1900, a hurricane slams into Galveston, Texas, in what is still America’s worst natural disaster. At St. Mary’s Orphan Asylum, the sisters and staff are desperately trying to save 93 children, but only three boys survive: Will Murney, 14; Albert Campbell, 13; and Frank Madera, 12. When the storm subsides, Will and his companions trek toward the hospital, slowed by injuries and a mountain of corpse-strewn wreckage. Stunned survivors wander among the debris, searching for loved ones. As time passes, Galveston begins to pull itself together, distributing food, providing medical aid, and collecting the dead. It takes six weeks to burn all the bodies. Meanwhile, Will struggles to reconcile himself with the tragedy without losing faith: “Although enduring loss was one of life’s most crucial themes, seeking sunlit hope in its wake was also one of its most cruel duties.” In his book, Funderburk hews closely to historic accounts and real figures, bringing them to life with great sensitivity and a fine ear for period-appropriate diction (“Your bean, son, got conked awful good”). While the story is harrowing, it is shot through with striking, well-earned moments of grace and compassion—even humor; a woman doling out food calls it “Don’t Ask Stew.” The storm’s destruction is horrifying, yet Will’s hunt for meaning is luminously described. The larger community comes together in ways sometimes flawed but also beautiful, as when Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, gives a speech: “To watch her mobilize power in the cause of service to the suffering was extraordinary,” thinks Will.

**NOWHEREVILLE**

*Weird Is Other People*  
Ed. by Gable, Scott  & Dombrowski, C.  
Broken Eye Books (302 pp.)  
$19.99 paper | Dec. 17, 2019  
978-1-940372-48-8

A short story collection provides mixed-genre, speculative fiction, with the tales bound together by mutual love, fear, and fascination with the concept and mystique of the city.

As Gable’s introduction puts it, “weird” fiction lies somewhere between the “Impossible” heights of fantasy and the
Sorrow is a stunning, moving novel that explores masculinity and suspended adolescence, all the while begging the questions: Can courage be learned? And is it ever too late to follow your heart?

“This novel is a rare gem: a profoundly warm, witty story about art, love, and the journey of the soul...”
—Colleen Hoover, #1 New York Times Bestselling Author

“A smart, thoughtful work that balances romance with intriguing philosophical questions.”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review) ★

FOR ALL INQUIRIES, PLEASE EMAIL
debartolo.tiff@gmail.com • www.tiffaniedebartolo.com
Githaiga writes in the great realist tradition, sometimes recalling Victorian novelists like Dickens or, more recently, Vikram Seth.

THE PEOPLE OF OSTRICH MOUNTAIN

Githaiga, Ndirangu
Bon Esprit Books (366 pp.)
May 14, 2020
978-1-73504-170-4

In this novel, Kenya is the center of three lives connected by blood and friendship. In Part 1, it’s 1952, and Kenya—long under colonial rule—is seeing violent clashes as the British try to put down the Mau Mau uprising. Atrocities and police raids affect the small village of Kandutu, home of 14-year-old Wandutu, son of Raymond, a doctor, taking the train to boarding school, where he gains a mentor and friend in her White mathematics teacher, Eileen Atwood. Wandutu eventually marries shopkeeper Mwangi Kíng’ori, discovering in herself an unexpected talent for business. In Part 2, Eileen is forced into retirement in 1989 and returns to England, where she feels like a stranger after more than 40 years away. Meanwhile, Wandutu’s son, Raymond, becomes a doctor, taking a residency at a Chicago hospital, where he experiences both prejudice and success. In his debut novel, Githaiga writes in the great realist tradition, sometimes recalling Victorian novelists like Dickens or, more recently, Vikram Seth. He paints on a wide canvas—investigating points of view of those disparate in age, gender, and nationality with equal attention and skill—in prose that’s lively but dignified. For example: “homesickness, that erstwhile banished companion, began to make an unwelcome comeback.” Racism is an important theme in the novel, all the more effectively explored because Githaiga uses a scalpel, not a hammer. Wambúi, taking the train to boarding school, notices a sign reading “WHITES ONLY. She turned left and continued walking.” Also thoughtfully considered is the complexity of immigration, as with Eileen’s story. Home, to her, is Kenya, where she’s never become a citizen.

A rich, absorbing story of destinies intertwined across time and space.

“Inevitable” depths of SF. This anthology, edited by the team of Gable and Dombrowski (Welcome to Miskatonic University, 2019, etc.), aims to blend these elements—not to confuse readers but to present them with something that feels true in their uncertainty. Cities, then, form the perfect backdrop, as they feature constant cycles of new growth, preservation, and demolition as well as juxtapositions of wealth and poverty, high and low culture, and a melting pot of people, languages, and ideals. Cities represent the concept that anything can happen at any time while imparting the knowledge that true divergence from the quotidian is rare. The tales range as widely as the cities in which they take place, from Enugu, Nigeria, to a futuristic urbanscape called Punktown. Some, like Nuzo Onoh’s “Walk Softly, Softly,” in which a mysterious shadow haunts the dreams of men and steals their genitals, invoke a sort of fabulist horror to take on complex social ills. Others, like “Y” by Maura McHugh and “Nolens Volens” by Mike Allen, throw kids about how to protect watercourses. Wills, an artist and graphic designer illustrating her debut book, provides stylized, well-composed pictures that are a real pleasure to look at. They recall 1930s linocut poster design both in composition and in the palette, limited to a few shades of blue and coral.

A happy marriage of text, art, and message that’s absolutely beautiful.

THE MIGHTY RIVER

Ginalina
Illus. by Wills, Kelley
Peppermint Toast Publishing (44 pp.)
Oct. 26, 2020
978-1-989927-01-4

Ginalina’s picture book celebrates a wide river’s birds, animals, insects, and plants.

In her debut children’s book, singer/songwriter Ginalina asks what can be seen along “The Mighty River, wild and free.” Kids and adults enjoying the outdoors might spot “Three pin-tail ducks / paddling free. // A small black bear / just by the tree.” Other species mentioned include a black-crowned heron, big-horn sheep, and bracken ferns. (Although the river is unnamed, many of the listed creatures and plants suggest western Canada.) Written in a pleasing musical cadence of abcb rhyming quatrains, the book is well suited to reading aloud. The book imparts an air of serenity, peace, and joy in nature. It also gently teaches an environmental lesson by including river facts, space to draw and describe a river animal and scene, and ideas from
In this picture book, rapt garden plants enjoy fantastical circus acts performed by seeds.

In the arena of their garden, all the plants are waiting expectantly to see “The One and Only, / The Cirque des Graines!” Each of the three acts demonstrates the circus performers’ particular ways of self-seeding. First up are the maple seeds, the “Graines Nomades,” who wear “papery pantaloons” and put on a dazzling aerial display full of twisting, swirling arabesques. Next come the Acacias, contortionist acrobats who bend and warp themselves to send their seeds spinning. Finally, the Wisteria stage a rough-riding daredevil act in their “buckskin pods” to release their seeds. In her third picture book featuring growing things, Glenn—a former flower arranger at California’s famed Chez Panisse restaurant—again blends botanical realism with a magical atmosphere. The text, with its onomatopoeia and poetic diction, deftly enacts the seeds’ kinetic performances: “Maple tree whirlybirds / Hover and hum with a / Sibilant sound.” The author’s enchanting watercolor illustrations dance across the page in lovely shades that capture both the artistry and the strength of the performers.

A beautifully told and illustrated circus story that casts a potent spell.

A consumer advocate sounds an alarm about everyday safety risks in this expose of corporate and other practices that endanger Americans.

Goldhaber draws on decades of designing warning labels, consulting for government agencies, and testifying as an expert witness to reveal ongoing consumer and workplace safety problems. In chapters organized by theme—home, work, travel, recreation, and more—Goldhaber reviews cases of negligence, carelessness, and unforeseen consequences that have resulted in injury and death. Some of the situations he covers are well known, such as the Takata airbag recalls or the fatal Upper Big Branch mine explosion. Others involve hazards that have had less attention, such as the risks of inflatable bounce houses (which, he says, cause 30 injuries a day) and of microwave ovens with no or incorrect wattage labels (which can lead to unsafe food preparation). Goldhaber shows how corporate profitability has often won out over safety and why regulating manufacturers can be challenging. An especially strong chapter deals with “deeply troubling” TV commercials for prescription drugs that adhere to the letter of the law while flouting its intent—for example, by adding an “Ask your doctor” line that allows big pharma legally to avoid “the general rule that manufacturers have a duty to directly and explicitly warn end-users about the potential risks of their products.” He also describes companies that have taken the lead in providing adequate warnings and demonstrated responsible corporate behavior. The book concludes that safety is simultaneously the responsibility of corporations, the government, and ordinary Americans, and it suggests how each group can do its part, whether by producing and marketing responsibly, upholding standards, or staying informed. With well-chosen and informative anecdotes, the writing is eye-catching (“the common ladder is, for all practical purposes, a list of hazards looking for a purpose”), its messages supported by many images of product or other warning labels that Goldhaber helped to design, illustrating effective but not excessive precautionary techniques. Based on solid research and Goldhaber’s experience in the field, and introduced by the activist Erin Brockovich, this book by the author of *Organizational Communication* (1989) is a solid choice for both casual readers and those with a passion for safety.

A safety expert’s engaging and well-written guide to hazards at home, at work, and elsewhere.

This debut tells the story of Virginia Hall, an American spy for the Allies in World War II. Hall (1906-1982) was a real woman and an amazing one. But rather than tell the story as straight history, Gralley has chosen to turn it into a novel with Hall as the protagonist and first-person narrator—an inspired decision. As if her life would not prove challenging enough, early on, Hall lost her lower left leg in a hunting accident. As a result, she gained an intimate lifelong companion, a wooden prosthesis that she named Cuthbert. It was, needless to say, a love-hate relationship. She would sometimes encourage Cuthbert, but more often, she would berate him. Hall spent the early years of the war under various guises as a spy based in Lyon. The northern half of France was German occupied; the southern half—the Vichy government—was also under German control but existed under the thinly veiled illusion that it was free.
Danger was a constant. Right off the bat, Hall’s “pianist,” her “covert radio operator,” was found out and killed. The high point in the story is her escape into Spain, trudging over the Pyrenees in winter, the Gestapo hot on her trail. There is no question that Hall was indefatigable. But Gralley’s treatment really brings that aspect home. We get to know Hall firsthand, in all her tortured and scary moments. What pervades the novel like a miasma is the sensation of being a spy, a deceiver, to be always—always—on guard. She has the human feelings that we all have, but she cannot indulge them, and this, too, eats at her. The fact of Cuthbert has shut off avenues to advancement, but there is also the fact that she is a woman. Time and again she has to prove herself (and prove herself she does), but it seems never enough until a final triumph. She receives commendations from Britain and her own country but dodges the accompanying ceremonies, having further work to do.

A fascinating, electric account of a heroic woman.

THE TRUE ADVENTURES OF GIDON LEV

Gray, Julie
Self (322 pp.)
$16.95 paper | $5.99 e-book
Jun. 30, 2020
978-1-73524-970-4

In this elegantly conceived memoir, a Czechoslovakia-born Holocaust survivor works with an LA editor to write his life story, and a tender friendship ensues.

Gidon Lev was born in Karlbad, Czechoslovakia, in 1935. When he was 6, he and his mother were ordered by the Nazis to board a train to Theresienstadt concentration camp, where he remained until the age of 10. Lev lost 26 members of his family in the Holocaust. In 1959, he immigrated to Israel and served in the Six-Day War. His marriage to his first wife “fell apart incrementally but dramatically”; Lev found a note on her door saying she had gone to America, taking their children with her. A two-time cancer survivor himself, he lost his second wife to lung cancer months before Gray moved to Israel in 2012. Lev sought out Gray as an editor, while collaborating on his book project, they spent “almost every day together” and realized they made “great life partners.” The memoir later recalls their visit to the West Bank and Lev’s horror that the “fenced-in” Arab villages remind him of Theresienstadt: “Starlings were swooping in and out of nests….Divining up, under the eaves on the outside of the buildings, they pulled bits of string and straw in after them.” Some readers may question the juxtaposition of Gray’s and Lev’s very different voices, but they blend together well, informing each other, and Gray ensures that Lev remains the central focus. Illustrated with Lev’s family photographs, this is a remarkable tale of survival and unexpected kinship.

A vitally important Holocaust story eruditely captured.

A dedicated lawyer works to exonerate an innocent woman on death row for the murder of her three children in a legal thriller by the author of The Good Twin (2018).

In the late 1990s, Becky Whitlaw was a young working-class mother in Glen Brook, Texas, when her husband, Grady, was killed in an auto accident. Nine months later, a 23-year-old widow with two toddlers and a new baby, Becky feels old and exhausted, and her life seems out of control. She even wonders sometimes if she wouldn’t be better off if her children had never been born. When her house is consumed by flames with her children inside as she sobs on the porch, “It’s my fault,” it doesn’t take long for investigators to conclude that she set the fire herself. In spite of her denials, she is charged and brought to trial and, after only two days of testimony, convicted of murder and sentenced to death. Years later, Dani Trumball, an attorney for the Help Innocent Prisoners Project, learns of Becky’s case and agrees to try to get her a new trial, in hopes that new evidence will prove her innocent of starting the fire that caused her children’s deaths. While juggling her own family challenges, including adjusting to a West Coast life after a cross-country move with her husband and two children, Dani works tirelessly to unearth old leads and witnesses, all the while knowing that even her best efforts might not be enough. A veteran author of novels about legal injustices, Green is a masterful storyteller, and her narrative fascinates from the first page to the last as she describes the uphill battle faced by those who try to prove the innocence of convicted felons. In addition to providing educational and electrifying details of Dani’s investigation and court battles, Green gives empathetic attention to the details of the attorney’s personal life, drawing parallels between Dani and Becky as wives and mothers and creating a tale that combines courtroom and family drama.

A captivating and intimate look at injustices in the judicial system.
An extraordinarily imaginative and compelling exploration of love, death, race, and patriotism.

IN THE REALM OF ASH AND SORROW

WHEN DEATH IMITATES ART

In Halt’s debut mystery, an art gallery co-owner is sent a painting depicting her slain in a bathtub—and then the scene plays out for real.

In 1980s Cologne, Germany, American Amanda Lee and German Marlene Eichler own the Lee Eichler Gallery. Glamorous Marlene laments her divorce from prominent architect Wolf Eichler, with whom she remains friends. However, she refuses, infuriating the critic, who hides a dark past.

In 1980s Cologne, Germany, American Amanda Lee and German Marlene Eichler own the Lee Eichler Gallery. Glamorous Marlene laments her divorce from prominent architect Wolf Eichler, with whom she remains friends. However, she also enjoys high-end shopping, posh salon visits, and sex with wealthy, married art collectors and pickups at questionable clubs. A major show is about to open at the gallery, featuring death-inspired works of leading artist Klaus Kruger. Art critic Dieter Becker works with Marlene to promote it, and he feels entitled to kickbacks from gallery sales for his efforts. Amanda refuses, infuriating the critic, who hides a dark past.

Then Amanda finds Marlene slashed to death in a bathtub, and it turns out that Marlene had received a mysterious package at the gallery—one that contained a painting of her own future murder. Kommissar Fredrich Grutzmacher and his underling Ernst Rudolf investigate both Amanda and Wolf as potential suspects. Readers will find this chilling story hard to put down, as the crimes (yes, plural) are gruesome and the suspects, numerous. The author, who once lived in Germany, captures the edgy atmosphere of that country’s art and club scenes in the ’80s, and she offers richly developed characters along the way; at one point, for instance, the entitled Marlene insists that Amanda find her a new identity. Readers will find this chilling story hard to put down, as the crimes (yes, plural) are gruesome and the suspects, numerous. The author, who once lived in Germany, captures the edgy atmosphere of that country’s art and club scenes in the ’80s, and she offers richly developed characters along the way; at one point, for instance, the entitled Marlene insists that Amanda find her a new identity. Readers will find this chilling story hard to put down, as the crimes (yes, plural) are gruesome and the suspects, numerous. The author, who once lived in Germany, captures the edgy atmosphere of that country’s art and club scenes in the ’80s, and she offers richly developed characters along the way; at one point, for instance, the entitled Marlene insists that Amanda find her a new identity.

A novel of resistance in WWII France.

A QUIET HERO

This historical novel features the true story of Gen. René Carmille, “the world’s first ethical hacker,” who saved thousands of French Jews from Hitler’s Final Solution.

Carmille is just one of the many historical figures in this World War II tale. The fictional protagonists are Miriam Meijer, a Dutch Jew, and her eventual lover and husband, Charles Delmand (aka Charles Secours). Miriam is in Paris when her family perishes during the destruction of Rotterdam. Charles, who is with the Resistance, arranges a new identity—Miriam Dupré—and gets her a job at the Military Recruitment Service in Lyon. Her formidable talents lead her to working directly with Carmille. This highly classified work—right under the noses of Nazi agents and associates. The question of whom to trust runs
through the story like a leitmotif. Everyone knows that the Vichy government is a bad joke that eagerly collaborates with the Nazis. But to round up Jews, the Nazis need to correctly identify them. Carmille has engineered a way to sabotage the IBM punch cards that are used. The hacking and the deliberate stalling are successful. But later, Miriam, having killed a Gestapo officer, is on the run. She and Charles ultimately reunite while Carmille is arrested and tortured by the infamous Klaus Barbie. Harshbarger has a riveting story to relate, and he tells the tale superbly Miriam—who narrates most of the chapters—is well drawn and braver than she thinks. Charles leads his double life with aplomb. As Delmand, he is a Times of London journalist; as Secœur, he is a French art consultant. How the punch card hacking works, the German occupiers’ arrogance, the daily anxiety that the Jews feel—all of this comes across very convincingly. During moments of heightened drama, the author deftly uses the brevitas trope. At one point, Miriam’s friend Simone has just seen a Jew killed by a German soldier and recounts her reaction: “Bit my fist till the soldier was out of sight. Then I ran. Through alleys. To the hotel.’ Simone burst into tears. She put her hands over her face. ‘I escaped from Warsaw,’ she sobbed. ‘My family’s there. Trapped.’ ” The useful backmatter bolsters the history and clearly shows that IBM’s complicity with the Third Reich was amoral at best, monstrous at worst.

A vivid, dramatic, and believable tale of a courageous and self-effacing war hero.

THE LANGUAGE OF CHERRIES
Hawkins, Jen Marie
Owl Hollow Press (310 pp.)
Feb. 10, 2020
978-1-945654-45-9

A Florida girl and an Icelandic boy communicate without words in this cross-cultural teenage romance.

Sixteen-year-old budding artist Evie Perez is spending an unhappy summer accompanying her geologist dad on his temporary Iceland assignment, fretting that her best friend might be moving in on her boyfriend back in Miami. The one bright spot in the chilly, gray landscape is a cherry orchard that provides both succulent fruit and an inspiring setting for Evie to paint in. An added attraction is 17-year-old Oskar Eriksson, nephew of Agnes, the Scottish woman who runs the orchard; he has a chiseled torso, tousled blond hair, gorgeous dimples, and an uncanny resemblance to a figure in Evie’s painting, right down to a runic tattoo. Oskar is silent and aloof, and Evie supposes he doesn’t speak English; she thus feels free to gripe about her woes, including her beloved abuela’s creeping dementia and her divorced parents’ plan for her to live with her estranged mom in New York. Oskar has his own secrets: His parents and brother died in a car crash; his stutter makes him shy; and he speaks English perfectly. The two spend the summer processing cherries, dodging the odd earthquake, occasionally smoking marijuana, and edging toward passion. But their relationship is complicated by the mystery of Evie’s dream visions, which feature people from Oskar’s past. Hawkins weaves an atmospheric tale that plays Evie’s warmth against Oskar’s reserve and Agnes’ earthiness. The novel alternates between Evie’s point of view, written in well-observed, naturalistic prose with touches of magic, and excerpts from Oskar’s journal in lyrical blank verse. The latter captures Oskar as an awkward, occasionally rancorous adolescent (“It’s the American mentality / that triggers my upchuck reflex: / Take what you want— / when there’s a problem, / throw money at it,” he writes after Evie offers money when she’s caught with pilfered cherries) and as a poetic soul that many teen girls would find hard to resist: “I pick up the guitar / open up my veins / and bleed music / over the strings.” Readers will root for the pair as they try to figure each other out.

A luminous YA love story with magnetic characters and literary flair.

TURING’S GRAVEYARD
Stories
Hawkins, Terence
Running Wild Press (202 pp.)
May 1, 2020
978-1-947041-51-6

Hawkins’ American Neolithic (2019, etc.) collection of tales ranges from unnerving SF to exceedingly dark comedy. Opening with the creepy title story, an unnamed narrator connects online with a woman named Sophie for a steamy cyber encounter. But when he goes to meet her in the flesh, he learns Sophie had died months ago. So to whom had he been talking? Some of the subsequent stories are equally unsettling. In “The Darkness at the Center of Everything,” for example, the sun seemingly vanishes—from the entire world. Hawkins, however, also excels at genres other than SF. The amusing “A Call to Arms” follows a young boy who’s a reluctant participant in his stepfather’s American Civil War reenactment weekends. Watching the stepfather embarrass him in front of “the hottest girl in the whole Middle School” is hilarious, though the ending is a shocker. Similarly, “The Thing That Mattered” plays like a murder mystery, as Hemingway, in 1956 Cuba, tries to identify the person who shot and killed his friend Rick. Despite the multigenre approach, certain topics recur, most notably religion and infidelity. One of the most memorable tales involves the author’s take on the crucifixion of Christ. It’s engrossing with too much without extremes; the man on the cross experiences human emotions, such as doubt, but is unquestionably the son of God. As for infidelity, several characters among the stories are—or may be—having extramarital affairs. “Crossed Wires” takes the issue seriously while the hungover and possibly philandering husband in “Like Leonardo’s Notebooks” comes across as a hapless buffoon. Hawkins often uses a first-person narrator,
which doesn’t preclude descriptive passages. In one instance, he
writes, “The mayor always made me wonder whether there was
an extra Stooge who didn’t get through the screen test. He had
rubbery lips and pop eyes and really bad hair.” The collection
ends fittingly with two very short and very different stories: a
farcial comedy trailed by a story featuring the book’s single
most disturbing image.

**Extraordinary stories that will make readers laugh, shiver,
or perhaps both.**

**DRIFTWOOD**

*Stories From The Margarita Road*

*Head, Anthony Lee*

Luna Blue Books (274 pp.)

$15.95 paper  |  $8.99 e-book

Oct. 17, 2020

978-1-73527-810-0

This debut collection of short stories features an exotic location populated by believable people.

Paradise Beach is a fictional Mexican town on the Riviera Maya in Quintana Roo, somewhere between Cancún and Tulum. (Head owned a bar and hotel for a decade in Playa del Carmen.) But Paradise Beach is more than a Jimmy Buffett cliché. The atmosphere is real, and certainly the characters and events are inspired by the author’s own sojourn in Mexico—how close they are to the truth doesn’t matter. These are discrete vignettes (though characters sometimes reappear), each prefaced by a short reflection on what one is about to read. The first tale sets the scene with a biographical sketch of Poppa (who appears to be Head’s alter ego). He is the classic expatriate, the footloose drifter who finally landed on this largely unspoiled shore—“living the dream,” in that awful cliché. Some stories are humorous; some are poignant; some defy description. Poppa is sometimes a main actor in these tales but more often a bemused bystander, counselor, or father figure. He holds the book and, it occasionally seems, Paradise Beach together. In a setting such as this, it is hard to avoid clichés, so the work does have ugly

The author is at his best with tales that may be rooted in the local milieu but are really universal. People fall in love just as often in Albuquerque as in Paradise Beach. The difference—and it is a crucial one—is that Albuquerque is not Edenic, not a place one escapes to and then is forced to take stock of one’s life. This is the moral fulcrum of the finest of the stories, as when Poppa and Lynn Timmons fall in love or when Sadie and Roy break up. Perhaps the strangest tale ("The Old Man in the Sea") stars not a human character but an old black grouper (seen through Poppa’s eyes). It is a very touching rumination on what this sea creature has seen and suffered in his—starting out as a her—30 years offshore. While the collection offers a bunch of familiar characters, the strongest ones are fully fleshed out, not cardboard cutouts. All stories must end, and the end comes for Paradise Beach in the form of a monster hurricane, Bad-Ass Bertha, that all but levels the little town. Poppa realizes that it would be pointless to try to rebuild his bar. In the end, he and his old friend Chaz sit on the beach in the dark. Chaz, using the allegory of a bullfight and the exhausted beast to discuss the concept of querencia, explains why people like himself and Poppa should move on. Indeed, there is, almost literally, no Paradise Beach anymore. And with that, readers will realize that Paradise Beach is no more real than Macondo or Prospero’s enchanted isle.

**Truly wonderful and moving tales; the author is a writer to watch.**

**THE CONCORDAT**

*Heary, Sean*

Troubador Publishing (416 pp.)

$14.01 paper  |  $0.99 e-book

Jun. 20, 2018

978-1-78901-344-3

In Heary’s debut thriller, the Catholic Church goes to great lengths to protect its reputation while the Kremlin is determined to destroy it.

When history teacher Maximilian Wolf in Bonn, Germany, discovers a written agreement, or concordat, between the Vatican and Adolf Hitler among his late father’s possessions, the Vatican’s senior clerics quickly dismiss it as a forgery. Dated June 1, 1939, it almost exactly follows the style and format of another, genuine document, the Reichskonkordat of 1933, which is enough to raise suspicions of foul play. Crucially, the new concordat, which purports to have been signed only three months prior to Germany’s invasion of Poland, hints at an anti-Russian pact between the Nazis and the Holy See, which would have shocking political ramifications. Its inauthenticity is likely, but the potential for it to be used as a propaganda tool worries the Vatican enough that they’re willing to pay Wolf for it. The head of the Vatican’s police force, Inspector Gen. Enzo Rossi, is assigned the task of recovering the document; when he arrives for a meeting with Wolf, he instead finds two dead bodies—and no concordat. Assuming, rightly, that the document has fallen into Russian hands, and that the Russians intend to use it as political leverage against the church, Rossi sets off, with the aid of CIA agent Cathy Doherty, on a time-sensitive mission to track down the thief. Overall, this novel is an impressive addition to a well-stocked thriller market. Fast-paced, intelligent conspiracy tales are hardly thin on the ground, nor are novels about Vatican-related scandal, so it takes something special to stand out from the crowd, which Heary provides here. His strengths lie in his ability to fuse dramatic tension, political intrigue, and even wry humor into a narrative that manages to

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A narrative that manages to be simultaneously informative and escapist.

**THE CONCORDAT**

*SPECIAL ISSUE: BEST BOOKS OF 2020*
be simultaneously informative and escapist. His attention to detail is particularly noteworthy; the years that he spent living in Moscow enable him to write with an authority that eludes many other thriller authors mining similar material.

Highly recommended for fans of thrillers in the vein of Dan Brown's and Robert Harris' works.

**RINN’S CROSSING**

_Heath, Russell_

Koehler Books (350 pp.)

$30.95 | $19.95 paper | Mar. 30, 2020

978-1-63393-888-5

978-1-63393-886-1 paper

Murder and mystery commingle with dirty politics in Heath’s eco-thriller.

Heath, the author of _Broken Angels_ (2015), channels his experience as a former environmental protection lobbyist at the Alaska legislature into the creation of Kit Olinsky, a single mother of one who tries to protect that state’s natural resources through her work with the Alaska Environmental Lobby. Kit finds herself in hot water after being indicted in the murder charge to distract Kit from meddling with a bill he supports that involves Native American land rights, which would further his political ambitions if passed. He will stop at nothing to get the bill through the legislature, including colluding with other lawmakers and attaching controversial riders to it, such as an abortion deterrent. Blackmail, threats, and coverups ensue as Kit attempts to absolve herself from the charge that she’s leading a group of outlaw eco-terrorists while at the same time trying to keep her child from being removed by the state from her care. Additionally, Kit must deal with her attraction to her former lover, “mountain man” Rinn Vaness, whose need for revenge against the perpetrators of deforestation efforts leads to acts of vandalism bordering on eco-terrorism. Vaness might be able to help her, but in order to do it, he’d have to tangle with Dan Wakefield, Kit’s friend and the CEO of the Tlikquan logging group that Rinn sabotaged only days earlier. The plot moves at a riveting pace, and fans of suspense fiction—particularly eco-thrillers—will find themselves pleasantly engaged with all the treacherous political and interpersonal machinations. Heath cleverly incorporates many contemporary hot-button issues into his narrative, such as Native Americans’ attempts to claim overdue rights and the enduring fight between woodland conservationists and political and corporate entities bent on developing precious forestland for profit. Heath certainly knows his way around controversial land management issues and parleys this knowledge into a riveting page-turner.

A thrilling, engrossing work of serpentine intrigue and crisp characterization with a conservationist conscience.

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**DRAGONS CAN’T SPELL**

_Heinrichs, Susie_

Illus. by Grall, Christina

FriesenPress (48 pp.)


Sep. 13, 2019

978-1-5255-5664-7

978-1-5255-5665-4 paper

A boy overcomes spelling-bee anxiety by imagining the misadventures of his stuffed dragon in this debut picture book from sisters Heinrichs and Grall.

Jimmy, a blond, pale-skinned boy, often has silly dreams of animal adventures, as depicted in Grall’s opening, brightly colored cut-paper illustration. But the night before a spelling bee, his dreams turn to nightmares. He wakes up and confesses to Fire Breath, his stuffed dragon, that he’s forgotten all his spelling-bee words. But he comes up with a plan: “What if he stayed home and sent Fire Breath in his place?” As Jimmy imagines the resulting antics—which culminate in the fire-breathing dragon burning down the auditorium—the boy realizes that it would be unfair to send an unprepared dragon to a spelling bee. Also, he now remembers all the words he’d memorized. Over the course of the story, a large ape in a picture above Jimmy’s bed offers easy-to-read commentary. Indeed, author Heinrichs uses accessible vocabulary throughout the book, and the illustrations effectively move the story forward on pages with little or no text. Grall’s beautiful paper creations vividly reveal Jimmy’s inner thoughts, and the silly conceit allows the creators to effectively show how creativity can help one cope with stress.

Young readers will sympathize with the anxious protagonist and giggle at the dragon’s well-illustrated adventures.

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**LOST ONE STANDING**

_Hill, Hector_

Waterfall Films (258 pp.)

$12.99 paper | $5.99 e-book

Apr. 29, 2020

978-1-73469-241-9

Ruthless mercenaries invade a posh New England prep school and confront resourceful teens in this high-stakes YA thriller.

Seventeen-year-old Cade Dixon is part Holden Caulfield, part Jason Bourne, with a touch of MacGyver. He was raised by a single mother whose administrative position at a prep school enables him to attend. He covertly sells homework assignments to his wealthy classmates and hatches a crush on a student named Kira but hasn’t yet kissed a girl. He’s inordinately curious, highly intelligent, and knows every hiding place in the school. These characteristics, combined with his mastery of mixed martial arts, make him a terrific foil for brilliant, diabolical criminal mastermind Reilly, who’s employed 14 heavily armed men to lay siege to the school. He
Hillhouse’s writing is overwhelmingly joyful and explicitly invested in the power of Black joy, Black excellence, and Black self-love.

MUSICAL YOUTH

Two very different teenagers with a shared gift for music fall in love over a summer in this YA novel by Antiguan and Barbudan author Hillhouse.

In Antigua, painfully shy Zahara can play guitar and has an encyclopedic knowledge of famous musicians, but she just can’t work up the courage to perform in front of people—and her strict grandmother likely wouldn’t allow it, anyway. Then she meets a cute, confident boy who calls himself Shaka; he’s not only her match in musical knowledge, he also writes his own rap verses with a schoolboy hip-hop crew. Shaka finds himself smitten by Zahara and tries to bring the anxious girl out of her shell. However, he has his own doubts and insecurities underneath his showman persona. Unlike the private-schooled, light-complexioned Zahara, public-school Shaka comes from the poor part of town and has been ridiculed all his life for his dark skin. As summer starts, the two teens grow closer, and a tender romance begins to blossom. Soon, Zahara and Shaka are caught in a whirlwind of creative collaboration, self-discovery, and family revelations that will leave them forever changed. In the tradition of the best YA stories, Hillhouse’s characters are convincing because they’re unfailingly realistic in their interactions, interests, and struggles. Her players sound like actual people, and specifically like Antiguan teens. Through their personal journeys, readers learn about issues that affect young people in Antigua and across the globe, including internalized racism, colorism, economic inequality, generational trauma, and old-fashioned teenage angst. This is not to say that the book is heavy or maudlin in tone; on the contrary, Hillhouse’s writing is overwhelmingly joyful and explicitly invested in the power of Black joy, Black excellence, and Black self-love.

A charming and edifying work with a romance that will make YA fans swoon.

MUSICAL YOUTH
Hillhouse, Joanne C.
Caribbean Reads Publishing (280 pp.)
$16.99 | $10.99 paper | Sep. 15, 2019
978-1-73382-996-0
978-1-73382-995-3 paper

WITHOUT EXPIRATION
A Personal Anthology
Hincy, William R.
Self (150 pp.)
$9.95 paper | $3.99 e-book | Nov. 1, 2019
978-1-73275-790-5

Flawed, despondent characters show a surprising wit and humanity in a collection of 12 tales, most of them previously published.

Two lovers are lying together in this book’s opening story, “Bermuda Triangle.” Their mutual fondness is evident, but it’s clear they aren’t likely to divorce their spouses. This is the attitude that characters in this collection adopt, simply accepting their reality, however imperfect it is. In “Left To Soak,” for example, Helen’s 46-year union with her shiftless husband, Hank, has involved endless days of washing the dishes alone. As she returns home from her three-day hospital stay, she unhappily anticipates the stack awaiting her. Hincy saturates the pages in sardonicism, but her stories are more than just black humor. In “A Thousand Counted and Unrepentant Debts,” life coach Bill blatantly describes himself as “a man of words, none of which I’m particularly committed to.” Similarly, “A Study in Discontinuity” is rife with often amusing footnotes that are considerably more revealing than the narrative itself. The book strikes a chord with characters whose defects make them simultaneously believable and with descriptions of moments involving a loved one’s death, either its prolonged aftermath or its inevitability.

Cynicism and cheekiness abound in brief but memorable stories.
WEST OF IRELAND
Hoff, C.P.
Black Crow Books (346 pp.)
$15.00 paper | $4.99 e-book
Oct. 1, 2019
978-0-9812215-0-2

An Irish family in Canada faces a stark generational choice.
Hoff’s impressive fiction debut centers on the O’Brien family in New Brunswick, Canada. Mr. O’Brien is gar-rulous and tries to be optimistic, holding court at The Donnybrook, the local pub, every day, and Mrs. O’Brien is sharp and forceful, haunted by the fact that all of her many children but one died very early (“Three boys and five girls buried one after the other in the churchyard, none living long enough to open their eyes to see, or their mouths to cry”). Tended by servants, the couple lives in a fine house with their only daughter, Mary-Kate, a high-spirited, bookish young woman who’s continuously being proffered by her father to all the eligible or semi-eligible men in the town of Tnúth. Mary-Kate is the book’s most complex dramatic creation, and the subject of her matrimonial future is a contentious one. Years ago, Mrs. O’Brien made a rash promise to her sister-in-law, Sister Mary-Frances, pledging one of her children to religious orders, and Sister Mary-Frances is determined to collect (“The long line of O’Briens was coming to an end,” we’re told, “and she wanted to make sure it finished with some dignity”). Hoff adds to these charged premises a third storyline that’s customarily a staple of comedy rather than drama: Mrs. O’Brien’s quarrelsome mother (referred to by her son-in-law as “Our Lady of Blessed Misery” and called by her daughter simply “Herself”), having just recently buried her husband, has decided to come and live with the O’Briens. Hoff animates this tale of over-the-top family dysfunction with wit, considerable writing skills (at one point we read “There was enough blue in the sky to cut out a pair of pants”), and deadpan humor (“I’m not ignoring you,” one character tells another, “I’m just pretending you’re not here”). And the very human pathos of the novel is always present but never heavy-handed, with even the most outlandish characters written to a fine shade of believability.

An eccentric, ultimately moving novel of an expat Irish family in turmoil.

A LITTLE BIT OF DINOSAUR!
Hutcheson, Elleen & Pattison, Darcy
Illus. by Joven, John
Mims House (32 pp.)
Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-62944-153-5
978-1-62944-154-2 paper

An atom of calcium makes the journey from dinosaur bone to child’s body in this entertaining tale about the conservation of mass.
When the narrator announces to a brown-haired, blue-eyed child: “You have a little bit of Tyrannosaurus rex in your jawbone,” the child looks astonished. It is, the narrator explains, the child’s mother’s fault. But how did the bit of dinosaur get there? The narrator guides the child—and the reader—through the saga of a dinosaur’s living, dying, and being buried long ago. As rain erodes both the rock burying the dinosaur and a little bit of the dinosaur’s toe bone, calcium from the bones washes into the river. From there, the water irrigates a corn field, the corn is fed to a cow, and the cow makes milk, which becomes cheese, which the child’s mother purchases for lunch. The calcium becomes part of the child’s bones—and will one day again return to the cycle to perhaps become calcium in the spine of a blue whale. Hutcheson and Pattison introduce difficult science concepts in simple, accessible language. Although death is a part of this cycle, it’s handled in a scientific and not scary way. Joven’s comical, retro, and ingenious illustrations—featuring bright colors as well as a cow that rides inside a tractor and has a milk faucet inside her body—are brimming with kid appeal.

A science-centric winner, especially for young dinosaur lovers.

ONCE A GIRL, ALWAYS A BOY
A Family Memoir of a Transgender Journey
Ivester, Jo
She Writes Press (352 pp.)
$16.95 paper | $9.95 e-book
Apr. 21, 2020
978-1-63152-886-6

A Texan decides to have gender-affirming surgery in this memoir.
Jeremy Ivester was born as Emily in 1980. Growing up in Austin, he wanted to be one of the boys. He loved short haircuts, male clothes, and football, playing on teams where he held his own as the only one perceived to be a girl on the field. His idyllic tomboy existence was upended in middle school, where he was excluded by classmates as his gender nonconformity became more glaring in the midst of adolescent dating culture. He was further horrified when puberty gave him breasts and curves that
Jaffe’s lively, limpid prose features sharply etched characters and passages that shift between absurdist humor, sly social observation, and wry sensuality.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Male Tales Of Lust & Love

Jaffe, Daniel M.
Rattling Good Yarns Press (168 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Sep. 8, 2020
978-1-73414-642-4

Restless men go abroad in search of sex, love, and belonging in these adventurous short stories.

Jaffe, the author of Yeled Tov (2018), sends his protagonists, most of them gay and Jewish, to unfamiliar places to encounter people and situations that stimulate them carnally and spiritually. In “The Importance of Being Jurassic,” an American reporter in Dublin encounters a cloistered Catholic man who regards oral sex as a filthy sacrament, and in “Cobblestone Elegy,” a Jewish American in Prague meets the ghost of a gay Holocaust martyr. A middle-aged Soviet woman, looking for a way to immigrate to the United States, tries to lure a decades-younger American student into marriage in “Innocence Abroad.” In “The Trickster,” an aging man at a convention of “bears and chasers” in Catalonia imagines that all the young, attractive men are lusting for his corpulent body, and a new widower falls in love with a frankly businesslike yet soulful female sex worker in Seville in “El Bochorno.” In the sexually graphic “Walpurgisnacht,” a Catholic soul knocking on heaven’s gate struggles to explain to St. Peter why he engaged in a Satanic sex-murder orgy at a German bathhouse during his last night on earth. Over the course of this book, Jaffe’s lively, limpid prose features sharply etched characters and passages that shift between absurdist humor (as when a character wonders why an old man on a plane “ensconced himself toe-to-head within a 30-gallon, heavy-duty, clear plastic trash bag”), sly social observation (“No matter how many times you wink at him, he will not return your glance, will just take some book out of his bright blue backpack and read—or pretend to”), and wry sensuality. The result is a redolent blend of atmospheric travelogue, earthy physicality, satire, magical realism, and Kafkaesque disorientation—the latter most notably in “The Return,” in which a descendant of Jewish conversos returns to the Spain that his ancestors fled and finds himself bombarded with hallucinatory inducements to take up his deceased relatives’ gentle ways.

Rich, complex, entertaining tales of strangers in strange lands.

WOMEN IN THE WAITING ROOM

Kapur, Kirun
Black Lawrence Press (85 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Oct. 20, 2020
978-1-62557-823-5

Kapur’s collected poems compellingly respond to afflictions and healing in women’s lives.

This second collection for Kapur, following Visiting Indira Gandhi’s Palmist (2015), was a finalist for the National Poetry Series; many of the poems first appeared in literary magazines while two won awards and were anthologized. Several threads weave through the book, including Hindu mythology, conversations on a crisis hotline, and the ravages of illness for both sufferer and onlooker. Much of the work addresses the corrosive ways girls are portrayed as responsible for their own rape and abuse. Drawing on the Hindu epic Ramayana, in which Sita, wife of Rama, must prove her innocence via fire ordeal after being kidnapped by a demon king, Kapur writes in her opening poem that “Every girl can be taught / her middle name is shame.” Whether ancient or contemporary, the same story prevails, as suggested by the poetic form in “Steubenville Ghazal” (referring to the 2013 Steubenville High School rape case). An Arabic poetry form dating to the seventh century, the ghazal is written in couplets that repeat an ending refrain—in this case, a preposition plus bim. Narrated by the survivor, the building up of this phrase leads to a devastating conclusion: “My name is redacted, it no longer speaks of emotions that must be contained; in the hotline poems, fragmentary lines halt and hesitate across the page as the callers struggle to articulate their stories. “I wish the old me would just,” reads one unfinished, perhaps unfinishable,
thought. Such lines thrum with coiled tension. Throughout, the speaker’s role is often to bear witness, sometimes in ways that can find expression only on the page. As a hotline worker, she’s been trained not to react with shock; as a hospital visitor, in the poetry cycle that gives the collection its name, she must be circumspect: “I watch the last / whip of light blurring the far bank slip away. / It will be back tomorrow. I know better than to say so.” Kapur’s craft is everywhere evident, as in these lines from “Waiting for Sleep, I Imagine Sita in Her Youth,” a poem that also uses imagery from Sita’s captivity, though the she in the poem could be any Indian woman: “From the window she could see / women from every corner of the city // walk into the river, disappear / then rise clean, saris soaking.” The sibilants in these lines onomatopoeically recall the rush and rinse of water, as they do in the final stanza when the speaker imagines herself with Sita in the river, “so we might both rise ready / to wring out the story.” The alliteration of window/women/walk and rise/ready/wring skillfully enacts both the connection described and the process of transforming experience through the work of art making.

Poems of craft, power, and compassion: a fine collection.

THE TALKING BAOBAB TREE
LaTef, Nelda
Illus. by the author
Sub-Saharan Publishers (40 pp.)
$18.00 | Jan. 1, 2020
978-9988-8603-8-7

A rabbit and a tree get the better of a greedy hyena in this beautiful retelling of a Senegalese fable.

Johari, a rabbit, isn’t sure how she’ll survive lost in the desert until she discovers a lush baobab tree. Startled when the tree speaks to her, Johari quickly adjusts, showing her appreciation in the poem could be any Indian woman: “From the window she could see / women from every corner of the city // walk into the river, disappear / then rise clean, saris soaking.” The sibilants in these lines onomatopoeically recall the rush and rinse of water, as they do in the final stanza when the speaker imagines herself with Sita in the river, “so we might both rise ready / to wring out the story.” The alliteration of window/women/walk and rise/ready/wring skillfully enacts both the connection described and the process of transforming experience through the work of art making.

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Johari, a rabbit, isn’t sure how she’ll survive lost in the desert until she discovers a lush baobab tree. Startled when the tree speaks to her, Johari quickly adjusts, showing her appreciation for the wise tree. “You deserve to be known as the Tree of Life,” Johari tells it. “You provide food, shelter, shade, and so much more.” Rewarding Johari for her appreciation and kind spirit, the deciduous giant reveals secret treasures. But after Johari returns home, a greedy hyena demands to know those secrets. As in similar folktales, Johari’s cleverness and willingness to give up material treasures give her the ultimate reward, and the hyena’s greediness is punished. Like LaTef’s previous Animal Village (2018), this picture book is based on a traditional West African story she learned in her African travels. Her flowing prose seamlessly integrates new vocabulary in English (baobab) and Wolof, the language of the story’s origin. The beautiful acrylic, India ink, and collage illustrations capture the setting and the tone of the tale. The design is also inventive; in one delightful two-page spread, Johari slides down a sand dune, requiring readers to turn the book sideways. In another long illustration, a collage of gems fills the inside of the baobab.

A rich, inventive rendering of a familiar folktale.

CATCHLIGHT
Law, Brooke Adams
Woodhall Press (322 pp.)
$18.95 paper | $9.49 e-book
Oct. 5, 2020
978-1-949116-18-2

In Law’s debut novel, the mother of a Rhode Island family is stricken with Alzheimer’s.

When Katherine Keene is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, her children and her husband, Bill Norman, are going to have to learn how to deal with it. More importantly, they will have to learn how to deal with each other: Will the family survive together or crash and burn? The main characters are Katherine’s children Laura, the youngest and a relationship therapist, and James, the black sheep alcoholic. These two divvy up the narrating. (The others are Izzy, the big sister, and Robert, the responsible—and judgmental—brother.) Laura is, ironically, divorced; James, a construction worker, is also divorced, with an ex-wife and a son, Jeremiah. And then there is Jonah, Laura’s love interest and strong support. Katherine goes downhill rapidly, but the shock comes when another family member falls ill, which leads Laura to a shattering revelation. At the gathering after the funeral, James gets very drunk, in effect steals Robert’s car, and, crashing it, almost kills his son. The rest of the book details, beautifully, Laura’s confusion and hurt and James’ clawing his way back to sobriety—all while Katherine sinks deeper into incoherence but with moments of startling lucidity. Izzy and Robert do come around, but they have not grown as Laura and James have. Character is everything here. Law is no novice writer, and this is truly an impressive debut. The prose is more often straightforward than lyrical, as befits a hard telling. Laura describes some of her troubled clients as wearing “their problems on their bodies. Bruises, track marks. Scars.” (This just before one of those clients suffers a dramatic fate.) James’ struggle—including a prison stint and a long stretch in rehab—is both heroic and harrowing, an exercise in bated breath, a master class in suspenseful pacing. The destination is satisfying, but the journey will keep readers enthralled.

A triffecta of memorable players, convincing storytelling, and well-honed prose.

RIVER TOWN GIRL
A Memoir
Litterine, Lynn
Serving House Books (230 pp.)
$19.99 paper | $9.75 e-book
Oct. 5, 2020
978-1-947175-28-0

Litterine recalls growing up in a small town across the Hudson River from New York City in this original, poetic debut memoir.

The author’s first memory of Edge-water, New Jersey, was standing on a stool at 3 years old looking...
Most arresting are Lorka’s candid discussions of her lifelong struggles with her body and sexuality as a gender-nonconforming lesbian.

HANDSOME
Stories of an Awkward Girl Boy Human
Lorka, Holly
She Writes Press (250 pp.)
$16.95 paper | $9.95 e-book
Oct. 20, 2020
978-1-63152-781-8

A collection of humorous and heartfelt stories about gender, sex, childhood, shame, and self-acceptance.

“When I was four years old,” Lorka states on the first page of her debut, “my friend Mikey told me that when he went downhill fast, like in a car, it made his pee-pee feel funny.” Thus begins her collection of autobiographical essays that focus on nearly five decades of awkwardness, sexual awakenings, breakups, gender dysphoria, upended career expectations, and nighttime visitations by the ghost of singer George Michael. Lorka’s charming, irreverent voice leaps off every page as she casually unspools the details of her life, touching on major events only briefly—such as when she dumped her male fiancé and embraced her attraction to women, or her difficult relationship with her late mother—only to saunter back to them later with winking familiarity. Lorka’s ability to balance life’s harshness alongside its ridiculousness and to poke fun at herself makes for a read that’s never disingenuous or boring. An account of a pit bull attack is, at different points, harrowing and hilarious, and a story of a high school crush on a coach walks a tightrope between longing and obsession. Various digressions about her career as an intensive care nurse manage to, by turns, bemoan the sexualization of nursing and recount the tragic death of a new mother. Most arresting, though, are Lorka’s candid discussions of her lifelong struggles with her body and sexuality as a gender-nonconforming lesbian. With self-deprecating humor, the author lays out her internalized shame, her discomfort, and her hunger to be someone different; only after having thoroughly entrenched the reader in this mindset does Lorka then guide them through an account of her agonizing but glorious process of learning to love herself. The results are cathartic, joyful, encouraging, and often very funny.

A delightful remembrance that’s brimming with honesty and wit.

GANADO RED
Lowell, Susan
Illus. by Scholes, R.W.
Rio Nuevo Publishers (152 pp.)
$14.95 paper | Nov. 6, 2019
978-1-940322-46-9

Lowell collects a novella and eight short stories, primarily set in various eras of the American Southwest.

In “The Kill,” a Montanan’s choice of college is on the other side of the country, in Princeton, New Jersey, but he doesn’t stray far from his roots; he even keeps a hunting rifle under his bed, and his ways seem to fascinate his English professor. However, for the most part, a theme of shared experience threads through Lowell’s book. In “Lavinia Peace,” wife and mother Lynn has spent her life in Dallas with her husband and child. As an adult, she has head-achesh and seems to lose time, which may stem from radiation exposure when she was younger. But in all of Lowell’s tales, her sense ignites the senses, such as in the description of a woman weeping over a stove and hearing “tears dropping upon the hot metal with faint hisses.” Adjiba is described as enjoying working outside “under the broad blue sky” with the cottonwood trees’ “fresh light green against the cinnamon sand.” Scholes’ simple
but distinctive black-and-white sketches preface each story as well as each of the novella's five chapters.

Incisive, profound, and colorful tales.

**TWO DESPERADOS**

*Stories*

Lowell, Susan  
Texas Review Press (206 pp.)  
$19.95 paper | $5.99 e-book  
Jan. 24, 2020  
978-1-68003-193-5

Characters in this volume of short stories shuffle through lives steeped in regret, uncertainty, and the inevitability of death.

In the opening tale, “The Woman Who Loved Trees,” an aging poet writes his latest verse. But as he reflects on a past that entails fame and praise that no longer interest him, he may be anticipating and welcoming death. Others in this book are more fearful of the end. Rascoe, for example, a blacksmith in “Ironwork,” scoffs at ostentatious newspaper headlines. But as 1999 comes to a close, those headlines, coupled with Rascoe’s ominous dreams, make Y2K a truly daunting forthcoming event. But Lowell’s stories aren’t typically bleak, notwithstanding the despondency that many of her characters endure. In “The Frog Prince,” Teresa Slade is on a “surprise vacation” with her husband, Ray, and her daughter, Claire. Though her overwhelming unhappiness is apparent, Teresa clings to hope, however fleeting it is. As in the author’s earlier work, the tales here are set mostly in Arizona and neighboring states, including the outstanding eponymous tale. In it, Elizabeth Ryding leaves her contemptible boyfriend in Alaska and returns to Arizona, her home state. But as her mother is oddly unavailable, she stays with her delightfully assertive Aunt Tinny along with, quite possibly, a ghost. Lowell displays a knack for indelible, concise descriptions and subtle humor. “The Witch of the Stacks,” for one, begins with: “Long, long ago, almost before computers.” In other instances, characters provide the charm, like Aunt Tinny—“Ahnt,” she repeatedly stresses—who answers her door with a sizable Rottweiler at her side and a hefty Colt .45 in her hand. The author also plays with different narrative forms: In “Love and Death,” a collection (within this collection) of “short short stories,” there’s flash fiction as well as a fragmented tale showcasing a killer’s frightening perspective.

Another sublime compilation from a consistently impressive wordsmith.

**THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY AND OTHER STORIES**

Maher, Jan  
Dog Hollow Press (128 pp.)  
$10.00 paper | $2.99 e-book  
Feb. 15, 2020  
978-1-943547-04-3

This volume of diverse short stories offers an exploration of memory and age. Subtle surprises abound in Maher’s stylish collection. The opening tale, “A Real Prince,” introduces Yanka, a young girl who lives at an “outpost” and is ordered to do chores by her “keepers.” Due to her “obvious deficits,” the narrative reveals it is “irregular” that she has been allowed to live. She finds pleasure in folktales and retreats into her imagination, but when soldiers come to lodge at the outpost, she believes she has encountered a real prince. “Livia’s Daddy Comes Home From the War” continues the theme of youthful innocence, as the scene of a father returning from combat is recollected from the naïve perspective of a child. In “Vitae,” an academic plans on writing her magnum opus after being handed a severance package but finds herself working in a pizza shop and making an unusual deal with an armed robber. In “Dancing in the Dark,” a couple who have long fallen out of love are trapped in a dark elevator. The collection then turns to issues faced by older protagonists. The heartbreakingly moving “Turn, Turn, Turn” sees the world through the fog of dementia, where memory and understanding appear and recede without control. “Answering” is a whimsical but telling tale about a man named Howard whose vital organs take it upon themselves to call him on the phone to tell him how they feel. And the title story introduces a great-grandmother who hops on her great-granddaughter’s bicycle to evoke past memories and prove that she can still ride.

Elegantly written tales laced with melancholy and mischief.

**A WOUNDED DEER LEAPS HIGHEST**

Mangel, C.P.  
Eyewear Publishing (664 pp.)  
$19.99 paper | Jun. 1, 2019  
978-1-912477-25-8

A debut historical novel focuses on racial tensions in the South in 1950.

In this tale, the Horaces, a mixed-race couple, have moved from Chicago to fictional Kidron, North Carolina, because Titus’ Aunt Callula has bequeathed him the 90-acre ancestral homestead, begging him to settle there and keep it in the family. Fifteen-year-old Asa is the couple’s bright and perceptive daughter. The story is told through her eyes, eyes that are being opened to the rigid Jim Crow rules. Titus is a well-educated Black man, former lawyer, and successful writer; Ardene is White and Jewish. To complicate things
Matthews’ scenes of balls, drawing-room manners, and vaporous anxieties over deportation are full of piquant details.

GENTLEMAN JIM

Matthews, Mimi
Perfectly Proper Press (376 pp.)
Nov. 10, 2020
978-1-73305-699-1

A put-upon heiress pining for a lost love triangulates between a villainous guardian seeking her hand and a mysterious nobleman in this Regency romance.

Maggie Honeywell used to be a headstrong hellion who scandalized British high society by riding and shooting as well as any man and batting away countless proposals. Alas, by 1817, the 26-year-old has lost her health to flu complications and is about to lose her fortune unless she marries the loathsome Frederick Burton-Smythe. He was given control of her fabulous Beasley Park estate in a will and gets to keep it unless she marries someone he approves—namely, himself. Worse, Frederick has foolishly challenged the Viscount St. Clare, the best shot in London, to a duel over a card game, and if he dies, her assets will be forfeited. Maggie appeals for mercy to St. Clare, who sports over 6 feet of lean muscle and “lazy, masculine grace,” but when she gets a good look at his face, she faints dead away. He’s the spitting image of Nicholas Seaton, the bastard stable boy she fell in love with 10 years ago before Frederick framed him for theft and he ran off to find his father, the notorious highwayman Gentleman Jim. St. Clare ardently woos Maggie but denies that he is this Seaton fellow, all while fending off sly distant relations with a claim to his inheritance and pointed questions about his parentage. St. Clare feels flustered; Maggie feels gaslighted; and the jealous Frederick intensifies his controlling behavior and tries to assault her in a carriage, stopping only when a masked highwayman emerges from the darkness. In her latest yarn, Matthews serves up a savory blend of suspense, erotic infatuation, and marriage intrigue. Her characters are sharply drawn and captivating with lots of Hogarthian quirks; her scenes of balls, drawing-room manners, and vaporous anxieties over deportation are full of piquant details; and the dialogue is tartly elegant. (Frederick: “If you’d exert yourself to be sweet to me on occasion—” Maggie: “I shall exert myself to slap your face if you don’t let go of me.”) Maggie and St. Clare’s amorous scenes are passionate but don’t unnecessarily drag out the mechanics; the two make for captivating romantic leads whose personalities are as magnetic as their looks.

A vigorous, sparkling, and entertaining love story with plenty of Austen-ite wit.

UNEARTH [THE FLOWERS]
Matthews, Thea
Red Light Lit Press (102 pp.)
$16.00 paper  |  Jun. 20, 2020
978-0-9998895-1-0

Poems that speak of suffering, resilience, and flourishing.

In her debut book, Matthews titles each piece with both a common and Latin flower name; an appended glossary provides more information. She groups the poems, some of which have been previously published in literary journals and anthologies, into two sections: “Perennial” and “Annual.” A prefatory poem, “PRELUDE | Praeludium,” gives context for the collection. In it, the speaker remembers childhood violations: “UNEARTH the abuse: repetition of bruising the spirit / ... / the time said once more / ssbbbb . . . don’t tell
no body.” Disbelief from others injures the speaker’s psyche and, for a time, silences her, “the cries trapped in my teeth.” But a reclaimed voice speaks in the last lines: “the tongue clipped now regrown / UNERATH [THE FLOWERS].” The “now regrown” phrase suddenly gives the poem a different perspective, implying that what’s buried can also be a source of renewal. Many other poems in this collection explore this theme, such as “RAIN LILY | Zephyranthes grandiflora,” in which the speaker acknowledges lacerating pain but sees richness and power in it: “the scars of finding gold. You’ll see me shine / like a glass case of magic” in Adam Gallardo’s “The Ultimate Secret of Magic”.

I renew / an ethereal field of Lilacs!” Throughout, Matthews’ The tale features a man wrestling with ghosts from his past in Leicht’s moody “Forgiveness Is Warm Like a Tear on the Cheek.”

female subject “cracks windchimes with her teeth.” A fine collection of works that are rooted in darkness but open in sunlight.

EVIL IN TECHNICOLOR
Ed. by McDermott, Joe M.
Vernacular Books (372 pp.)
$15.99 paper | Oct. 1, 2020
978-1-952283-03-1

Ten spooky stories pay tribute to the wicked delights of classic and modern gothic horror fiction in this anthology. Editor McDermott combines aspects of horror and fantasy in this deliciously dark volume probing the depths of the unexplained and the nature of evil. The collection immediately evokes an edgy rather than an overly frightening tone with Stina Leicht’s moody “Forgiveness Is Warm Like A Tear on the Cheek.” The tale features a man wrestling with ghosts from his past in a reputedly haunted, three-story Victorian house where spirits reside in an adjacent cemetery. In order to bury the unresolved demons in his past, he must confront some present-day scares (and a few apparitions) first. Fans of deep blue ocean waters will appreciate the murky mystery emerging from the depths of the Mediterranean in fantasy writer E. Catherine Tobler’s superbly disturbing “Blue Hole, Red Sea.” A female archaeology diver converses with a witch and the ghost of a missing kid on the beach outside her home. Still others are masterful in their slow-burn narrative setups that then spring horrific denouements on unsuspecting readers. This is true of the haunted, Maine-based B&B featured in Haralambi Markov’s cinematic gore-fest “The Midnight Feast,” where a final, breathless countdown spells sheer terror. In this volume, McDermott, a co-editor of the collection of futuristic crime short fiction The Way of the Laser (2020), combines novelettes with shorter vignettes to an impressive extent. His anthology will appeal to readers of both modern horror fiction and the classic genre yarns derived from the black-and-white and early color film eras. A character in A.C. Wise’s ghost-story homage to classic horror, titled “A Thousand Faces Minus One,” says a timely, eerily relevant mouthful when she quips: “People love hidden histories and conspiracy theories.” These same readers and many more will savor this collection of the sinister, the kooky, and the creepy.

Plenty of standouts are on display in this gruesome grab bag of literary terror.

UNBLINDED
One Man’s Courageous Journey Through Darkness to Sight
Medford-Rosow, Traci & Coughlin, Kevin
Morgan James Publishing (201 pp.)
$27.95 | $16.95 paper | $12.99 e-book
Apr. 10, 2018
978-1-68350-784-0
978-1-68350-782-6 paper

This biography chronicles a man’s sudden vision loss, his self-reinvention, and his seemingly miraculous partial recovery of sight. In New York City in February 1997, Coughlin’s sight began deteriorating. Five days later, he was completely blind—stricken in his 30s by a rare, irreversible genetic disorder of the optic nerve that normally affects teens and young adults. Already alcohol-dependent, he was soon unemployed and dependent on disability checks. He confronted countless challenges in navigating city life, including physical barriers, inconsiderate strangers, and bureaucratic delays. In his favor, however, were his persistence and his preternatural ability to enlist help from others. For example, he persuaded a clerk to sell him a cane without the required mobility certification, and an ally at Gay Men’s Health Crisis helped him join a support group of HIV-positive blind people even though he was upfront about being HIV-negative. He continued to pursue his love of visual arts.
Moncrief captures a young boy’s naïveté in a satisfyingly amusing manner.

THE MAGICAL APPEARANCE OF EARTHWORMS

and photography by engaging a curator to narrate museum visits and a sighted Alcoholics Anonymous colleague to help take pictures. Coughlin also achieved sobriety and took up meditation, prayer, and ayurvedic practices. His physical and spiritual health improved, which helped him deal with the loss of another job and a beloved guide dog. Fifteen years after becoming blind, his sight began to return, but he already saw life differently. He began a journal (reprinted as an appendix), in which he cites “patience, prayer and turmeric” as “the corner stones of my journey out of the darkness.” Each chapter closes with a selected journal entry, foreshadowing and eventually merging with the narrative. Medford-Rosow and debut author Coughlin skillfully condense two decades into 33 easy-to-read vignettes about Coughlin’s challenges, setbacks, and breakthroughs. This results in a multilayered account that works on several levels, offering granular details of the blindness experience, detailing the difference between physical sight and personal vision, and highlighting the redemptive power of healing. The authors convey Coughlin’s spirituality and faith without being preachy, and they balance poignant moments with workaday complaints and unvarnished assessments of Coughlin’s behavior and relationships. The patient delivery allows this truly exceptional story to speak for itself.

An emotional account of a remarkable personal odyssey.

SILENCE OF SHAME
A ChildCaring for Her Bedridden Mother
Menara, Wendy J.
Turtle Mountain Stories (212 pp.)
$26.95 | Aug. 18, 2020
978-1-7353969-2-7

In this debut memoir, a woman recounts growing up with a mother confined to her bed because of multiple sclerosis.

Raised in Northern Michigan in the 1960s and ’70s, Menara was one of 10 siblings living in a two-bedroom, tin-roofed hut. The author was born in 1963 to parents who were recently divorced. In the mid-’60s, her mother, Shirley, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, which led to her being bedridden and cared for by her children. The memoir recalls how, as a child, Menara coped with emptying bedpans, assisting with sanitary towels, and giving enemas. The book also portrays a challenging relationship with a mother who showed moments of tenderness but also ordered her kids to dish out punishments on her behalf, which included administering severe beatings with a pancake turner and starving one brother. One particularly nightmarish moment details Shirley’s demand that newly born puppies be flushed down the toilet. Despite such traumas, visits from social services instilled a genuine fear in the author of being taken away. Menara is a keenly observant writer, particularly with regard to recognizing the rare, simple pleasures of her childhood: “I shoved my face in the fresh sweetness of the purple buds then continued on my walk as I gazed at the sun filtering through the towering trees.” Similarly, she never shies away from describing the horrors of her mother’s terminal illness: “Her backside was saddled with bedsores; the stench was unbearable. In one section the flesh was stripped to the bone.” This can make for an upsetting read, but the author’s inner strength and positivity prove sufficient to lighten the ordeal: “I savored those affectionate moments; like a banana turning bad, there were bits I cut off, salvaged, and treasured.” This is an eloquently recounted and heartbreaking story—readers will admire Menara’s honesty, although her willingness to describe the most intimate details of her caregiving duties may prove too frank for some tastes. Illustrated with family photographs throughout, the memoir closes with an unexpected revelation and offers a message of hope and healing that will be of value to others who have faced similar circumstances.

Incisive, courageous writing in a vivid family account that proves both sensitive and challenging.

THE MAGICAL APPEARANCE OF EARTHWORMS
Moncrief, N.A.
AuthorHouseUK (234 pp.)
$28.82 | $17.23 paper | $4.99 e-book
Jan. 13, 2020
978-1-72839-716-0

Moncrief’s debut memoir recalls the joys and sorrows of growing up in an Australian country town.

“It was the late 1960s,” remarks the author, “but we were still living in what was effectively 1900s rural Australia.” Along with his older brother, Darren, Moncrief was raised in Tilburn, 30 miles outside of Melbourne. The memoir focuses predominately on vivid memories from the author’s childhood in a quiet town where “everyone minded their own business and kept mostly to themselves.” Moncrief recalls journeys to a racetrack with his father, who trained horses, befriending a lizard that lived under the back step of the family home, and nursing an injured sparrow back to health. These sensitive recollections are interspersed with tales of cruelty and abuse. As a young boy, the author admits, he received so many bloody noses from his brother that one of his nostrils became “permanently blocked.” The memoir also charts the author’s coping with his parents’ divorce and grappling with adolescence. Each chapter is built around a particular person or event that left an impression on the author’s young mind. One, for example, discusses the author’s first sight of a pregnant woman and his father’s remarking, “pregnant women are beautiful.” This heavily anecdotal approach has the potential to grow tiring, but Moncrief avoids that by capturing a young boy’s naiveté in a satisfyingly amusing manner: “I couldn’t imagine what was wrong with her—that big, swollen stomach bursting forth from her body!” The author has the power to tug at the reader’s emotions—after his lizard was killed by a bully, he writes sorrowfully: “[I] pushed his little body
FOREVER FRIENDS
A Yoga Storytelling Adventure
Moyer, Melanie & Hudson, Kathe
Illus. by Pitcher, Maileys
Moving Tale (31 pp.)
$11.95 paper | Jan. 25, 2020
978-1-73409-840-2

Two animals form an unbreakable friendship in this cheerful, yoga-inclusive picture-book sequel. A gray and purple royal elephant has everything he could wish for—except a friend. Then a stray dog enters the palace grounds and asks to share the elephant’s food, and the two form a bond. Later, a merchant visiting the palace takes the canine away, which leaves the elephant bereft. It’s only after the palace adviser explains the elephant’s heartbreak to the king that the two animals are reunited once again. Moyer and Hudson, the authors of the previous Yoga Storytelling Adventure The Impossible Dream (2017), offer a simply told story in accessible English with a few Hindi words, defined in an introductory glossary. All of the human characters refreshingly try to do their best; they realize their error in separating the animals and react with kindness. Pitcher’s playful illustrations beautifully show the elephant’s emotions; when she and the dog meet again, the elephant’s coloring changes to a joyful purple-pink. At the end of the book, Moyer and Hudson, both yoga teachers, clearly encourage young readers to do yoga poses named after the story’s characters, including the elephant, the king, and the dog.

A pleasant tale of friendship with a happy ending—and extra yoga inspiration.

CATWALK
Natchez, Meryl
Longship Press (99 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Jun. 23, 2020
978-0-578-64422-6

A collection of verse explores the strange contours of modern existence. This impressive volume presents 79 poems in a wide variety of metrical and spatial forms. Natchez begins with a sense of urgency in “Looseplex: Rescue Mission,” in which a sudden trip to New York City signals trouble ahead. The poem features effective assonance and arresting imagery (“Grief flings its implacable lasso / Off the edge of the world where you will be lost”) before abruptly ending midthought. Later, the author juxtaposes two poems, both named “Full Circle, A Diptych,” that turn out to be hinged, mirror images of each other. The seemingly simple act of flipping them, with lines structured in reverse order, thus creates different perceptions. In “Dawn,” she employs line breaks to slippery effect, investing an everyday occurrence with additional meanings: “The newspaper waits / at the curb / the morning / fears still unwrapped.” Is “morning fears” adjective/noun or noun/verb? And what remains unwrapped: the newspaper, the morning, or both? One presence occupying a large space throughout the entire book belongs to Natchez’s husband of over 40 years. “Two-step, Starting with a Grapefruit” represents the give-and-take nature of their relationship while “Why size has almost nothing to do with it” extols the seductive virtues of voluntarily washing the dishes after a party. Another salient feature of this collection centers on what the author calls “prose poems.” The traditionally punctuated “Why I have a soft spot for bad TV” reads like a microstory and offers a glimpse of her childhood, particularly her relationship with her father, whereas the completely unpunctuated “Being here now” suggests the rush of thoughts while one suffers in traffic. Odes to flatulence and endless chores appear alongside meditations on life and death, harmony and dissonance. “Corporate Ode” gently chides readers for their volatile relationships with consumerism and technology. Although these poems are relatively short, with none extending past two pages, readers will most likely need to pause multiple times and process the flood of associations that Natchez provokes with her masterful control of content and form.

Outstanding poetic musings that strike at the very core of human connections and contradictions.

SORCEROUS RIVALRY
Nicol, Kayleigh
Blue Feather Publishing (292 pp.)
Apr. 7, 2018
978-1-73213-171-2

In this fantasy series starter, a mage makes unlikely friends and foes while discovering his lineage. Reshi was the youngest of seven illegitimate children sired by the king with his sorceress mistress, Laurana. After the Great Mage Hunt, Laurana was imprisoned and her children scattered. Reshi, who’s now around 20, grew up in an orphanage but now lives in a nameless town where he makes use of his shape-changing abilities. There is, however, a bounty on Reshi’s head as well as on the heads of his magical siblings, whom he’s never met. In the Broken Wing tavern, he watches Miss Chesawick provide a room for a strapping, young ex-soldier named Kestrel. In cat form, Reshi sneaks into Kestrel’s room as he sleeps and siphons some life force from him, which fuels his own magic. The next day, the traveler is none the worse for wear, so Reshi is intrigued.
A bet with Miss Chesawick—who's secretly a fairy—over whether he can make Kestral laugh results in the mage showing the warrior around town. Then vicious pigoblins attack, and Reshi fears for Miss Chesawick's life, as pigoblins pose a major threat to fairies like her. During the battle, in which Reshi performs capably, Kestral realizes that his new acquaintance is a son of Laurana—and Kestral, as it happens, is a bounty hunter. Soon afterward, Reshi answers the telepathic call of his sister Cera. From her, he learns more about Laurana's other children, including the war-hardened Kila and her monastic twin, Laki. Reshi and Cera decide to stick together to fight against bounty hunters. Their lives are further complicated by the fact that any sibling's death releases their magic to the rest of Laurana's surviving brood.

Nicol's fantasy novel is set in a streamlined medieval realm that requires no map to enjoy, and it runs on a fiendish series of cascading betrayals. She employs a strict show-don't-tell policy which keeps the storytelling crissp throughout the novel. In the playful opening chapter, for example, Reshi, the narrator, climbs onto Kestrel's bed and licks his mouth—and readers don't immediately know that he's a cat as he does so. From there, readers learn the major characters' backstories in tantalizing slivers. Kestrel has the potential to be Reshi's romantic companion or his killer, and to that end, Nicol teases readers mercilessly, as when one of the warrior's former colleagues regards Reshi and says, "You really do like the pretty boys, don't you, Captain?" The character development throughout is excellent, and it shines all the brighter because Nicol eschews wordy descriptions of traveling, eating, and humdrum aspects of medieval life. The lengthy but discrete chapters create a satisfying, immersive narrative flow. The introduction of each sibling is thrilling, and Nicol shows herself to be unafraid to kill off characters before readers know them too well. Indeed, she has creativity to spare; an appendix includes additional "Mage-Born Bounty Information." The magical and romantic cliffhangers at the end of the tale make the next volume unmissable.

A free-wheeling, clever, and joyful debut that should be on every fantasy reader's shelf.

Ostman leaves the claustrophobic tension at Second Chance with subtle humor and psychological insights.

THE SECOND CHANCE HOME FOR GIRLS
Ostman, Heather
Open Hand Press (265 pp.)
$16.99 paper
978-1-73403-212-3

A troublemaking teenager roils a rehab center in this novel of redemption. It's 1986, and the Second Chance Home for Girls in Texas imposes a 12-step doctrine and Christian exhortation on a dozen teens with histories of substance abuse and other failures to conform. The proprietor, Miss Sallyanne, presides over a regimen of chores, self-affirmation chants—"God loves me, and so do I!"—and group therapy sessions in which she pressures girls to reveal their sinful experiences with drugs and (usually abusive) sex. Those who don't get with her program are sentenced to kneel in gravel or sleep chained in a doghouse. Into the snake pit comes Lorilee, around 17 years old, who is preternaturally self-possessed despite the needle tracks on her arms and her claim to have borne a son by her own brother. She breaks rules with impunity, knows secrets that she shouldn't, flummoxes everyone with her blunt questions and unfailing gaze, and impudently corrects the Reverend, Sallyanne's father, when his fire-and-brimstone sermon misstates the Bible. The braided narrative unwinds in the point-of-view voices of several residents of Second Chance. A chorus of girls condemns Lorilee as a stuck-up bitch; the seen-it-all cook, Starlene, thinks the teen is the devil; Summer, a quiet girl who writes everything in her diary, is both unnerved and inspired by Lorilee's promise of forgiveness and freedom from her past, a vow that leads to violence. With its satire of a therapeutic culture that's designed to subdue the victims of an inescapable patriarchy, Ostman's yarn feels a bit like a distaff version of Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, with a touch of Southern gothic. Ostman leaves the claustrophobic tension and air of eerie expectation at Second Chance with subtle humor and psychological insights—the chorus's giddy encounter with an elusive pack of boys is a gem—all conveyed in pungent writing that's good to chew on. This result is an atmospheric yet entertaining read with an enigmatic, charismatic hero that will keep readers riveted.

This beguiling, slyly subversive tale puts a spiritual mystery at the heart of gritty truths.

THE SIKH HERITAGE
Beyond Borders
Pannu, Dalvir S.
Photos by the author
Pannu Dental Group (416 pp.)
$95.00 | Jan. 1, 2019
978-1-73329-370-9

An illustrated history of important sites in Sikh history in Pakistan.

In this oversized, sumptuously illustrated picture book, Pannu takes readers on a comprehensively detailed guide to the shrines and holy places of great figures from the Sikh faith. The book looks at 84 such sites, providing a great deal of information alongside stunning color photos by the author. Pannu searches through the Janamsakhis, the Sikh scriptures, and seeks to “incorporate logic and rationality in their interpretation,” and then supplies readers with images of many of the places mentioned in these and other Sikh writings. The book covers a broad expanse of history, from the days of Sikhism's founder, Guru Nanak, in the late 15th and early 16th centuries to the India-Pakistan Partition of 1947 to the present day, when relations between India and Pakistan remain raw and turbulent. In his introduction, Pannu expresses the hope that
his crossing of borders in search of a shared cultural heritage might be a harbinger of the future. “I remain optimistic that a day will eventually dawn when everlasting peace will prevail, and works like this book will prove to be both educative and enlightening.” Over the course of 400-plus pages, the work covers Pakistani sites in Sheikupura, Kasur, Nanakana Sahib, Narowal, and Lahore. In each chapter, the author pairs historical mentions of the place and shrine at hand with photos of its current appearance, and the juxtapositions between past and present often result in a compelling dissonance.

With a minimum of fuss, Pannu intriguingly deploys quotations from scriptures and historical accounts alongside his photos, which he’s taken over the course of years. The prose tells readers of places sacred to Sikh tradition, featuring locations as sacred to Sikhs as Bethlehem or Gethsemane are to Christians. Yet the excellent photographs very often show dilapidated, sometimes defaced ruins that no passerby would ever guess held greater significance. One example of a lone gurdwara—a type of block-tower that’s ubiquitous throughout the village—is all that remains of the Gurdwara Lahura Sahib in the village of Ghatwini, where Guru Nanak once rested beneath a Lahura tree. Guru Hargobind’s visit to the village of Padhana, as recorded in the Mabima Prakab Vartak, was an occasion for the Sikh holy man to dispense calm wisdom—but Pannu’s photos of the interior views of Gurdwara Pathshavi VI display a squarish and decayed building, where living saints once graced its halls, and—strangely—of buttered popcorn. The automaton is in love with the “One-Eyed Girl,” a ticket taker, his passion expressed in dignified and poetic terms. She’s like the moon, with “One unblinking eye, perfectly round, unblinking / The palest gold, with a hint of green.” As for Barnum, it’s rumored that he is responsible for the girl’s lost eye, having “done it himself, / gouged it out ’cause she wouldn’t be his whore.” Despair and rage inhabit these inventive and eerie poems. Looming over the moving collection is the fire that destroys the museum and horrifyingly kills its animals. Nevertheless, the speakers here—the damaged and abused; the dead, animal, or artificial—possess the humanity and art, something Pennock’s language skillfully emphasizes through literary qualities like assonance, alliteration, and internal rhyme. On the automaton’s lovesickness, the Learnéed Seal predicts that “if this distemper / persists, first his imagination will dry.” To this, Barnum responds “with a solemn scratch / of” the Seal’s “head and a votive of cod.”

Uncanny, heart-wrenching, and beautifully crafted poems by an original voice.

**THE MIRACLE MACHINE**

*Pennock, Matthew*

Gival Press (94 pp.)

$15.00 paper | $7.99 e-book

Sep. 1, 2020

978-1-940724-29-4

A 19th-century automaton and other museum exhibits narrate this collection of poems.

As Pennock explains in a note to readers, the “primary speaker of these poems is L’Automate D’Maillardet,” a mechanism built around 1800 by a Swiss clockmaker; it could produce drawings and poems. At some point, impresario PT. Barnum acquired the automaton for his museum. Other Barnum exhibits also speak here, such as “Ned the Learnéed Seal” and the “Feejee Mermaid,” the first, a living trained animal and the second, a mummified monkey and fish sewn together. Often throughout the collection, winner of the Gival Press Poetry Award, beauty and the idea of beauty are corrupted by Barnum’s huckster grotesquerie. The mermaid is no lovely creature but a monstrous joining of the dead, animal, or artificial—possessing the moving collection is the fire that destroys the museum and horrifyingly kills its animals. Nevertheless, the speakers here—the damaged and abused; the dead, animal, or artificial—possess the humanity and art, something Pennock’s language skillfully emphasizes through literary qualities like assonance, alliteration, and internal rhyme. On the automaton’s lovesickness, the Learnéed Seal predicts that “if this distemper / persists, first his imagination will dry.” To this, Barnum responds “with a solemn scratch / of” the Seal’s “head and a votive of cod.”

Uncanny, heart-wrenching, and beautifully crafted poems by an original voice.

**HOUSE OF FOSSILS**

*Phipps, Marilène*

Calumet Editions (248 pp.)

$16.99 paper | Dec. 12, 2019

978-1-950743-16-2

A Haitian American immigrant ponders her life and traumatized homeland in this novel about exile and return.

Phipps tells the story of Io, a mixed-race woman born to an affluent Creole family in Port-au-Prince, as she consolidates her life as an artist and writer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while still feeling the tug of her past in Haiti. The loose-limbed, episodic narrative unfolds over a decade, starting in 2004 with a dreamy prelude in which Io vacations on the Nova Scotia coast, stays in a strange house full of fossils, and meets a mysterious little girl who is somehow connected to the celebrated ghost ship *Mary Celeste*. The tale moves on to Io’s legal wrangles with her ex-husband and her estrangement from their adopted Haitian daughter, Eveline; her new marriage to a kind Englishman named Thomas; and a tense Alaskan cruise with her sister, Europa, an eccentric lost soul still living in Haiti who bears emotional scars from brutal relationships with men. A family reunion in Florida reconnects Io with her cagey, charismatic Aunt Rose and other relatives and lets her revisit her socially prominent clan’s history before it was driven out after Rose’s husband was assassinated by Haitian dictator François Duvalier. The book closes with Io’s return to Port-au-Prince, where she takes in the city’s squalor, tensions, and faded glory.
Poniarski offers clever insights into sexism, the high expectations of her affluent Jewish community, and changing attitudes toward mental health.  

JOURNEY OF THE SELF

Memoir of an Artist

Poniarski, Ruth

Warren Publishing (222 pp.)

$15.95 paper | Apr. 28, 2020
978-1-73470-755-7

A young woman struggles to find her place in the world while also grappling with her mental health in this debut memoir.

After Poniarski inadvertently consumed PCP at a college party, she found herself consumed by the notion of an incoherent conspiracy involving socialists and alien craft—which she continued to have after the drug wore off. “My brain fed me lies,” she says of the experience, which caused her parents to put her under the care of a psychiatrist for the first time. Her memoir continues from this moment, recounting her tumultuous 20s during the late 1970s and early ’80s in New York City. Poniarski struggled to finish an architecture degree as she bounced from one program to another, unable to successfully finish courses and fearful that her peers might learn of her “psychotic side.” In a similar manner, she shuttled between her parents’ home on Long Island and apartments in Manhattan, her independence constantly jeopardized by paranoid thoughts and mistrust of roommates and friends. Most poignant, however, is Poniarski’s account of a search for a suitable romantic partner. As she struggles with shame about her sexual feelings, she finds herself drawn to various lovers who each reject her, which only fuels her desire to break out of a lonely existence. Poniarski tells a story with heavy themes, but her prose remains graceful throughout. As she recounts outrageous thoughts and actions, she does so in a manner that gets across not only her distorted view of reality, but also the very real emotions she felt; at one point, for instance, she tells of slapping a man on an airplane after falsely thinking that he was making fun of her. In her fractured accounts of exchanges with colleagues, friends, and lovers, Poniarski also offers clever insights into sexism, the high expectations of her affluent Jewish community, and changing attitudes toward mental health.

An engaging and often beautiful portrait of living with mental illness.

SPECIAL ISSUE: BEST BOOKS OF 2020
Meanwhile revealing a long-standing mystery—the true identity of the Tin Snip killer, who murdered Christine’s mother.

As in the previous books, Porter employs amazingly inventive, multivalent wordplay that taps into buried meanings. Sometimes these “private cryptonyms” can be puzzling, though once explained, they seem just right. For example, to call something mansion, Aubrey explains to Drayton, means (by extension from big house) “anything that is a big deal or gets a lot of attention.” A poetic economy characterizes this wonderfully original argot, as when an asylum inmate says everyone “told stethoscope lies, and he could hear their hearts beating children.” Beating does double duty here and makes the stethoscope image perfectly understandable: hidden untruths that need special equipment to be detected. This third volume is more accessible than the first two and often humorous, suggesting that Aubrey has settled more comfortably into his life. Porter’s books are always captivating, but this tale gains maturity and depth from the characters’ heartfelt concern for animals and ecology, which they put into rousing action. The work’s presentation of the slipsers’ points of view is so compelling that readers may agree when Trip insists that “this is not imagination. It is a reality of a rare and mostly unknown kind.” The root meaning of schizophrenic is split—yet Aubrey seems not divided but multiplied.

An unforgettable tale with rich and moving connections, poetic storytelling, and an inimitable style.

**THE LIQUID BORDER**

*The Rio Grande From El Paso to the Gulf of Mexico*

Price, Jonathan Reeve

Illustrated by the author

The Communication Circle (40 pp.)

$7.95 paper | $2.99 e-book | May 15, 2019

978-0-9799954-3-7

Price’s new poetry collection centers on the nature of borders.

How do you cut a river in half? You can’t, of course—which makes the paradox of the Rio Grande even more painful in Price’s thoughtful, poignant new book of poetry and digital art. The poet refers to that river, which makes up much of the physical border between the United States and its southern neighbor: “Throughout most of the river’s run to the Gulf of Mexico,” Price writes, “the border is in the middle of the flow, invisible, but real.” That border has become a source of significant international conflict in the modern era, as immigrants hoping to cross it have run up against the will—and in a few places, the wall—of a presidential administration intent on keeping them out. Price’s volume seeks to map that liminal space in imagery and verse. Roughly half the book is given over to digital images; in them, the artist stitches together cartographs, photographs, and satellite images, many of them altered, to evoke the strange space between the two countries. Price calls these pieces “imaginary” maps and argues that they document “something close to reality, but not all there.” Accompanying the visuals are roughly a dozen thoughtful, poignant poems, many of which capture the torturous experience of those seeking entry into America. For instance, one of the later entries opens, “Wet and cold we crossed the island to the deeper river, / stepped in, and, the guides told us, passed the invisible border, / but all we saw was clouds and those cliffs, so tall, / steep, and slippery, rocks sliding down, / shoving us back down, clambering back up. / How hard our first steps into America were, / how uncertain.” Price is as adept with his poetry as he is with his pictures, and the combination is a moving testimony to the struggle of those who yearn for a better life elsewhere.

*A mournful, beautiful, and original synthesis of word and image.*

**BLOOD FIRE VAPOR SMOKE**

*Ray, Shann*

Unsolicited Press (210 pp.)

$26.99 | $17.00 paper | $4.99 e-book

Jun. 4, 2019

978-1-947021-94-5

978-1-950730-18-6 paper

In this collection of short stories, characters seek vengeance or strive for forgiveness.

Ray’s tale “Black Kettle” follows the titular, real-life Cheyenne chief, who fights to protect his people. Despite the tribe’s irrefutable surrender, Col. John Chivington leads a massacre at Black Kettle’s village. But the story, notwithstanding the chief’s never-ending pursuit of peace, centers on revenge against Chivington. Characters in several of the tales yearn for retribution. In “Republic of Fear,” a grandfather sends his grandson to avenge the boy’s dead father; in “The World Clean and Bright,” a young tribe member tracks down those responsible for the deaths of a loved one’s parents. At the same time, individuals are also forgiving. The unnamed woman of the heart-rending “The Current Kings,” for example, seems willing to forgive the men who seize her with unmistakably malicious intent. And “The Debt Men” features two characters, Zach Harrelson and Phil Silven, with turmoil in their marriages. Absolution may be in the cards for both even if only one man is truly deserving. Most of the tales unfold in Montana, including the unorthodox and curious “Love is Blindness.” In it, an affair threatens to separate married couple Michael White and Kristina Rosamonde, but a sudden injury will either split them apart or reunite them. A few historical figures, in addition to Black Kettle, make appearances. The protagonists of the collection’s sole poem, “City on the Threshold of Stars,” are Jan Kubiš and Jozef Gabčík, Czech soldiers who played a part in the assassination of the Butcher of Prague, Reinhard Heydrich.

The author, a clinical psychologist who “spent part of his childhood on the Northern Cheyenne reservation,” tackles race in intelligent and sunry ways. It’s blunt in “Black Kettle,” as, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Cheyenne wish to kill Chivington while the colonel brazenly displays Native American scalps next to the United States flag. But “The Diplomat” is from the
The 1950s setting adds a slightly dreamlike quality to the tale.

ALL SALES FINAL

Reida, Sarah S.
Warrior Press (280 pp.)
$10.99 paper | Apr. 7, 2020
978-1-7348170-1-0

A preteen girl learns about what’s valuable in life—and what’s not—after discovering a magical secondhand shop in her small town in the Midwest.

In the second middle-grade novel by the author of Monsterville (2016), 11-year-old Anna lives in Longford, an ordinary town in Illinois, in 1956. Anna thinks that she’s ordinary, too—not sporty like her brother or academic like her sister. But Anna is happy. She has a wild imagination, a great best friend, Carrie, and is known and liked by the adults in town. When she stumbles upon an otherworldly bric-a-brac shop on Main Street, it seems that life can only get better. The shop’s proprietors—lovely old Ruth and her grumpy husband, Vernon—call themselves “keepers.” They look after the magic of the world, and use a magic mirror to discern what their customers most desire. Best of all, Anna has the same gift. She, too, can see what the mirror shows. The shop makes Anna feel special, and she starts working there after school and brings in lots of new customers. But for all the good she does—for all that she makes lives better—some of the changes affect Longford in a less positive way. The magic that solves people’s problems takes something in return. Anna’s obsession with the shop places a strain on her friendship with Carrie. And the shop has a no-returns policy. While Anna’s dreams are coming true, it becomes clear that she needs to careful what she wishes for—a reality that makes this a delightful, safe adventure with insidious dark edges. The 1950s setting adds both a point of difference and a slightly dreamlike quality to the tale. Reida’s minor characters are well drawn and all have roles to play. The dialogue is natural. The prose is simple but polished, drawing readers faster and faster into the unfolding scenario. Given how neatly the plot is structured and how naturally it is traversed, the novel ends rather abruptly—but Anna has a vitality and effervescence that will have staying power for young readers.

An enchanting fantasy for middle-grade readers who like a touch of magic in their fiction.

A RACE AROUND THE WORLD
The True Story of Nellie Bly & Elizabeth Bisland
Rose, Caroline Starr
Illus. by Bye, Alexandra
Whitman (32 pp.)
978-0-8075-0010-1

Rose explores the true story of a race between two accomplished 19th-century women in this children’s book featuring illustrations by Bye.

In 1889, famed reporter Nellie Bly believed that she could circle the globe faster than anyone had before—in less than the 80 days of Jules Verne’s fictional hero. She pitched the story to her boss at the New York World, who, after initial protests, approved her journey. As Bly left New York City, heading east, Cosmopolitan writer Elizabeth Bisland was sent off to the west, with little notice, to race Bly back to the city. In this entry in the She Makes History series, Rose reports the travels of both women in tandem, showing the eastward movement of Bly and the westward travel of Bisland as the reporters encountered successes and setbacks. Rose’s text and Bye’s cartoon-style color images, which accurately and vividly depict the era in detail, allow young readers to get a deeper sense of what living in the late 1800s was like and how travel, by various methods, was very different than it is in the modern day. The extensive text never overwhelms the illustrations, though, and Bye depicts the players in action-oriented poses that propel the story forward. One particularly elegant two-page spread shows the two travelers’ ships literally passing in the night. Rose captures both the wonder of the world as the women experience it as well as the dangers and miseries of their journeys. Her straightforward vocabulary and accessible narration will let young readers immerse themselves in the history. Endnotes offer greater context for the role of women reporters of the era, highlighting the main characters’ tremendous achievements.

An absorbing account of a real-life adventure in a series that showcases historical accomplishments of women.
Violet's fiance, Alfred Eton. Violet's well-bred family suspects Alfred, only to be present for her target's unexpected murder. The stakes aren't only Violet's freedom, but Olive's reputation. The primary suspect is Violet, of course, and Olive must work to clear her cousin's name. But who could be the real culprit?

Could this investigation be the beginning of a lucrative career for a high-society lady detective! Rosett's polished prose is pitch-perfect for its 1920s setting, summoning all the formality and intrigue of London society at the time: "Thea moved closer to me and fingered the tulle of the overdress. 'Lovely. Where did you find this?' 'At a little shop in London.' 'You must give me its name.' She gestured with her glass at Sebastian. 'He's always telling me to cut the flounces and flourishes, but I do love them so.' "The author lovingly evokes the world à la Agatha Christie while focusing the action firmly on the women. Olive gets some help from an old crush and a police inspector, but these men primarily play foil to the protagonist and the many female suspects who surround her. With several sequels already published, satisfied readers can happily dive right into the next tale.

A thoughtfully constructed and elegantly executed murder mystery in the classic style.

**THE BANDIT KINGS OF NOWHERE PARK**

Samuelle, Jonas
Self (275 pp.)
$10.99 paper | $2.99 e-book
Aug. 18, 2020
978-8-6537-8668-6

Two restless teens discover a magical but dangerous paradise for delinquents in this YA fantasy novel. Holliday Ringo O’Raff and the story’s initially unnamed narrator (later nicknamed “Bogart”) are both 14 and have been best friends for several years, having grown up in harsh circumstances in North Phoenix: “our insides were knives. We hungered for something intangible.” That something appears late one summer night when the friends happen upon a portal to another reality: Nowhere Park, a sort of Never-Never Land for punk kids with booze, drugs, skateboarding, and treehouses. After a bloody initiation, the boys discover that they have a gift for theft, and they become part of a gang, or “suit” in Nowhere Park, called the Bandits; other suits include the Brains, Bashers, and Creeps. Supernatural terrors are another facet of this new world, and Holliday and Bogart must face them when they’re targeted by the park’s new king—an ordeal that changes them forever. Samuelle, whose first novel was the magical-realist *The Jovian Spark* (2015), offers a compelling coming-of-age story like no other. The narrator’s voice is literary, even luminous, but also authentically hardscrabble; Holliday, for example, is described as having “a solid layer of tightly-wrapped sinew over bones made of used car parts and bad intentions.” The story embraces the boys’ outsider perspective as an honest stance in a corrupt world while unblinkingly revealing the park’s hardships, treacheries, and terrors—a world where the boys find purpose but also loss. Early on, Bogart sees his future as “full of scared nights and wild parties and near-deaths and blood oaths and broken windows and bad promises and maybe an early grave.” By the novel’s end, he glimpses other possibilities for himself, which would have been impossible if he hadn’t been shaped by his experience in Nowhere Park.

A gripping and fiercely moving tale with a rough magic all its own.

**WHAT IS A GREEN ROOF?**

Sando, Vicki
Illus. by Lehar, Zee
Nausicaa Valley Press (27 pp.)
$9.95 paper | $5.95 e-book
Feb. 19, 2020
978-1-73416-720-7

Urban environmentalist and educator Sando makes green architecture accessible to an elementary school audience in this picture-book debut. The rooftops of New York City come in several colors: blue, black, silver, stone, and green. Sando briefly describes the reasons behind the other structures’ hues before delving into the subject of green roofs and how planting atop buildings can have a tremendous environmental and emotional impact. In well-labeled diagrams and instructional illustrations, the author, along with illustrator Lehar, reveals the layered structure that makes planting atop a roof naturally beneficial. Sando also makes sure to mention the positive impact it can have on people, who “work and feel better when they look at nature.” Sando seamlessly introduces scientific terms (such as compression, tension, habitat), providing definitions inline or in a callout where necessary as well as in a glossary. Lehar’s bright cartoon illustrations depict real New York landmarks with green roofs to show the variety of appearances they can have as well as a variety of
New Yorkers. The text’s complexity is best suited for independent readers at the second- or third-grade level, but teachers will also find plenty of plain-language classroom material here.

An engagingly illustrated work that brings a compelling concept to life.

A young woman reconnects with her Italian heritage and attunes to her inner self in this coming-of-age novel by Sapienza. Lavinia Lavinia (who was given the same first and last name as part of an “old custom in Italy”) is sauntering through the streets of San Francisco from her home in the Mission District when this novel opens. Her Uncle Sal “scooped her away” from Naples before she was 5 years old and moved with her and her aunt Rose to the West Coast. Soon after Rose died, Sal hurriedly returned to Italy, leaving the 26-year-old Lavinia feeling abandoned. After dropping out of San Francisco State University, she set up as a laundress, “detailing” clothes for a range of offbeat clients from lawyers to sculptors. Lavinia has a habit of tipping with bubble gum, a gesture that catches the eye of an attractive barista. Her playful demeanor conceals that her lost past tugs heavily on her emotions. With the help of others, she starts to recover memories of her infancy and, in doing so, sets out on a journey of self-memories to be hauled up to their second- and third-story apartments. As Lavinia breezes through the streets of San Francisco, she evinces the freedom of youth. This effervescence is beautifully balanced by the wisdom of experience, as proffered by Mercedes Montoya, the mother of a close friend. She counsels Lavinia: “La querencia is a safe place in the bull ring, the place where the bull goes to stay alive, to stay away from the lance of the matador….it’s a place to regain his power.” Wistful yet uplifting, the book mourns the fading past while celebrating the intricate beauty of each passing moment.

An acutely observed, tenderly philosophical novel that tells a wonderfully bittersweet story.

**THE LAUNDRESS**

*Sapienza, Barbara*  
She Writes Press (304 pp.)  
$16.95 paper | $9.95 e-book  
May 19, 2020  
978-1-63152-679-4

**THE BIG THAW**

*Ancient Carbon, Modern Science, and a Race To Save the World*

*Scigliano, Eric with Holmes, Robert & Natali, Susan & Schade, John*  
Photos by Linder, Chris  
Braided River (176 pp.)  
$35.00 | Oct. 1, 2019  
978-1-68051-247-2

An intrepid band of scientists chases after carbon lurking beneath Arctic permafrost that threatens to destroy the world.

Teaming up with experts from the Woods Hole Research Center, science writer Scigliano and photographer Linder tell the bleak true story of Arctic regions whose permafrost has trapped deadly carbon. (“Permafrost soils are rich in carbon—the legacy of the grasslands, peatlands, and forests of past epochs, protected by freezing from microbial breakdown.”) Now, with Earth’s temperature rising, these greenhouse emissions threaten to unleash untold devastation on the planet: “As it thaws, the Arctic’s permafrost has the potential to unend the lives of people living in seaside condos in Miami, in exurban dream houses overlooking scenic wildlands in California...and in flimsy houses perched precariously on slippery hillsides in Haiti and on the floodplains of Bangladesh.” But far from being a despairing portrayal, this work celebrates some undergraduate researchers, directed by a group of experienced and knowledgeable scientists from Woods Hole, as they travel to Arctic regions to study this potential catastrophe with an enthusiasm and engagement that prove courageous and inspiring. Here, in the Arctic taiga (forests) and tundra, these researchers are depicted in their daily investigative pursuits in Scigliano’s text—written with scientists/debut authors Holmes, Natali, and Schade—and Linder’s color photographs. The young team members display such a passion and joy in their love of science and the exacting and repetitive work of gathering important information that they will capture readers’ hearts and minds through the many beautifully shot images and lucid prose that support this illuminating venture. Enhanced by sidebars that skillfully detail the lives and backgrounds of the young band and their mentors from Woods Hole, this volume is a tribute to the years of amassing compelling research into this problem that threatens to release more greenhouse emissions than humans will know what to do with. The book demonstrates the demanding activity of collecting data that is an antidote to the depression and helplessness many feel in the face of climate change. In its splendid design, well-written text, and revealing photos of the Arctic world and those who probe the impact of thawing permafrost on the climate, this book perfectly captures this critical issue and those who are meeting the challenge.

This wondrous and timely work—featuring stunning photos—explores a crucial environmental problem that endangers the planet.
Reigh handily preserves Sebastian's supple, languid syntax, shap-}

finding themselves in a passionate tryst. Adriana floats in and out of Adriana's unnamed town, and he's preoccupied with the intensities of first love. Gelu is a 20-year-old university student from Bucharest, pursuing her musical talent as a pianist with the help of affluent relatives, and finds herself tangled in the lives of Gelu, whose studies are in the capital, and Cello Viorin, an impetuous and romantic composer. (The sensory experience of music is a repeated focus, in an evident nod to Marcel Proust's work.) The Bucharest backdrop—the university, the concert hall, the tram, the streetscapes—effectively recalls Sebastian's other works, but this novel expands on the tension between province and capital, which acts as a stand-in for the conflict between traditional and modern values. Adriana and Gelu, in the midst of a century-defining sea change, discover their need for each other even as they witness a marriage that ends in divorce, due to a previous affair between the wife and a nun, and another matrimony ordered the old drapes to be refitted as clothing, even helping the tailors run out of cloth, all fear what will happen next until one brave girl convinces the king to leave the windows bare. The king sees the suffering of his people, and he tries to avoid being victimized by her peers. The rest of the country is not much friendlier than her middle school, particularly since the rise of Arthur McNally and his populist, anti-intellectual movement based on exclusionary Christian nationalism. After McNally wins the presidency and Russia and the nations of Asia destroy themselves in a nuclear war, America is forced to undergo “The Great Shut-In” until radiation levels return to normal. During the resulting social unrest, Kayla's professor father becomes involved in the Movement, a nonviolent protest organization at odds with McNally's government. Things come to a head when her father is pulled from their house by their neighbors and lynched in the street. Kayla's mother and uncles are arrested, forcing the teen to go into hiding. After she is betrayed by a friend's family, Kayla ends up in a school for girls who have lost their families during the government's purges. Here, Kayla must learn how to keep herself from becoming a victim—and to plan her revenge on those who destroyed her family. Smith's prose is lyrical and controlled, creating a dystopia that is realistic in its mundane brutality. Here, Kayla witnesses her father's hanging: “Slater lifts his arm, and the shirtless man yanks the rope. Another man rushes forward and grips the rope, then another. My father rises, an imitation of fight. His hands claw the noose, the spastic kick of his feet, the rope's wild sway.” The author masterfully depicts America's crisis through the perspective of one girl even as he shifts the point of view through the novel—first person, second person, third—to highlight major reorientations in Kayla's life. While there is no shortage of novels offering nightmarish visions of the near American future, this one manages to stand out both in its realism and its resistance to simple moralizations. It's all the more frightening for it.

An affecting futuristic tale that manages to feel both urgent and timeless.

In this novel, a young man and woman fall in and out of love as they come to terms with the banalities of adulthood. As the story opens, it lucidly depicts the bookish, 15-year-old Adriana's reappraisal of childhood “with the weary eyes of a survivor” and the intensities of first love. Gelu is a 20-year-old university student from Adriana's unnamed town, and he's preoccupied with his own romance—but in the course of rescuing a depressed peer from an attic refuge, he and Adriana form a friendship. The author reveals how their bond builds, slowly and subtly, until they find themselves in a passionate tryst. Adriana floats in and out of Bucharest, pursuing her musical talent as a pianist with the help of affluent relatives, and finds herself tangled in the lives of Gelu, whose studies are in the capital, and Cello Viorin, an impetuous and romantic composer. (The sensory experience of music is a repeated focus, in an evident nod to Marcel Proust's work.) The Bucharest backdrop—the university, the concert hall, the tram, the streetscapes—effectively recalls Sebastian's other works, but this novel expands on the tension between province and capital, which acts as a stand-in for the conflict between traditional and modern values. Adriana and Gelu, in the midst of a century-defining sea change, discover their need for each other even as they witness a marriage that ends in divorce, due to a previous affair between the wife and a nun, and another matrimony ordered the old drapes to be refitted as clothing, even helping the tailors run out of cloth, all fear what will happen next until one brave girl convinces the king to leave the windows bare. The king sees the suffering of his people, and he tries to avoid being victimized by her peers. The rest of the country is not much friendlier than her middle school, particularly since the rise of Arthur McNally and his populist, anti-intellectual movement based on exclusionary Christian nationalism. After McNally wins the presidency and Russia and the nations of Asia destroy themselves in a nuclear war, America is forced to undergo “The Great Shut-In” until radiation levels return to normal. During the resulting social unrest, Kayla's professor father becomes involved in the Movement, a nonviolent protest organization at odds with McNally's government. Things come to a head when her father is pulled from their house by their neighbors and lynched in the street. Kayla's mother and uncles are arrested, forcing the teen to go into hiding. After she is betrayed by a friend's family, Kayla ends up in a school for girls who have lost their families during the government's purges. Here, Kayla must learn how to keep herself from becoming a victim—and to plan her revenge on those who destroyed her family. Smith's prose is lyrical and controlled, creating a dystopia that is realistic in its mundane brutality. Here, Kayla witnesses her father's hanging: “Slater lifts his arm, and the shirtless man yanks the rope. Another man rushes forward and grips the rope, then another. My father rises, an imitation of fight. His hands claw the noose, the spastic kick of his feet, the rope's wild sway.” The author masterfully depicts America's crisis through the perspective of one girl even as he shifts the point of view through the novel—first person, second person, third—to highlight major reorientations in Kayla's life. While there is no shortage of novels offering nightmarish visions of the near American future, this one manages to stand out both in its realism and its resistance to simple moralizations. It's all the more frightening for it.

An affecting futuristic tale that manages to feel both urgent and timeless.

A gifted girl finds her life thrown into chaos during a period of societal upheaval in this dystopian literary novel. Math prodigy Kayla sticks out from the herd. The middle schooler takes high school calculus classes while generally trying to avoid being victimized by her peers. The rest of the country is not much friendlier than her middle school, particularly since the rise of Arthur McNally and his populist, anti-intellectual movement based on exclusionary Christian nationalism. After McNally wins the presidency and Russia and the nations of Asia destroy themselves in a nuclear war, America is forced to undergo “The Great Shut-In” until radiation levels return to normal. During the resulting social unrest, Kayla's professor father becomes involved in the Movement, a nonviolent protest organization at odds with McNally's government. Things come to a head when her father is pulled from their house by their neighbors and lynched in the street. Kayla's mother and uncles are arrested, forcing the teen to go into hiding. After she is betrayed by a friend's family, Kayla ends up in a school for girls who have lost their families during the government's purges. Here, Kayla must learn how to keep herself from becoming a victim—and to plan her revenge on those who destroyed her family. Smith's prose is lyrical and controlled, creating a dystopia that is realistic in its mundane brutality. Here, Kayla witnesses her father's hanging: “Slater lifts his arm, and the shirtless man yanks the rope. Another man rushes forward and grips the rope, then another. My father rises, an imitation of fight. His hands claw the noose, the spastic kick of his feet, the rope's wild sway.” The author masterfully depicts America's crisis through the perspective of one girl even as he shifts the point of view through the novel—first person, second person, third—to highlight major reorientations in Kayla's life. While there is no shortage of novels offering nightmarish visions of the near American future, this one manages to stand out both in its realism and its resistance to simple moralizations. It's all the more frightening for it.

In this debut original fairy tale, a clever girl teaches the king to look beyond his own avarice.

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An affecting futuristic tale that manages to feel both urgent and timeless.
The book is a brilliantly composed account of a very different sort of diaspora and return.

GOING BACK

both foolish and demanding. His change of heart is quick but in keeping with the fairy-tale tone. Tambascio’s rhyming stanzas scan beautifully, and the repeated phrases make this a fun read-aloud. Born’s brightly painted, geometric illustrations feature bird characters in all the roles, and the added elements belonging to the clever girl—her cardboard-box rocket ship, a book of great ideas, and a “dream big” poster on the wall—offer even deeper insight into her character.

Though the story is new, the moral and tone, accompanied by artful illustrations, make it feel like a classic.

PSI-WARS
Classified Cases of Psychic Phenomena
Ed. by Viola, Joshua
Illus. by Lovett, Aaron
Hex Publishers (308 pp.)
$2.99 e-book | May 12, 2020

Editor Viola’s latest anthology comprises 13 SF-flavored wartime tales.

Myriad characters in this collection sport psychic abilities, a common weapon in the seemingly endless wars. That’s the case with Keith Ferrell’s “Psake Eyes.” Psoldiers spanning the globe battle one another and search for potential “multis”—those who have a combination of psychic talents. While most stories take place in an unspecified future, some are set during historical eras. Angie Hodapp’s 1917-set “Cradle to Grave,” for example, follows British agent Edith, a Sensitive whose current assignment somehow involves the psychic brother she hasn’t seen in years. Likewise, the titular character in Dean Wyant’s “The Visions of Perry Godwin” is a WWII sailor who may soon “Under the Lotus”) and a failed sleep-deprivation experiment “Us Apart, We Stitch Ourselves Back Together.” In it, someone has involuntarily separated Violet from her conjoined sister, Daisy. Though psychically gifted Daisy is gone, Violet tries accessing her like a phantom limb while the story merely hints at a grander, possibly worldwide war in progress. Even stories without discernible psychic elements entail psychological turmoil, including trouble with a VR-type device (Darin Bradley’s “Under the Lotus”) and a failed sleep-deprivation experiment (Gabino Iglesias’ “Awake”). Lovett’s sensational, graphic-novel-style artwork accompanies and enhances each story.

Exceptional SF that enlivens, fascinates, and unnerves.

GOING BACK
16 Jewish Women Tell Their Life Stories, and Why They Returned to Germany—the Country That Once Wanted To Kill Them
von Treuenfeld, Andrea
Trans. by Siegal-Bergman, Cathryn
Clevo Books (317 pp.)
$14.95 | Jul. 9, 2018
978-0-9973052-0-3
978-0-9973052-2-7 paper

Sixteen Holocaust survivors describe returning to Germany after the war in von Treuenfeld’s work of oral history translated from the German by Siegal-Bergman.

The familiar narrative of the Holocaust is that it marked the end of Jews in Germany. Those who managed to survive settled in America or Britain or Palestine. And yet this view does not represent the whole story: When the war ended, some Jews returned to Germany. After all, it was their home. “How could they bear to come back to this country?” asks von Treuenfeld in her introduction. “To the country where relatives and friends were killed, and...futures were destroyed. The country that also wanted to kill the 16 women who I—in search of an answer—have asked to tell me their life stories.” This book profiles women like Bela Cukierman, whose family fled Germany east through Poland and—by way of the Trans-Siberian Railroad—all the way to Harbin, China, and then Shanghai. After the founding of Israel, nearly their entire community was shipped there, but the German-speaking family couldn’t adjust to the already crowded country and returned to Germany. Renée Brauner’s parents kept her alive by fleeing to Yugoslavia, Italy, and Switzerland, settling in France after the war. Ultimately, they returned to Germany when she was 7. Others spent time in the Americas, and many were at least temporarily in Israel. But all found themselves back in a Germany that was quite different than before—though one that was still far from welcoming. Von Treuenfeld is an invisible presence on the page, and the book is compiled as though each woman is narrating her own story uninterrupted. The personalities and underlying trauma shine through the anecdotes, as here when Brauner describes the prewar residence of her father: “His sister had lived on the prewar residence of her father: “His sister had lived on the Reclamstrasse. When the Wall fell the building was torn down.” The book is a brilliantly composed account of a very different sort of diaspora and return. Each of the 16 strands is haunting and heartbreaking in its own way. The result is something quite distinct from the usual Holocaust memoir: a book that scrambles the very notion of a homeland and the ties that bind us to one.

A vital, understated contribution to the body of Holocaust literature.
Toguri may have been guilty of naiveté and misplaced faith in the American judicial system, but she was primarily a victim of consistently being in the wrong place at the wrong time. In July 1941, as a 25-year-old aspiring medical student, she dutifully obeyed her parents and went to Japan to bring greetings and gifts from her prosperous family to her aunt’s poor one. Her stay there was a disaster, and for several months, Toguri tried to sabotage all propaganda broadcasts. She tried covertly to sabotage all propaganda efforts and was under constant pressure from her Japanese bosses. At the war’s end, she became a hapless victim of intense anti-Japanese sentiment, spearheaded by the powerful tabloid boss, WALTER WINCHEL, and, through perjured testimony and FBI misconduct, was tried and convicted of treason in a biased court proceeding. Toguri served time in prison and was paroled in 1956. She was finally granted a presidential pardon in 1977. The story is gripping, and WEEDALL recounts Toguri’s years of isolation, prison, and particularly her Kafkaesque trial with excellent pacing and a keen eye for drama. The prosecutor told the jury: “This is one of the most despicable cases of treason against our country at a time of national emergency.” The singular focus on Toguri omits some historical context: The Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings are only mentioned in one sentence. Undated chapters often leave readers unclear of the precise chronology. But while the mostly fictionalized dialogue is sometimes strained, the court proceedings and testimony are well documented, providing rich and evocative details.

An armchair historian delivers a remarkably compelling story of justice denied.

A debut historical work focuses on the woman who was turned into World War II’s legendary Tokyo Rose.

The name Tokyo Rose conjures up images of a powerfully seductive Japanese woman demoralizing homesick American soldiers through radio propaganda during the brutal years of World War II in the Pacific. How that label was affixed to Iva Toguri, a Japanese American, is a tragic and complicated story recounted by Wee dall in this book.

Wittig has a gift for character development and for pacing. She takes her time, raising this story to the deserved level of saga. It is Emma who holds the book together, and there are many more characters than mentioned above. Friedrich is an especially fascinating piece of work. All he has in life is his aristocratic lineage (“Graf” is the equivalent of a count) and the concomitant style and manners. And the Bruckners have money, so it is the ultimate marriage of convenience. He does great damage, not so much because he is immoral but because he is amoral, morally lazy—as he would be the first to admit. The story plumbs deep sadness. At one point, Emma wonders, “Didn’t God ever have enough of death? There are saving graces, too, including a young British army officer and a kind doctor.

A standout among the many novels set in this world-changing era.

Wittig’s decades-spanning historical novel set mostly in Vienna takes us from the 1930s to the 1970s, detailing the fallout from WWII.

We start with three women—Emma Huber, Greta Bruckner, and Léonie Salzmann—who have been fast friends since grammar school. Emma’s fiance, Theo, is killed early on in an uprising in Austria, and Emma has a miscarriage and cannot bear more children. Greta marries Otto Bruckner and has a daughter, Sophie. Léonie is married to Josef, a doctor, and their daughter is the lively Valerie. By the late 1940s, only Emma is alive of the three women. For villains, we have Greta’s mother-in-law, the grasping Elsa; her sister-in-law, the vain, shallow Marion; and Marion’s husband, Friedrich, Graf von Harzburg. All of these characters are thrown into the cauldron of Hitler’s rise, the war itself, and the struggle to rebuild their world and come to terms with the evil at the root of it. Novelist Wittig has a gift for character development and for pacing.

A picture book presents an original fable about a magical being who learns the consequences of believing bullies’ lies.

In the beginning, Nyame, the Creator, is “bored with the barren world.” With just a thought, Nyame makes many magnificent things, then creates four magical beings: Sunne, Earthe, Watre, and Winde. Each of the beings, called magbees, has a
special gift and an appearance that symbolizes that power. For a time, the four magbees work together to keep the world running. But when they look at their reflections in the river, they discover that only Sunne has hair that stands tall rather than flows down. After being mocked, Sunne tries to flatten the tall hair with disastrous results: The sun vanishes. Only Nyame’s return allows Sunne to regain the gift of the sun and teaches all the magbees a lesson about respecting others. In this series opener, Davis’ beautiful illustrations give the magbees a wonderfully mythical feel. His emphasis on depicting diversity perfectly evokes the theme of valuing differences. Yawson’s language adopts a formal vocabulary—imbued, dwell—to emphasize the folktale tone. Her use of Nyame as the Creator, drawing on the tradition of the Akan people of Ghana, may encourage readers to seek out more original stories from that area. The author’s choice to show the bullies realizing the magnitude of their actions is almost as potent as the portrayal of how Sunne embraces self-worth.

An impressive legend with the feel of an older tale and a highly relevant theme.
After years of gradually widening distance between them, a man learns some truths about his absent mother when he travels abroad to bury her and settle her business affairs.

Lula, the enigmatic and estranged daughter of a conventional and well-to-do Italian family, fled Italy for Romania and the opportunity to grow a business in the “Wild West” atmosphere of the post-Ceaușescu years. Left behind with a “Dad” who was not his father—and who is also part of Lula’s collateral damage—Lula’s young son, Lorenzo, grows up with his memories of a loving and playful mother and a growing resignation to her absence. A short (and often surreal) trip to Bucharest to attend Lula’s funeral and unravel aspects of her personal and business affairs provides Lorenzo, as a young man, with subtle clues about the realities of his mother’s life in a country struggling to move forward after years of repression.

Bajani’s spare prose delivers startling imagery—Lula’s business manufactures and sells a weight-loss machine that resembles a giant egg, and one of her confederates runs a business which is, essentially, a coffin farm—as well as quiet reflection as Lorenzo addresses the departed Lula as he moves around her chosen home away from home. Lorenzo finds evidence of himself along the trail of Lula’s shattered relationships and works to answer questions about their broken bond through a lens of adult, rather than childlike, understanding. Psalm 130, which lends the novel its title and is awkwardly read at Lula’s funeral, asks “If you kept a record of sins, oh Lord, who could stand before you?” a reminder that there is usually enough fault to go around.

Bajani’s lovely, quiet novel lives at the intersection of love and misunderstanding.
WHEN I RAN AWAY
Ilona Bannister
Doubleday (336 pp.)
$27.95 | Mar. 30, 2021
978-0-385-54617-1

A homesick New Yorker suffering from postpartum depression completely loses it in London.

We meet Gigi in the middle of the second-worst day of her life, a Wednesday in August 2016, when she walks out on her husband and two children, all three screaming and crying, and checks into the Grand Euro Star Lodge Hotel, where she will drink wine, watch her beloved Real Housewives of New Jersey, and try to shove her body into what the English call a “half bathtub.” The next section of the book revisits what was surely the actual worst day of her life, Sept. 11, 2001: Her only sibling was at an interview in one of the towers. The one redeeming factor of that day was that she met Harry, a kind and elegant Brit who became her future husband, on the Staten Island Ferry. Fate keeps them apart for quite a while, and by the time they meet again, Gigi is raising a child—her dead brother’s dead girlfriend’s son. This time, they seal the deal, and before long Staten Island Gigi is installed in a posh house in London where she is miserable beyond belief. The older boy, Johnny, goes to a fancy private school where Gigi feels completely out of place (her class consciousness and awareness of other women’s clothing, accoutrements, and bodies is acute), and her new baby, Rocky, is the product of a Caesarian birth so traumatic that she is more or less destroyed, emotionally and physically. How much can one woman take? That is the question this novel asks, furiously, impatiently, and without too many niceties of plot. The author’s bio, perfectly parallel to Gigi’s at least in the outlines, suggests that Bannister’s impulse is autobiographical; who could or would make this up? Gigi is sharp and funny and endearing enough that you will want to stick with her through the whole nightmare, as if she needed you to hold her hand.

A searing account of the pain and rage motherhood can sometimes produce.

THE KAISER’S WEB
Steve Berry
Minotaur (432 pp.)
$28.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-2501-4034-0

The rise of a neo-fascist with deep roots in the Third Reich pulls not-exactly-retired Justice Department agent Cotton Malone back for a 16th round of international intrigue.

A specter is haunting Europe. No, not the coronavirus but Theodor Pohl, an insurgent German nationalist who’s set his sights first on toppling long-serving chancellor Marie Eisenhuth, then on making the Fatherland great again—really, really great. Barely have Malone and his lover and comrade in arms Cassiopeia Vitt dusted themselves off from their leap from their mortally wounded plane in Poland on a single parachute than ex-President Danny Daniels is packing them off to Chile to investigate rumors that Adolf Hitler, Eva Braun, and Martin Bormann didn’t all die in that bunker in 1945; at least one of them escaped to South America with billions in Nazi gold. The trip to Chile produces some eye-popping revelations and whittles down the cast, but instead of settling matters for good, it propels Malone and Vitt to South Africa for further investigations among people determined to be left alone until their time has come. Meanwhile, back in Germany, the chancellor realizes that she’s being undermined by not only Pohl and his ruthless acolyte, Josef Engle, but her xenophobic husband, Kurt Eisenhuth, whose past is even more checkered than she knows. Cannily mixing historical research with florid inventions that fill in gaps and sometimes fly in the face of the available evidence, Berry presents an ominously up-to-date world whose frenzied nationalism is a direct descendant of the Thousand-Year Reich.

Hitler may not live, but Heil Hitler is alive and all too well.
Though it may have seemed like 2020 would go on forever, the end is finally in sight. But this year hasn’t been a total loss: In addition to electing a new president, we’ve been introduced to a panoply of new writers whose books will be enriching our lives for decades to come.

This was a year of book awards going to writers at the beginnings of their careers. We kicked off the season on Nov. 5 by presenting the Kirkus Prize for Fiction to Raven Leilani for her stunning novel, *Luster* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Aug. 4), about which the judges said, “Emotionally raw and virtuosically polished, *Luster* feels like both a story that will stand the test of time and the novel we need right now.” At 30, Leilani is the youngest ever winner of the Kirkus Prize, and I can’t wait to see what she does next.

Two weeks later, the Booker Prize was awarded to *Shuggie Bain* by Douglas Stuart (Grove, Feb. 11)—another first novel by one of the Kirkus Prize finalists. Stuart, 44, is a successful fashion designer who spent 10 years writing *Shuggie* in his off hours, and in an interview with Kirkus, he said he already has three more novels in various stages of writing and planning.

Eighteen of the 100 books on our list of Best Fiction of 2020 are debuts, as many as we’ve ever had. There’s *How Much of These Hills Is Gold* by C. Pam Zhang (Riverhead, April 7), about two Chinese immigrant children during the gold rush era, which our review called “aesthetically arresting and a vital contribution to America’s conversation about itself,” and Kevin Nguyen’s *New Waves* (One World, March 10), “a blistering send-up of startup culture and a sprawling, ambitious, tender debut.” There’s *Precious You* by Helen Monks Takhar (Random House, March 10), a psychological thriller set in the world of London magazine publishing, and *Something To Talk About* by Meryl Wilsner (Berkley, May 26), a lesbian romance set in Hollywood.

These writers and many others have brought us new perspectives and the anticipation of exciting books to come. But we’ve also had to say goodbye to a number of writers who died this year—and somehow, it seems to have been a particularly bad year for women who wrote crime novels. M.C. Beaton, whose real name was Marion Chesney Gibbons, produced two popular series, one featuring Cotswolds retiree–turned–private detective Agatha Raisin and the other, set in the Scottish Highlands, featuring policeman Hamish Macbeth. What they had in common was their author’s wry sense of humor.

Mary Higgins Clark wrote more than 50 books and sold millions of copies. Her last collaboration with Alafair Burke, *Piece of My Heart* (Simon & Schuster, Nov. 17), follows true-crime TV producer Laurie Moran in the days leading up to her wedding. Our review called it “a fitting sendoff that modulates as smooth as butter from celebration to shock to detection to ticking-clock suspense.”

A few months before her death in March, Barbara Neely was named a Grand Master by the Mystery Writers of America though she wrote only four novels, the last, *Blanche Passes Go*, appearing 20 years ago. Neely followed the investigations of Blanche White, a Black housecleaner, and our review of her last adventure called it “a trenchantly written feminist manifesto for women of color, women who’ve survived abuse, and men who don’t mind having their hackles raised.”

Swedish crime writer Maj Sjöwall was best known for the 10 books about police detective Martin Beck that she wrote in collaboration with Per Wahlöö in the 1960s and ’70s, which found new popularity in this century with the explosion of Scandinavian crime fiction. That’s the joy of books: If you haven’t read them yet, they’re new to you, whenever they were written.
A posthumous triad of novellas by Bolaño, postmodernist par excellence, late of Chile, Mexico, and Spain.

“It’s...a novel (like all novels, really) that doesn’t begin in the novel, in the book-object that contains it, understand? Its first pages are in some other book, or in a back alley where a crime has been committed.” So says a mysterious caller to a young intellectual named Diodorus Pilon in the first novella, *French Comedy of Horrors*, summoning him to Paris to join the Clandestine Surrealist Group—a group so shadowy that no one quite knows what it is. Will he answer the call? Only Bolaño knows. The title piece is similarly far-flung, with our narrator starting off in Chile, moving north to Mexico, land of those cowboy graves, and then returning to Chile just in time, the chronology suggests, to get caught up in Pinochet’s fascist coup of 1973. As ever, the story contains a classic improbability: The narrator, just 15, is an accidental reader of the poet Nicanor Parra and goes off in quest of him while getting ready to leave Chile: “I didn’t know where he lived, of course...From the start, I suspected that it would be hard to get there and just as hard to get back.” The science-fictional, Jesuit-twitching story within the story is vintage Bolaño while *Fatherland*, the third novella, is especially fragmentary and inconclusive. Set in Concepción, along the central Chilean coast, it’s a whirl of volcanoes ever about to erupt, of a Nazi fighter that appears in the skies overhead, and of the steady devolution of humankind: “We’ve progressed from the perfect execution to the concentration camp and the atomic bomb.” In an afterword, the Spanish poet Juan Antonio Maso-liver Ródenas notes that the first and third stories were written in the 1990s and the second in 2002-2003, concurrently with books such as *Distant Star* and *The Savage Detectives* and
perhaps even part of them at one time, which makes them no less enigmatic.
Each story reveals a centrifugal writer with a brilliant command of words and no fear of a plot’s getting away from him.

CRY DARKNESS
Bonner, Hilary
Severn House (272 pp.)
$28.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-7278-9051-1

And now for something completely paranoid from the creator of DI David Vogel of Dreams of Fear (2020, etc.): an intercontinental crime novel whose dark heart is a paper that reveals the secret of consciousness.

Years before she became a celebrity astrophysicist, a household name to everyone with a computer or a television, Exeter U’s Dr. Sandy Jones, who’s just been offered the chancellorship at Oxford, crossed the pond to study at Princeton. Two of the solitary, geeky scholar’s few friends there were closely associated with RECAP, the center for Research into Consciousness at Princeton. Encouraged by her schoolmate Constance Pike and by professor Paul Ruders, who ran RECAP, Jones took enough tests to make her wonder if she might have unsuspected psychic powers herself. Upon completing her Ph.D., she ditched her boyfriend, math prodigy Ed MacEntee, took a job in London, married, divorced, and never looked back. When she brushes off an urgent call from Connie Pike only to discover days later that the campus building housing RECAP was destroyed by a suspected bomb, she’s determined to do something even though she can’t imagine what to do, and it’s too late to help Connie and Ruders, both presumed killed in the explosion. Flying to Princeton, she endures an awkward reunion with Ed, who’s also divorced, and an even more unpleasant run-in with the New Jersey State Police, who arrest her, jail her, and release her on the understanding that she’s to head home immediately. What are the powers that be trying to cover up? And

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Four-time Shamus Award Winner

How to order: Ingram, Amazon, mikebroganbooks.com
Moving and, at times, disquieting: a piercing exploration of poverty, eroticism, and love.

**AN ORPHAN WORLD**

Caputo, Giuseppe  
Trans. by Adcock, Juana & Hughes, Sophie  
Charco Press (218 pp.)  
$15.95 paper | Feb. 25, 2021  
978-1-9164-6562-6

In an unnamed Latin American city, the bond between a son and his father is tested by poverty and violence.

The novel’s nameless narrator and his quirky, puerile father are on the brink of utter destitution. Though the father remains optimistic about their financial situation, his various moneymaking schemes—such as turning their home into a “Talking House” using tape recordings of his dramatic interpretations of household items—fail miserably and leave the two penniless, with no option other than to pawn off their belongings and move to a different neighborhood. Meanwhile, the narrator is coming into his own sexual power, talking to men on Chat Roulette and pursuing casual relations.

"Ultimately, Randle unravels our inner fears about love, hope, and faith while masterfully weaving a tale regarding the complexities of each intricate and life altering concept."

—Kathryn Mattingly, award winning author of novels *Benjamin, Journey, Olivia's Ghost* and *The Tutor*

"A modern-day miracle throws a priest’s life into turmoil in this novel."

"A captivating and intensely readable tale about men of faith finding friendship and renewal."

—Kirkus Reviews

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did Paul Ruders indeed plumb the mysteries of consciousness before his own lights were put out for good?

An academic suspenser whose brainy bits and action scenes both work beautifully without ever quite coming together.

**CLOUDMAKER**

Brooks, Malcolm  
Grove (400 pp.)  
$27.00 | Mar. 9, 2021  
978-0-8021-2705-1

Teenage cousins get the jump on the aviation age in 1930s Montana.

In an opening suggesting a Disney-esque Western adventure, Houston “Huck” Finn, a 14-year-old engineering prodigy in Big Coulee, Montana, designs his own glider, wrecks it in a ballfield, then turns to his next project—building, in his father Roy’s smithy, a prop airplane powered by a Ford engine and, later, supercharged with vacuum cleaner parts. Brooks’ singular style, evoking the ornate vernacular of a cowboy poet, does not quite distract from the fact that we’re going deep—too deep—into the mechanics of any practical challenge that might arise, such as retrieving a gangster’s body from a trout stream with an ingenious pulley system. Huck and his bookish pal, Raleigh, find a Lindbergh flight watch on the body, and Huck can’t resist hoarding this talisman of his idol. That watch provides the key to a mystery plot that quickly fades into irrelevance. Huck’s 18-year-old cousin, Annelise, newly arrived from California, sports an identical watch, on loan from her flight instructor and first lover. Annelise’s “ruin” is the reason her mother has exiled her to Montana. Her maternal Aunt Gloria, Huck’s mother, worships charismatic preacher Aimee Semple McPherson almost as much as Annelise adores Amelia Earhart, who, as this novel’s convoluted and multivoiced action unfolds, vanishes over the Pacific. Annelise will test-pilot Huck’s new rig and court new ruin with Roy’s assistant, McKee, a former member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. However, she’s sometimes arbitrarily sidelined, as is Gloria, who spends long stretches of the novel in Bible-thumping seclusion at the family ranch. But Brooks won’t let any of his characters be marginalized, or stereotyped, for long. The backstories of Roy, McKee, and Gloria are a vivid, anecdotal compendium of Western disgrace and glory. Although the flight scenes are majestic, they’re often truncated by excessively detailed preflight tinkering. Amid all the eloquence, history, scenery, and how-to, forward momentum stalls.

An occasionally profound novel that takes risks with language and readers’ patience.
sexual encounters in bathhouses and gay clubs. A homophobic massacre in the local bar district prompts a sudden exodus of many community members and friends, though the narrator and his father don't have the option or desire to leave. Meanwhile, tensions between the two grow as they run out of money entirely, the father becoming more silent and withdrawn as the son tries to find solace in the club scene and has flashbacks to victims of the massacre. A spell of luck finds the two working at a haunted house attraction in an amusement park, but how long before all that slips through their fingers? Narrated with irreverence, wit, and arresting attention to detail, the novel is structured so that the narrator is constantly oscillating between the narrative present and his memories, creating a poignant and mosaiclike impression of his childhood and coming-of-age in abject conditions.

Moving and, at times, disquieting: a piercing exploration of poverty, eroticism, and love.

THE SCAPEGOAT
Davis, Sara
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
(224 pp.)
$26.00  |  Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-3741-8145-1

In this unnervingly good debut, Davis' narrator pieces together details of his father's death.

N is an employee at a prestigious San Francisco Bay Area university. "As a rule...," he says, "I preferred not to involve myself in university gossip, or department politics, aware, without regret, that I had chosen for myself a somewhat lonely stance." N's father has recently died, and the circumstances surrounding his father's death nag at him, invading his waking and sleeping hours. "The more I considered them, the stranger they seemed," he says. When he happens upon a connection between his father and a hotel built over the site of a former California mission, the
An experimental, psychological debut about selfhood, fiction, and memory.

**HER HERE**

Dennis, Amanda
Bellevue Literary Press (352 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Mar. 9, 2021
978-1-942658-76-4

A former scholar searches for a missing woman in an unorthodox way.

In Dennis’ elusive debut novel, Elena—a young woman grieving her late mother—finds herself in the pages of a missing woman’s journal. Still traumatized by her mother’s death six years ago, Elena is plagued with memory loss and a slippery sense of self: “Forgetting is how the body keeps itself sane.” When Siobhán, her late mother’s friend, reaches out with an unconventional job offer, Elena moves to Paris, leaving behind her graduate program and long-term boyfriend. Siobhán wants Elena to find Ella, her biological daughter, who fled to Thailand when her adoptive parents told her the truth about her birth—and has been missing for the past six years. Craving closure, she asks Elena to rewrite Ella’s impressionistic journals “as an account of what happened” and use that narrative to unearth clues that may be hidden in plain sight. Physically and emotionally unmoored for years, Elena loses herself in the task almost immediately: “The difference now is purpose—one to string itself through my days, adding tautness, definition, orienting them on an axis of someone else.” If the journal rewriting is an interesting (if convoluted) premise, Dennis’ sensory prose leads to a fascinating exploration of identity, grief, and time. As Ella’s journals tip further toward madness, the two women’s lives become more intertwined; the physical, mental, and emotional boundaries between them become nearly nonexistent. Dennis’ abilities to blur fact and fiction—through structure and pronoun use—and wield language elevate the novel. Her prose is sensory and unsettling: “three days, ample and round, like peaches ripening in the summer markets,” “I was becoming other than myself, to my delightful terror.” With an unsurprising (though satisfying) ending, the women come to terms with their lives—the ones they currently inhabit and the one Elena has created.

**An experimental, psychological debut about selfhood, fiction, and memory.**
THE BONE FIRE
Dragomán, György
Trans. by Mulzet, Ottilie
Mariner/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
(480 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Feb. 23, 2021
978-0-544-52720-1

A widow and an orphan seek solace in each other's company.
Thirteen-year-old Emma was raised to believe her mother had no living relatives, but six months after a car accident kills her parents, her maternal grandmother arrives at the orphanage to claim her. Emma is initially dubious, but the unnamed woman explains she and her daughter had a falling out long ago, and she only recently learned of Emma's existence. Fate brought them together, she insists, as she, too, has been alone since her husband died during the bloody political revolution that ravaged their unidentified Eastern European nation. Emma can't deny the family resemblance, so she packs her bags and lets the old lady take her home. There, she meets the ghost of her grandfather, learns the mystical, old-world ways of her grandmother, and grapples with the difficult truths of her family's fraught history. Hungarian author Dragomán employs elements of magical realism to literalize the power inherent in superstition and ritual. Contrasting narrative styles illustrate the strikingly different manners in which the two characters process their respective traumas. Emma's first-person-present narration holds the reader at a remove, echoing her own sense of detachment, while her grandmother's tales of World War II unfold in the second-person-present, reflecting her inability to move on. Discursive plotting allows Dragomán to draw parallels between Emma's adolescent growing pains and those felt by her country as it tries to rebuild itself in the wake of communism's collapse.
A poignant coming-of-age tale set against the backdrop of regime change.

THE GHOST MOTHS
Farthing, Harry
Blackstone (300 pp.)
$27.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-5384-6923-1

The Himalayas hold secrets to Tibet's past as well as its present.
After a poetic opening section that touts the importance of the ghost moth as a medicinal source, an exemplar of rugged survival, and a status symbol, the book begins in 1981 with American climber Christopher Anderson, who's killed on Makalu Mountain by a falling rock after carving a moth into the rock face and seeing, inexplicably, the face of a Tibetan child. In 1950, 8-year-old Pema Chöje, who finds a skull buried deep in a hillside, is forced to surrender it to a soldier in Mao Tse-tung's new People's Liberation Army. Dreams of the skull haunt the boy for years as the Communist Party strengthens its hold on his nation by destroying a village and a beloved monastery. Then, in 2014, the exploits of British mountain guide Neil Quinn harken back to the monumental events of half a century earlier. Farthing's sprawling plot unfolds in short, elegantly written chapters, pinpointed in location and time, that bounce all over the region. He seems equally interested in adventure, mystery, spiritualism, and history and the symbiotic relationships among them. There's an interview with the elderly Dalai Lama—who'd appeared as a young man much earlier—as well as visits to the Royal Palace in Nepal, a suspicious suicide, and numerous revelations from Quinn, some mystical, some related to past crimes. Farthing presents colorful bits of tapestry and trusts the reader to assemble them and locate the nexus between the physical world and the metaphysical. An extensive glossary, cast of characters, and maps are welcome aids.
An ambitious, stylishly written, thought-provoking tale.
SAMMI AND THE PRESIDENT
W. D. COUNTY

ASIN: B08K96VM69

“Often funny, always well-crafted, his new book explodes like breaking news on cable TV.”
—Tom Shepherd, Best Selling Author of Jump Gate Omega

“With a scathing tongue firmly planted in his cheek, author W.D. County launches a new satirical salvo with SAMMI and the President.”

“The linguistic puns and real-time social commentary is relentless and timely. ...there is an exciting adventure plot.”
—Self-Publishing Review

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Welsh author Emma Glass has been so busy with her job as a nurse that she almost forgot that her second novel, *Rest and Be Thankful* (Bloomsbury, Dec. 1), is coming out in the U.S. now after having been published in Britain the day before the country went on lockdown last March. The book tells the story of Laura, a nurse at a children’s hospital in London, and though it was written before the pandemic, it’s easy to imagine nurses right now experiencing the burnout Laura feels working night shifts, caring for dying patients, watching her personal life evaporate. And that’s not to mention the ghost she starts seeing around the hospital. Our starred review calls the book “a heart-wrenching and poetic look at a profession that deserves more literary attention.” We spoke over Zoom; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Laura gives everything of herself to her job. Is that what it’s like for you?
I have on occasion given blood for my patients, and not as in having gone to the blood bank. When I worked as a specialist for infectious diseases, some of my patients would need sets of control bloods to be sent alongside theirs to help with diagnostics. And I stuck my arm out, and people have bled me. And that’s a silly example, but it’s blood, sweat, and tears.

You’re a nurse at a pediatric hospital in London and you’ve written two novels. How did you get here?
When I was 18, I was packed off to university. I didn’t really want to go because I didn’t know what I wanted to do. My parents said I should do a degree in English because it’s just a good, solid core subject that can open doors. But when I graduated in 2008, all the doors were shut because of the recession. My mother’s a nurse, and she said, “You’ve got a similar nature to me, why not go and do something where you’ll be guaranteed a job?” So I went into nursing that way. And that’s always sat really uncomfortably with me, actually. Most of the people on my course had always wanted to be nurses. They had these very caring personalities, they love people, they love kids, they really see themselves in that position. And I was there because I needed a job, and I carried around a lot of guilt for that. But then I remember my first placement, walking in and introducing myself to the patients, and I immediately had a sense of belonging. And any idea that I was there for any other reason than to care for people just disappeared immediately.
How did you have time to write two novels?
I was writing *Peach*, my first novel, as my dissertation piece in university. I had planned to go back and do a master’s and finish it then, but that didn’t happen. So it was in the back of my head, *Oh, keep writing, keep writing*, but then I got flung into nursing, and there is no time. You know, priorities change. For me, being creative and writing are really self-indulgent, and I didn’t feel like I deserved that until I’d been in London for about a year. And writing came back because I needed an outlet.

What’s the genesis for *Rest and Be Thankful*?
The crux of it was a ghost story I was told on my induction at the first hospital where I worked in London. The person leading the induction was really funny. She said, “You know, we’ve got a rich Victorian history in this particular hospital, and that comes with some superstition.” And she told the ghost story that features in the book, about a nurse who threw herself off the stairwell of the nursing accommodation—where I used to live, actually, and where Laura lives in the book—and she’s said to haunt the wards. People have seen the ghost over the years, and she’s in Victorian nursing dress, and it flutters and makes this crispy sound as she goes along.

Did you ever see the ghost?
I don’t believe in ghosts, but there were a few things that happened to me there that you could classify as unexplainable. And it’s funny, all of the nurses I was working with, everyone had a story but none of us ever admitted to having seen the ghost. But I hooked on that idea of writing a ghost story. The focus was never really writing about nursing, it wasn’t about giving you a glimpse of what it’s like to be a nurse, because I don’t really do that justice. I write about the very worst bits of being a nurse—and some of the best bits, like the connections with the families. But I don’t write about all the funny stuff that happens and the goofy jokes and the really creepy clowns that I can’t bear. If somebody says the words “Doctor Clown,” I’m out! There’s loads of joy that happens on the children’s wards. And for me, the bit that I love most about being a nurse and a writer is when the two worlds collide. Whether I’m speaking to a parent or a child, every day, in some form, I will get to be creative in the way I express myself or explain the situation. If the children are having a procedure or something scary is happening, you automatically make that into a story. It’s imaginative; you use different words for different things so they don’t feel scared.

Your prose is intense and poetic. Who are some of your literary influences?
Joyce and Gertrude Stein are the ones who are, for me, so far apart from any other writers. In particular, Stein’s *Tender Buttons* is the biggest influence—it’s the obscurity, but it’s the beauty, and it’s the short sharpness, which I have arguments with people over in terms of how I end my own books. I don’t like them to go on. I also really love Shirley Jackson and how she uses atmosphere to create the scariest ever moments in the English language, in my opinion. I don’t want this to sound bad, but I’m not a big reader, certainly not this year. I find it’s been so hard to read anything, but I guess a lot of people feel that way.

*Rest and Be Thankful* feels like the perfect book to read in this time of short attention spans, because it is so short and sharp.
I love anything short. Lydia Davis and Carmen Maria Machado are also big influences because they deal with women’s trauma. And whatever I write, I always wanted to highlight women who are struggling or who have had hard times and how they come through those.

*Rest and Be Thankful* received a starred review in the Aug. 15, 2020, issue.
**The Twilight Zone**

Fernández, Nona  
*Trans. by Wimmer, Natasha*  
Graywolf (392 pp.)  
$16.00 paper  |  Mar. 16, 2021  
978-1-64445-047-5

Chilean actor and novelist Fernández continues her project of lifting the veil on the dark years of Augusto Pinochet’s military dictatorship.

As in Fernández’s previous novel, *Space Invaders* (2019)—note the two pop-culture titles—the story moves about in great leaps from decade to decade. It opens in 1984, when a man enters the Santiago office of a magazine and asks to speak to the author of a story that centers on him. “Andrés Antonio Valenzuela Morales, Soldier First Class, ID #39432, district of La Ligua,” wants to speak about what he has done on behalf of the regime, “about making people disappear.” He has a dossier running page after page, giving names, recounting how they were tortured, his victims now denizens of “some parallel reality” that suggests to the narrator an extended episode of the old creature-feature series *The Twilight Zone*. A quarter-century passes, and now the narrator encounters the killer again, this time as she is writing a television series about the era, one of the characters based on him. He recounts watching the protest marches by the mothers of los desaparecidos, who hoist poster-sized photographs of their loved ones: “They don’t realize that I know where that person is,” he says, “I know what happened to him.” Enumerating the victims is a process that absorbs both characters, moving between past and present, when the state-sponsored murderer escapes to rural France: “Will he be able to change the shadows of things to come? He wants to believe he will, that he has the right to a change of skin.” Fernández’s story has shades of the cat-and-mouse mystery, her touchstones emblems of mass global culture: episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, to be sure, but also old movies and, of course, the video games of the era: “On the same television screen where we used to play *Space Invaders*, we now saw the national police agents responsible for the murders.” Fernández is emerging as a major voice in South American letters, and this slender but rich story shows why.

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**Every Last Fear**

Finlay, Alex  
Minotaur (368 pp.)  
$26.99  |  Mar. 2, 2021  
978-1-2502-6882-2

Debut novelist Finlay throws every last plague at a Job-like Nebraska family, and most of them stick.

The troubles began seven years ago, when Danny Pine was accused of killing Charlotte Rose, the high school girlfriend who’d just discovered her pregnancy. Prosecutors swiftly convicted Danny on the basis of a confession the local cops bullied out of him, and although *A Violent Nature*, a Netflix documentary series, suggested that the real killer was Bobby Ray Hayes, the Smasher convicted of beating several other girls to death, it didn’t change the minds of the Pines’ neighbors in Adair, turning the family into celebrity pariahs. Taking his family from Nebraska to Chicago, Danny’s father, Evan Pine, has worked ever since at another branch of the accounting firm Marconi LLP. Just a few weeks after he’s laid off, however, comes the most crushing blow of all: On a trip to Mexico, Evan, his wife, Olivia, and their two youngest children, Maggie and Tommy, are all found dead, apparently from a gas leak in their cabin. FBI agent Sarah Keller, who’s had her eye on Marconi for quite a while, wants to know why Evan was found outside the cabin; whether that red splotch near him is his own blood or someone else’s; why the Pines decided to celebrate Evan’s joblessness by taking a family vacation; and how all these developments are connected to the murder of Charlotte Rose. In search of answers, she leans on Danny, who refuses to talk, and on Danny’s brother Matt, an NYU film student surrounded...
The Girl with the Green Lipstick

“A debut autobiographical novel focuses on a man’s disastrous relationship with a self-absorbed woman who has a long criminal history.”

“...engrossing...”

“The author, utilizing plain prose, unflinchingly details difficult discussions and somber events, including a fair amount of violence, both physical and verbal.”

“...Saubert provides some intriguing insights into the mind of an abused person.”

“...absorbing...”

—Kirkus Reviews

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by people he can’t trust who feels his family’s history converging on him like a pack of hungry wolves.

The author deftly juggles past and present and a wide range of viewpoints until the sadly predictable big reveal.

**INFINITE**
Freeman, Brian
Thomas & Mercer (316 pp.)
$24.95 | Mar. 1, 2021
978-1-5420-2386-3

Even fans used to the wild inventions of Freeman’s thrillers, such as Robert Ludlum’s The Bourne Evolution (2020), had better buckle their seat belts for this traversal of a troubled man’s alternate identities.

As if it weren’t enough to lose his wife, realtor Karly Chance, to a car accident he swam away from, Chicago hotel events manager Dylan Moran is jolted even more by seeing his double watching him from the riverbank. After he spots another version of himself wearing the bloodstained jacket his father had worn when he shot Dylan’s mother and himself and he learns that construction worker Scotty Ryan, the one-night stand Karly had been desperately trying to apologize for when she died, has been stabbed to death, he reaches out to psychiatrist Eve Brier, a stranger who’s giving a lecture at his hotel and yet insists that he’s been seeing her professionally since the death of his best friend, Roscoe Tate, in another car crash that introduced Dylan to Karly in the first place. The doubles, Eve assures him, are real enough: alternate versions of himself living alternate lives in alternate worlds that have intersected with his own. Under her direction, Dylan allows himself to be injected with a cocktail of hallucinogens that sends him rocketing into first one of those worlds, then another, determined to neutralize the most dangerous of the doppelgängers, a serial killer who’s already murdered four Karly look-alikes. Each world offers him new possibilities for reversing his mistakes but also new pains, new griefs, and a deepening sense of estrangement, not only from Dylan’s leading increasingly nightmarish versions of his life, but from the life he thought was his.

This cockeyed, suspenseful exploration of roads not taken is a dizzying delight.

**THE RECENT EAST**
Grattan, Thomas
MCD/Farrar, Straus and Giroux (368 pp.)
$27.00 | Mar. 9, 2021
978-0-3742-4793-5

A broken family makes an uncomfortable transition into former Communist Germany in this moody debut novel.

Grattan’s family drama centers on three characters: Beate Haas, who as a girl escaped from East Germany with her parents in 1968, and the two children she later had in the United States, Adela and Michael. In 1990, with the Berlin Wall collapsed, Beate inherits her family home in Kritzhagen, a small town in the former East. Adela and Michael, 12 and 13 at the time, uneasily adjust to a place that “had gone from prom queen to old maid in a single season”: Michael keeps busy looting abandoned houses while furtively exploring relationships with men while Adela lends support to the demonized occupants of a nearby refugee camp. Beate, meanwhile, despondent after splitting with her husband, wanders the streets at night, eventually stumbling into a job cutting hair at a bar. In the early going, the book feels like a gothic novel with a Brutalist severity: The characters are so downcast and the home so haunted by the past that emotional escape seems impossible. But when the narrative leaps back into the 1970s and forward to the 21st century, the novel brightens as the characters’ motivations and experiences deepen. Michael settles into a job running a bar with a Stasi theme, Beate pursues new relationships, and Adela leaves the country just as her mom...
A Lovely Young Irish Woman Immigrates to Kentucky with her Horses.


"...this series opener presents a beautiful thesis: that true love shapes people to notice others’ needs before their own."

“A gentle, frothy take on classic romance set pieces.” —Kirkus Reviews

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did. In the meantime, cousins and lovers provide emotional support while neofascism and homophobia buffet the family emotionally and physically; Grattan is a graceful writer and keen observer of family dynamics; the domestic themes, realist style, and emphasis on German culture can’t help but recall Jonathan Franzen. But the energy Grattan expends on characterization doesn’t quite extend to the plot, which feels shapeless despite some dramatic flare-ups. The lassitude is somewhat intentional, though: When you’re as disoriented as this clan is, Grattan suggests, there truly is no place like home.

An ambitious, artful, and winding tale of a family in search of its moorings.

**ABUNDANCE**
Guanzon, Jakob
Graywolf (328 pp.)
$16.00 paper | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-64445-046-8

An impressive debut tells of a Midwestern father on the brink of destitution and his grim efforts to survive.

Two narratives alternate: One follows Henry and his son, Junior, hour by hour on the 8-year-old’s birthday and into the following day, when the father has a crucial job interview. They live out of a pickup, and their money seesaws on day labor and the barest necessities. The chapter titles reflect how much cash they have, opening with “$89.34,” which is followed by “$89.59” because Henry finds a quarter on a McDonald’s men’s room floor. Their hoard will plunge to “$17.41” when Henry treats them to a hotel room and bath ahead of the interview; the stay ends abruptly after Henry fights with another
It’s easy to adore Heiny’s characters. They tend to be quirky and smart, caring and passionate.

EARLY MORNING RISER

Heiny, Katherine
Knopf (336 pp.)
$26.95 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-0-525-65934-1

The author of Single, Carefree, Mellob (2015) and Standard Deviation (2017) brings us new characters to fall in love with in this novel about love, family, and community.

It’s easy to adore the characters Heiny conjures in her novels and short stories. They tend to be quirky and smart, caring and passionate. Jane, the protagonist of Heiny’s gentle, funny new novel, is no exception. When we first meet her, the year is 2002, and she’s 26. She has just moved to small-town Boyne City, Michigan, from Grand Rapids by way of Battle Creek, to teach second grade at the local elementary school. Almost immediately—in the first month she’s in town and the first sentence of the novel—she meets and falls for Duncan, a handsome, divorced woodworker in his early 40s who moonlights as a locksmith (they meet when she locks herself out of her new house), looks to Jane “like the Brawny paper towel man,” and, she later learns, not entirely to her surprise, has slept with pretty much every woman in the area. Both Jane, ever hopeful, and Duncan, ever appreciative, are pure charm (as are the book’s secondary characters: their Northern Michigan neighbors, friends, and family members). She is a creative teacher and all-around blithe spirit who enthusiastically procures all her clothes and household items at the local thrift store. (“Some of her thrift-store outfits were more successful than others,” we’re told.) He’s the kind of generous, easygoing guy who still shovels out the snowy driveway of his ex-wife, Aggie, as well as that of Jane; Jane’s best friend, Freida; and, eventually, Jane’s flinty mother. Duncan’s sole employee is a sweet young man named Jimmy who was initially “described to Jane by more than one person as ‘slow learning.’ ” After an accident for which Jane feels culpable, Jimmy becomes Jane’s responsibility, too. Eventually, Jimmy will bring Jane and Duncan together in a new way. Told episodically in chapters titled by year and covering a span of 17 years, Heiny’s book finds beauty and humor in connection and community, family and friendship, and the way love can develop and deepen over time.

A heartwarming novel with a small-town vibe that sparkles like wine sipped with friends under backyard fairy lights.
THE OPPOSITE OF CHANCE
Hermes, Margaret
Delphinium (275 pp.)
$26.00 | Mar. 16, 2021
978-1-883285-95-1

Fleeing the shock of her husband’s infidelities, a Midwestern librarian embarks on a solo trip to Europe that will change her life in unexpected ways.

Sitting in Montreal’s airport awaiting her flight to Paris, Wisconsinite Betsy is acutely aware of her own lack of sophistication. “Each time she heard French spoken she thought reflexively that everyone around her was more cultured.” It’s 1981, and 32-year-old Betsy had spent most of the 1970s as a naïve and clueless wife until the discovery of Greg’s betrayal sent her to divorce court, library school, and now her first trans-Atlantic flight. A casual conversation with a handsome Muslim man she had been observing eases Betsy’s anxieties and renews her confidence: “Already she had made it out of the United States onto foreign soil and into her first adventure.” Betsy’s subsequent encounters—a French consultant’s failed attempt at seduction in a train compartment; an American trio’s plot to entice Betsy into a ménage à quatre in Florence; a Lake Como hotel owner’s clumsily aggressive pursuit—prove more disappointing until a romantic rescue from a Dublin riot by a handsome Irishman spurs her to make her own destiny. How Betsy finds peace is the touching, if somewhat predictable, conclusion. Hermes’ unusually structured narrative alternates Betsy’s journey with chapters offering the perspectives of the people she meets. Some of these stories were originally published separately, so they don’t always seamlessly mesh with the main storyline. The author writes with wit and flair, however, and she vividly evokes the ups (the beauty of a misty evening at Lake Como) and downs (a lonely night in a gritty Le Havre hotel) of European travel.

A romantic escape to savor.

THE REMOVED
Hobson, Brandon
Ecco/HarperCollins (288 pp.)
$26.99 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-06-299754-8

Signs and wonders animate a Cherokee tale of family and community abiding through trauma.

Stories are “like medicine, but without the bad taste,” says Wyatt, a 12-year-old Cherokee boy in foster care who is preternaturally gifted in telling them. He spins mesmerizing, ambiguous fables about snakes and birds and an underworld, called the Darkening Land, for children at a shelter in rural Oklahoma. Wyatt, whose father is in jail and mother is in the wind, is spending a few days with Maria and Ernest Echota, the only Cherokee placement available. Fifteen years earlier, a White policeman shot and killed the couple’s middle child, Ray-Ray, outside a mall. Now Wyatt’s quirks and buoyant impersonations startle the Echotas by echoing those of Ray-Ray. More remarkably, the presence of this child appears to draw Ernest back from the fog of Alzheimer’s. Maria, her surviving son, Edgar, and daughter, Sonja, all take turns narrating. So does T sala, a mysterious figure who declares, “We are speakers of the dead, the drifters and messengers…. We are always restless, carrying the dreams of children and the elderly, the tired and sick, the poor, the wounded. The removed.” The talented Hobson conjures both the Trail of Tears and family fracturing, as he did in Where the Dead Sit Talking (2018), a finalist for the National Book Award. The traumas of forced removal and Ray-Ray’s killing twin in Maria’s depression, Edgar’s meth use, and Sonja’s drifting detachment. “I used to stare out the window, envying trees,” she says. “This became a regular pattern of thought for me...that I stared at a tree outside and envied its anonymity, its beauty and silence....A tree could stand over a hundred years and remain authentic.” Edgar, in his own Darkening Land, fights a treacherous fellow named Jackson Andrews, an evocation of Andrew Jackson. Each of the Echotas gropes toward their
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annual family bonfire commemorating Ray-Ray on the Cherokee National Holiday. Spare, strange, bird-haunted, and mediated by grief, the novel defies its own bleakness as its calls forth a delicate and monumental endurance.

A slim yet wise novel boils profound questions down to its final word: “Home.”

KLARA AND THE SUN
Ishiguro, Kazuo
Knopf (320 pp.)
$27.95 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-593-31817-1

Nobelist Ishiguro returns to familiar dystopian ground with this provocative look at a disturbing near future.

Klara is an AF, or “Artificial Friend,” of a slightly older model than the current production run; she can’t do the perfect acrobatics of the newer B3 line, and she is in constant need of recharging owing to “solar absorption problems,” so much so that “after four continuous days of Pollution,” she recounts, “I could feel myself weakening.” She’s uncommonly intelligent, and even as she goes unsold in the store where she’s on display, she takes in the details of every human visitor. When a teenager named Josie picks her out, to the dismay of her mother, whose stern gaze “never softened or wavered,” Klara has the opportunity to learn a new grammar of portentous meaning: Josie is gravely ill, the Mother deeply depressed by the earlier death of her other daughter. Klara has never been outside, and when the Mother takes her to see a waterfall, Josie being too ill to go along, she asks the Mother about that death, only to be told, “It’s not your business to be curious.” It becomes clear that Klara is not just an AF; she’s being groomed to be a surrogate daughter in the event that Josie, too, dies. Much of Ishiguro’s tale is veiled: We’re never quite sure why Josie is so ill, the consequence, it seems, of genetic editing, or why the world has become such a grim place. It’s clear, though, that it’s a future where the rich, as ever, enjoy every privilege and where children are marshaled...
into forced social interactions where the entertainment is to abuse androids. Working territory familiar to readers of Brian Aldiss—and Carlo Collodi, for that matter—Ishiguro delivers a story, very much of a piece with his Never Let Me Go, that is told in hushed tones, one in which Klara's heart, if she had one, is destined to be broken and artificial humans are revealed to be far better than the real thing.

A haunting fable of a lonely, moribund world that is entirely too plausible.

**YELLOW WIFE**  
Johnson, Sadeqa  
Simon & Schuster (288 pp.)  
$26.00 | Jan. 12, 2021  
978-1-982149-10-9

An enslaved young woman’s experiences come wrenchingly alive in this vivid historical novel.

Pheby Delores Brown, the novel’s narrator, was born on a Virginia plantation to its owner, Jacob Bell, and Ruth, one of the women enslaved there. As a child, Pheby was sheltered from much of the harshness of slavery, even taught to play the piano and to read, although the latter is against the law. Pheby is almost 18—the age at which Jacob has promised to free her—when the book opens in 1850. But Jacob has married a younger wife, Delphina, who resents Ruth and Pheby bitterly. When Jacob takes Ruth on a trip, Delphina sells Pheby to a slave trader. Roped into a coffle with dozens of other enslaved people for the long walk to Richmond, she is thrust into a nightmare of brutal, dehumanizing treatment. In Richmond, at a notorious slave trading center called the Jail, light-skinned, pretty Pheby is marked for sale as a “fancy girl.” But Rubin Lapier, the White man who owns the Jail, claims her for himself even though she is pregnant with the son of Essex Henry, a stable hand at the Bell plantation, now a runaway. Although Richmond’s White elite get their wealth from slaveholding, traders like Lapier are considered disreputable enough that White women will not marry them. Pheby becomes his “yellow wife,” running his household and bearing him five children. Johnson’s first-person narration gives the reader a window into the terrible burden of double-naturedness that Pheby carries, always performing submission to keep herself and her children safe, painfully aware that behind Lapier’s usually courteous treatment of her is a ruthless sadism. As time passes, she realizes she must find a way to send her Black son, Monroe, to freedom before Lapier sells him (or worse) in some fit of anger, and her life becomes much more dangerous. Johnson is unsparing in her depiction of the physical, psychological, and spiritual damages wrought by slavery and realistic in her portrayal of the heroism of Pheby and others in resisting it—they cannot change the world, but they do what they can, and sometimes that’s extraordinary.

A horrifying but ultimately moving story anchored by a complex narrator.
here: a historical novel tied to a family saga tied to a psychological portrait of a boy who might or might not be a prodigy. Alessandro would have made a fine focal point for the novel, but Levi seems to lose interest in him. She flits from one character to another without resting. That means, unfortunately, that none of the characters really come alive, and we never learn why Alessandro’s mother is so permanently disappointed or why his grandfather is so annoyed by his own daughters. Too many minor characters clutter these pages, and while some of them occasionally reappear, others only show up once before disappearing. Levi has a fluid style and a clear talent for storytelling, but this novel, at least, is not particularly successful.

Interesting in parts, Levi’s book asks more questions than it seems prepared to answer.

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**THE BLIZZARD PARTY**

*Livings, Jack*

*Farrar, Straus and Giroux*  
(416 pp.)  
$28.00 | Feb. 23, 2021  
978-0-3742-8053-6

From acclaimed story writer Livings, a first novel that might be called a detour de force: sprawling, discursive, loose-limbed (and impressive).

Our narrator is Hazel Saltwater, daughter of a renowned and prodigiously phobic writer. At 6, she was the still center in the drugged-out maelstrom of a bash held by neighbors in the Apelles, her family’s grand Upper West Side apartment building, on the snowy night of Feb. 6, 1978. While watching TV in a back bedroom, Hazel made the peculiar acquaintance of Albert Caldwell, an elderly ex-lawyer who, having confirmed his descent into dementia, earlier in the evening had staged an emergency, slipped away from the hospital, and crashed a cab on his way to drown himself in the Hudson River. Albert was interrupted in this plot by Vikram, a boy—later Hazel’s husband—who delivered him back home to the Apelles and, it turns out, a yet more spectacular fate. That fate became the germ of Hazel’s father’s most famous book, which starred a fictional version of Hazel. The book we’re reading, it soon emerges, is Hazel’s own four-decades-later reconstruction of that night, which she treats as a Rosetta Stone to unlock every secret and explore every connection in her life before and since—and in the lives of all those constellated around her. The book ranges with supreme confidence from its titular setting to World War II Europe, 9/11, and beyond. Livings’ nearest model may be the doorstop-sized novels of Tom Wolfe...and this book is similarly digressive, maximalist, and prone to old-fashioned manipulations of sentiment. Livings may not quite have Wolfe’s journalistic chops, but he’s a far more skillful and empathetic novelist, and what seems moralistic and preening in Wolfe’s books reads here mostly as playful and nimble, if mildly self-indulgent. One may wonder why a first-time novelist in 2020 would follow the Wolfe/Balzac template for the Novel of Everything...but the fact is that Livings, amazingly, pulls it off.

An exuberant, everything-and-the-kitchen-sink pleasure.

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**NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS**

*Lockwood, Patricia*

*Riverhead*  
(224 pp.)  
$25.00 | Feb. 16, 2021  
978-0-593-18958-0


Lockwood first name for herself on Twitter: “@parisreview So is Paris
Get the ultimate inside scoop on the best new books.

New episode every Tuesday

Podcast Available on iTunes
any good or not." Such was the acclaim of this 2013 tweet that the Paris Review felt compelled to respond to it—a year after it was first posted—with a review of Paris. In 2013, Lockwood achieved a new level of web-based fame when “Rape Joke” went viral. This poem seems, in retrospect, to have been perfectly calibrated for a moment when people—mostly young or youngish, largely online—were asking themselves who gets to talk about what and how. But it also succeeds—and continues to succeed—as a work of literature. All of this is to say that Lockwood is very much of the internet but also, perhaps, our guide to moving beyond thinking of the internet as a thing apart from real lives and real art. Her debut novel is divided into two parts. The first introduces us to a nameless protagonist who makes up famous tweets and composes blog posts and turns this into a career traveling the world talking about tweets and blog posts. In the second part, this character goes back to her family home when she learns that the baby her sister is carrying has a profound congenital disorder. The first part is written in short little bursts that feel like Instagram captions or texts—but if Lydia Davis was writing Instagram captions and texts. The second part is written in short little bursts that feel like they’re being written in spare moments snatched while caring for an infant. (Again, Lydia Davis comes to mind.) This bifurcation mirrors the protagonist’s own meditations on the difference between the life that she chooses online and the life that comes crashing in on her, but it’s a mistake to imagine that this novel is simply an indictment of the former and a celebration of the latter. The woman at the center of this novel doesn’t trade ironic laughter for soul-shattering awe so much as she reveals that both can coexist in the same life and that, sometimes, they may be indistinguishable.

An insightful—frequently funny, often devastating—meditation on human existence online and off.

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH
Margolin, Phillip
Minotaur (320 pp.)
$27.99 | Mar. 9, 2021
978-1-2502-5842-7

Portland attorney Robin Lockwood takes on the defense of a homeless boxer who’s been framed but good for murder. Joe Lattimore has a bad feeling about allowing himself to be drafted into an illegal no-holds-barred fight, but the $300 he’s offered would settle his wife and baby daughter in a motel room for a few nights while he looks for work. Things go from bad to worse when he apparently kills the man he’s fighting and agrees to burgle a stranger’s home as his price for the recording of the fight. Inside, Joe finds the corpse of Elizabeth Carasco, the wealthy wife of Judge Anthony Carasco, whose life has changed in dramatic ways ever since he was picked up by escort Stacey Hayes. Joe swears he’s innocent, but the cops have his fingerprints inside the house and a pair of witnesses, one of them Judge Carasco, who saw a man who looks a lot like him fleeing the scene shortly after the murder. It’s an ideal case for Robin, who’s not only a dab hand in the courtroom, but a former mixed martial arts warrior who, in a rare dead end, expresses an interest in returning to the ring undercover in order to expose the culprits who arranged the illegal fights and a whole lot more felonies. Margolin keeps the story steadily absorbing, replacing whatever surprises you might have expected with new revelations of the plotters’ ever more violent and treacherous behavior that make you nod with appreciation. Everything purrs along until one character too many gets killed and Robin suddenly finds herself wrestling with a genuine whodunit.

“I feel like I’m in a movie sequel,” the presiding judge observes, but there’s nothing wrong with that.
A complex portrait of sexual abuse set in the world of pre-Olympic equestrian competition.

DARK HORSES

Mihalic, Susan
Scout Press/Simon & Schuster
(352 pp.)
$27.00  |  Feb. 16, 2021
978-1-9821-3384-9

A complex portrait of sexual abuse set in the world of pre-Olympic equestrian competition.

Debut novelist Mihalic takes us inside a life of extreme privilege, equestrian “eventing”—a kind of horse-based triathlon—and sexual predation with Roan Montgomery, a feisty 15-year-old Olympian-to-be who confides her story in a clear-eyed narration. From the outside, Roan’s life looks too good to be true. She’s the youngest competitor in her high-stakes equestrian world, attends a ritzy prep school, and lives on the sprawling grounds of her family’s Rosemont Farms in the picturesque Shenandoah Valley, complete with an extensive staff, multiple horses, and a father-cum-trainer who’s working to make her the next Olympic gold-medal winner in their family. Look closer, though, and the cracks appear. Her mother’s an addict/alcoholic with no bandwidth to care for Roan, sleeping with the headmaster at her daughter’s school. Her father, meanwhile, has been sexually abusing her for years. From the moment Roan gets to know Will Howard, one of her classmates, and feels the first tug of genuine connection, the fireworks start. Her father wants to keep Roan all to himself, and Roan craves her father’s undivided attention and the goals he’s set for her while also wanting to escape his abuse. To the author’s credit, this is no poor-little-rich-girl story. Rather, Mihalic complicates the narrative at every turn, creating a disturbing and flinty picture of what abuse, psychological control, and rage look like. The emotions Roan feels toward her father are multilayered and confusing, speaking to the gnarled nature of their relationship. When he tells her before an interview to “Just be yourself,” she knows that’s code for inhabiting the persona he’s created. Though the narrative occupies taboo terrain, it does so with great heart and thereby honors Roan’s love-hate experience in all its bewildering and inscrutable nature.

A searing examination of love and lust, power and control, as the narrator’s rising sense of self yearns to take the reins.

Something I Keep Upstairs

Philip Crawford


“...a colorful mix of admirable characters and a few despicable ones.”

“...a satisfying conclusion that’s perfect for the optimistic reader...”

—Boomer Magazine

“...the protagonist emerges as likable and authentic, yet his humorous narration never obscures his underlying struggles with severe trauma.”

“An assured mystery with an engaging narrator and a distinctive cast.”

—Kirkus Reviews

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THE IMPOSTER
Montgomery, Marin
Thomas & Mercer (416 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Mar. 9, 2021
978-1-5420-2298-9

What could be more touching than the reunion of a long-estranged mother and daughter? Practically anything, as Montgomery unsparringing reveals.

Derailed from her meteoric ascent to the legal stratosphere by accusations that she’s slept with client and divorcing dreamboat Nico Marcona, alcoholic associate Sibley Bradford lies to her husband, professor Holden Bradford, avoids checking into the rehab her boss has mandated, and drives 1,300 miles to take refuge with her mother in the frigid Midwest. It’s an odd choice because Sibley hasn’t spoken to Deborah Sawyer in years; if she had, she’d know her mother is wrestling demons of her own. Mother and daughter were torn apart by some troubled history, from the death of Deborah’s farmer husband, Jonathan, 16 years ago in a fall from his barn loft to the unsettling evidence that Deborah was having an affair with Edward Pearson, a veteran whose PTSD drove him to suicide. Even before she turns up unannounced on Deborah’s doorstep, Sibley has already overheard a conversation that makes her suspect she’s not actually Jonathan’s daughter. For her part, Deborah, after greeting her daughter warily, becomes more and more suspicious that this woman isn’t actually Sibley. Talking to Dr. Alice Alacox, the psychiatrist her mother had recently begin consulting, Sibley comes away with the deeply equivocal wisdom that “what we forget is more important than what we remember.” Officer Miles Fletcher, Sibley’s old high school friend, warns her that two convicts have recently escaped from a nearby prison. But they can’t possibly pose a greater threat than Sibley and Deborah do to each other.

A deep dive into some dark family places. Seriously dark.

WONDROUS JOURNEYS IN STRANGE LANDS
Nimr, Sonia
Trans. by Qualey, Marcia Lynx
Interlink (224 pp.)
$15.00 paper | Dec. 4, 2020
978-1-62371-866-4

Palestinian author Nimr spins an elegant fable of literacy, romance, and derring-do.

The Village, as locals call it, “was so isolated that no one knew of its existence, except for a few of the merchants who traded with the villagers.” It is also a place where books are forbidden to girls for fear that reading will turn their heads from the truth, and adult women who dare express independence are sent to the “House of Shamed Wives.” Young Saeed will have none of it, and after he escapes to the city, becoming a bookseller and falling in love with the beautiful Jawaher, he returns to help lift a curse and liberate the Village, though at terrible cost. Shams and Qamar, Saeed and Jawaher’s daughters, take separate paths when they are orphaned: Shams lives quietly while Qamar, armed with a book Saeed had treasured—one that gives Nimr’s tale its title—embarks upon truly wondrous journeys indeed, most involving love and loss. In the first, Qamar leaves Gaza for Egypt in a caravan in which, night after night, she takes the role of a Scheherazade-like storyteller: “I told them a story I’d read in a book,” she recounts, “about a sailor lost in the Sea of Darkness, who remained there for many years, fighting the waves, horrors, and monsters of the sea, until finally he triumphed and returned to his family.” Brigands beset the caravan, and though they edit her heavily to be sure that the bad guys in any given story win the day, her talents win her an elevated place in a palace—and then, in turn, aboard a pirate ship and in royal households from Morocco to India. Nimr’s story is both fabulous and utterly matter-of-fact, and, notably, at every turn women are the leaders and the shapers of their worlds. The writing is lovely, too, as when Qamar tells us, “On
the watery surface, I could see my life clearly written, each stroke of the oars another page of my life.”

Small in size but epic in scope: a delightful, profoundly meaningful adventure.

MONA

Oloixarac, Pola
Trans. by Morris, Adam
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (192 pp.)
$25.00 | Mar. 16, 2021
978-0-374-2189-9

In this third novel by Argentinian Oloixarac, an award ceremony for a major European literary prize takes an apocalyptic turn.

The eponymous protagonist, a Peruvian writer and doctoral candidate at Stanford, leaves California for Stockholm to attend the award ceremony for the prestigious Basske-Wortz literary prize. Drugged to the gills and covered in bruises from a night she can't remember, she sips Stoli on the plane, ignoring the messages on her phone and meditating on American racism: “American universities shared certain essential values with classical zoologists, for whom diversity was a mark of attraction and distinction.” She and 12 other writers from around the world, all finalists, converge for four days of panels and lectures beside a Swedish lake. Oloixarac’s debut novel, Savage Theories (2017), was a bestseller in Argentina and catapulted her to a certain literary fame; she describes this congress of international writers with a jaundiced and convincing eye. (As the French finalist puts it, literary festivals are good because “the memory of them is so repulsive, and you end up so disgusted by the writing ‘community’ that you have no choice but to stay home and write.”)

Savage Theories displayed the dizzying, at times manic, promise of a writer making original connections between wide-ranging subjects. This is a narrower effort and a considerably less successful one. There’s a lot of material here: ideas about what it means to write, about politics and South American literature (“Now that leftist culture is mainstream, it means absolutely nothing. Think about it: What does it mean to be a leftist? Eating vegan?”); a decapitated fox; Mona’s mysterious bruises; a mythological sea serpent; plenty of nudity and several sex scenes (“She’d waxed a few days beforehand and her pores grazed the pink fabric of her panties like the wet snouts of tiny rabbits”). But there’s little narrative cohesion between them. After reading a draft of her next book, Mona’s French translator asks, “Why should I care about these people?” Why, indeed?

Disappointing, because this author can do better.

THE KITCHEN FRONT

Ryan, Jennifer
Ballantine (416 pp.)
$28.00 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-0-593-15880-7

Stir together estranged sisters, prisoners of war, dastardly men, and whale-meat pie recipes; leave to simmer.

It’s 1942, and England’s women have been given a directive straight from Winston Churchill himself: Keep a stiff upper lip and do your part in your kitchen for the war effort. At the forefront of this messaging is a BBC radio show—hosted by a man, Ambrose Hart—that teaches Britain’s housewives how to make a lot out of very little. The BBC decides the show would better reach its intended audience if it were co-hosted by a woman; to find this feminine voice it holds a three-part cooking competition whose prize is the coveted radio spot. Enter Audrey, a war-widowed mother of three with a scrappy bakery
business; Gwendoline, Audrey’s haughty sister, who’s married to a bigwig factory owner; Nell, a meek but talented kitchen maid; and Zelda, an elite London chef with a secret. The book is divided into the three-part structure of the cooking competition, and while the novel is somewhat slow to start, Ryan hits her stride during “Main Course.” As a bonus for history buffs, many chapters end with ration-conscious recipes ranging from the eccentric (sheep’s head wrapped in its own tongue) to the more mundane (apple cake sweetened with honey instead of the hard-to-come-by sugar). Replete with a hearty amount of melodrama — “My own butler saw you with that fancy chef....Do you want to make a fool of me? Do you?”— and more than a dash of that wartime staple, saccharine— “You’ll be surprised what the power of friendship can do”— this is nonetheless a creative and satiating novel.

Certain to delight lovers of historical fiction and TV cooking competitions.

The Lost Village
Sten, Camilla
Trans. by Fleming, Alexandra
Minotaur (352 pp.)
$26.99 | Mar. 23, 2021
978-1-2502-4925-8

An aspiring TV producer and her skeletal crew of four head deep into the Swedish hinterland to make an underfunded documentary series about a village that vanished overnight 60 years ago.

What could possibly go wrong?

One day in 1959, Silvertjärn was a mining village of 887 inhabitants. The next day, its population was down to two: Birgitta Lidman, bound to a post and stoned to death in the town square, and a baby girl left in a schoolroom. Alice Lindstedt has been haunted all her life by the mystery of the vanished citizens, whose numbers included her grandmother, retired nurse Margareta, and most of her relatives. In the years since, there have been remarkably few clues. The infant, adopted long ago by a couple who raised her as Hélène Grimelund, knew nothing about the fate of her birthplace, but now Alice, who’s fought through poverty, temp jobs, and clinical depression, is resolved that “The Lost Village is my ticket out of all that.” Things go badly from the beginning. Co-producer Tone Grimelund sprains her ankle while she’s exploring one of the deserted houses and then disappears herself. Someone sets the crew’s vans on fire, and Alice’s college friend Emmy Abrahamsson, cameraman Robert, and financial backer Max eye each other warily even as they agree that the culprit must have been someone else. All the while, debut novelist Sten is counterpointing their adventures with a series of flashbacks to 1959, bringing Silvertjärn closer and closer to the brink of annihilation.

A memorably creepy newcomer to the crowded field of Nordic noir that’s worth a miniseries itself.

Tsumura, Kikuko
Trans. by Barton, Polly
Bloomsbury (416 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Mar. 23, 2021
978-1-63557-691-7

In Tsumura’s English-language debut, an easy job is hard to come by.

Over the past few years, there’s been a surge of novels centered around millennial women disillusioned with the modern workplace. They’re part of a genre that’s taken the unattainable ideals of late capitalism to task with dark humor. Tsumura’s novel gingerly joins those ranks thanks to a protagonist who’s still recuperating from “burnout syndrome.” After leaving what she thought was the job she’d always wanted, the book’s narrator—a 36-year-old woman who’s left nameless—moves back in with her parents.
and begins to search for an “easy job.” Essentially a perma-temp, she idly floats from one uneventful gig to another—surveilling a hidden-camera feed, writing bus advertisements, punching tickets for a public park—leaving each one the moment she excels. The irony is that as much as she wants to coast through life, she can’t resist the seductive pull of its small thrills, however mundane they may be. Tsumura’s droll wit is so subtle it’s almost imperceptible. It’s the kind that challenges the reader to pay close attention to the nuances at work beneath the narrative. When strange occurrences begin to tail our hapless narrator, the book takes on an unsettling quality but also that of a cozy mystery. To say the least, it has a strange, almost calming effect, like the serenity that comes from building out a perfect spreadsheet. By the book’s end, you realize you’ve just taken a 400-page tour through the lonely world of entry-level jobs, and somehow it leaves you feeling weirdly optimistic.

One thing’s for certain: You won’t have to work to enjoy this book.

THE ELEPHANT OF BELFAST

Walsh, S. Kirk
Counterpoint (336 pp.)
$27.00 | Apr. 6, 2021
978-1-64009-400-0

A determined zookeeper in Northern Ireland protects a young elephant during World War II.

Walsh’s novel is inspired by the true story of Denise Austin, a Northern Irish zookeeper who hid an elephant in her house during the 1941 bombing of Belfast by German Luftwaffe forces. The concept sounds whimsical, but this is not a light or frivolous novel. Ambitious zoo assistant Hettie Quin is young, but she has already suffered too much tragedy. Her father abandoned his family for another woman, leaving her mother distraught and depressed. Hettie’s beloved sister, Anna, recently died in childbirth, and their mother wants nothing to do with Anna’s Catholic widower or their child. Hettie’s part-time job at the zoo pays little, and life during wartime is hard. Into this emotional vacuum swings Violet, a young elephant Hettie first sees hoisted from the hold of a ship. She’s enchanted with the animal but isn’t allowed to care for her until Violet’s caretaker enlists. As their bond grows, rumors fly that Germans plan to bomb the city while IRA supporters align themselves with the Germans, gleeful over attacks on London. Walsh delivers a turbulent portrait of life in a divided city, and she wisely steers away from anthropomorphism. The animals, especially Violet, are real, messy, unpredictable creatures who don’t behave as their caretakers might like. As Walsh sets the stage for the bombing, though, sometimes the novel feels padded out, with interludes that don’t add up to much. On occasion Hettie’s behavior feels too impulsive and unlikely, robbing her of any common sense. Still, Walsh offers a unique perspective of a country at war and the lengths people will go for those they love.

A fresh perspective on painful losses during wartime.

THE ARTIST SPOKE

By Ted Morrissey

Avant-garde author Elizabeth Winters has died en route to Revelation, a literary event for her readers who have volunteered to be part of her latest novel . . . without knowing what their participation would involve.

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For information on representation and film rights, contact jtedmorrissey@gmail.com • tedmorrissey.com

RUNAWAY JUSTICE

Zunker, Chad
Thomas & Mercer (234 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-5420-2552-2

His third case entangles Austin lawyer David Adams with a most unlikely client.

Parker Barnes is only 12, but he’s already been through a lifetime’s worth of grief. Orphaned years ago, he bounced from one foster home to the next until an unpleasantly explicit insinuation from his latest nonfather made him steal $100 and take off on his own. Parker’s never been in a big city, and he makes for Austin as a promised land where he can live on the streets. His plans go spectacularly awry when he’s hauled in for helping a slightly older drifter named Skater steal purses shortly after he’s witnessed the fatal shooting of businessman Max Legley in Pease District Park. David, who has lots of experience
dealing with homeless people in Austin, steps up to represent Parker and quickly gets him released and admitted to a relatively humane group home. As it turns out, though, Parker may have been safer in jail. FBI agent Harry Zegers has seen a recording of Parker that puts him close to the murder scene in space and time, and since Legley was a federally protected witness, Zegers is hot to bring him to justice, even if that killer was only 12. At the same time, Richie Maylor, the ex-con who really did pull the trigger on behalf of a party to be named later, is under orders to mop up the loose ends—and he seems suspiciously well informed about everything David and Parker do.

A routine suspenser with a standout performance by a tough, resourceful preteen.

OLD SINS
Adams, Jane A.
Severn House (224 pp.)
$28.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-7278-9244-7

In 1929, DCI Henry Johnstone proves a string of suicides to be anything but.

When Otis Freeland, a mysterious government agent who’s crossed his path before, visits Henry claiming he wants to check out the view from his apartment across from the Thames, the veteran detective knows better. Sure enough, the wily Freeland happens to mention the recent deaths of two of Henry’s retired colleagues, DS Walter Cole and DCI Hayden Paul, who helped put away the dangerous villain Richardson when Henry was just a pup. Both died in a way that suggested self-dispatch, Paul after some dramatic financial reversals, but autopsies easily revealed that neither of their fatal wounds was self-inflicted. While puzzling over the two deaths, Henry attends a masked ball at the home of his sister, Cynthia, whose husband, Albert, has also suffered losses in the latest market crash. While he’s there, a reveler in flamenco costume presses a note into his hand warning that things are not as they seem, and presto: Albert tells Henry that a shocking number of his friends have also done away with themselves rather than face the consequences of their portfolios’ having vanished. Soon, Henry’s left wondering whether anything is as it seems. With his bagman, DS Mickey Hitchens, at his side, he interviews a series of grieving widows and bereaved mothers. There’ll be bodies to be exhumed, shady financial deals to be exposed, and a clandestine visit to Henry from Diamond Annie, leader of a gang of female thieves called the Forty Elephants.

Perhaps too replete with incident for many procedural fans.

THE MAN WHO DIDN’T FLY
Bennett, Margot
Poisoned Pen (256 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Jan. 5, 2021
978-1-72822-000-0

One of the British Library Crime Classics’ most obscure discoveries is this 1955 tale about a chartered airplane that crashes on route from England to Ireland, killing all four men aboard—a number that was supposed to be five.

After publishing seven variously successful crime novels, Bennett (1912-1980) shifted to writing for television. It would be hard to top the premise of her sixth novel for sheer ingenuity.
Businessman Joseph Ferguson, unable to book a commercial flight, charters a plane that goes down in the Irish Sea. The pilot is dead, and so are three of his four planned passengers: Ferguson, shady broker Maurice Reid, unemployed hypochondriac Morgan Price, and childlike poet Harry Walters. Which of the men failed to board the flight? Why? Did he arrange the crash? Where is he now? The inquiries of Inspector Lewis and DS Young focus on Tower House, the home of Maurice’s friend Charles Wade, where all three of the others had put in an appearance in the days before most of them died. Wade has obviously been marked by Maurice as lamb to be shorn; his daughter Hester is charmed and beguiled by Harry, whom everyone else heartily dislikes, an antipathy shared by Ferguson’s wife (or maybe widow), Moira. A series of extended flashbacks to those last few days calmly skewers the pretensions of all the characters while allowing each of the four designated passengers to audition for the role of sole survivor. An acridly amusing 1945 short story, “No Bath for the Browns,” provides a brief addendum that’s worth every word.

For fans who like their nostalgia served with a side of wicked cleverness.

A Louisiana belle adjusts to life in Brooklyn.

**KILLER CONTENT**

*Blache, Olivia*  
Berkley (304 pp.)  
$16.00 paper | Feb. 2, 2021  
978-0-593-19788-2

A Louisiana belle adjusts to life in Brooklyn. Odessa Dean might have been content to live life as a waitress at the Crawdad Shack in the minuscule town of Piney Island, which, according to her, is neither an actual island nor particularly filled with conifers. Instead, she’s rescued by that linchpin of cozies everywhere: her maiden aunt. Instead of dying, Odessa’s Aunt Melanie simply goes off to Europe for three months, leaving her niece to housesit a Williamsburg apartment that would be large even by Piney Island standards but is positively palatial compared to the efficiencies and squats her Brooklyn co-workers cram themselves into. Because yes, Odessa trades her Crawdad Shack apron for the neon green T-shirt that’s the uniform of the waitstaff at Untapped Books & Café, where instead of shrimp po’boys she offers hummus and microbrews to local hipsters. The Untapped crew is a varied bunch. Izzy Wilson is bright and energetic, happy to spend her days making customers happy. Chef Parker Reed does his best to accommodate carnivores and vegans alike. But Bethany Kostolus aspires to more than serving the sandwich of the day. She hopes that her Y0utube videos will propel her to fame as a nationally recognized maker of artisanal soap. Unfortunately, her dreams end in a fall from the elevated pedestrian walkway in Domino Park. Detective Vincent Castello assures Odessa that Bethany’s death was an accident, but Odessa isn’t convinced. In lieu of the standard cute cop-vs.-talented amateur standoff, Blache’s quirky characters and offbeat plot twists allow her debut to work some pleasing variations on the theme.  

Refreshing fare.

**FURBIDDEN FATALITY**

*Blake, Deborah*  
Berkley (288 pp.)  
$7.99 paper | Feb. 23, 2021  
978-0-593-20150-3

A stray kitten starts a recent lottery winner on the journey to restore an animal sanctuary in spite of an evil dog warden. Dropping off the kitten that’s been wandering outside her Lakeview apartment complex is supposed to be a quick errand for Kari Stuart. But when she finds the shelter full to capacity, Kari wonders if she’s going to be stuck with her new...
companion. An animal lover, Kari’s already got two cats and a dog, and now they’re joined by what her groomer friend Suz estimates is a 3-month-old black kitten with an attitude so big that Kari decides to call her Queenie. Kari’s frustration about the full shelter leads her to the Serenity Sanctuary rescue, with its run-down building, volunteer support staff, and seemingly hopeless financial situation. Kari buys it on the spot out of her $5 million lottery winnings. As she settles into her role as shelter manager, she realizes that she’s inherited a whole host of problems, not least of them the shelter’s nemesis, county dog warden Bill Myers. Myers, who seems to hate animals as much as Kari loves them, has even built a legal case against Buster, one of the shelter’s sweetest pups. Kari isn’t afraid to advocate for herself and her animals loudly and fiercely. That becomes an issue when Myers is found strangled on shelter property after a particularly bad run-in with Kari. Given Myers’ reputation in the community, Kari’s sure she can find a more reasonable suspect than herself and her staff, especially since Queenie seems to want to help in any way she can.

An animal-centric whodunit that clearly flags good guys and bad guys.

**LEGACY OF DEATH**
*Cutler, Judith*
Severn House (240 pp.)
$28.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-7278-8939-3

Dastardly doings at an English manor house.

For reasons that are never entirely clear, some of the servants at Thorncroft House, Lord Croft’s estate, have been named trustees of the place, along with the capital-F Family’s solicitor, the local doctor, the vicar, and several other prominent villagers. The Family wing has been converted into an asylum, although it’s never quite clear which members of the Family are being housed there or why. The trustees are also in charge of a large-scale project renovating the villagers’ dwellings to give them more room, better sanitation, and such other improvements as the villagers themselves propose. It all comes to a screeching halt when some Roman ruins are found beneath the excavation and then one of the shelter’s sweetest pups. Kari isn’t afraid to advocate for herself and her animals loudly and fiercely. That becomes an issue when Myers is found strangled on shelter property after a particularly bad run-in with Kari. Given Myers’ reputation in the community, Kari’s sure she can find a more reasonable suspect than herself and her staff, especially since Queenie seems to want to help in any way she can.

Nobody dies, but it takes a village, quite literally, to put things right upstairs, downstairs, inside out.

**THE STONE OF DESTINY**
*Doherty, Paul*
Severn House (224 pp.)
$28.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-78029-114-7

The great plague may be over and the rebellion crushed, but London in 1381 is still home to political intrigue and gruesome murders.

A monk is killed in Westminster Abbey; and a man known as the Flayer is murdering streetwalkers and then stripping them of their skin, so Sir John Cranston, Lord High Coroner, calls upon his reliable helper in crime-solving, Brother Athelstan, the parish priest of St. Erconwald, to help him investigate. The Flayer seems to be copying crimes from the past, so Athelstan seeks information from the odd and unusually knowledgeable members of his parish whose long memories have helped him before. Then four more monks, all Scots, are found poisoned under seemingly impossible circumstances while Athelstan’s parish entertains Austin Sinclair, a Scottish prior who seeks information about the prior rebellion. The Scots still want the return of the Stone of Scone, housed at Westminster Abbey, and royal regalia taken by Edward I in 1296. Two former rebels who are actually spies for John of Gaunt visit St. Erconwald to talk to Sinclair and are found hanged in a locked room. Athelstan must step carefully in investigating murders tied to powerful prelates and Gaunt, the king’s uncle and master intriguer. A deep dive into history reveals the motives; Athelstan must discover the methods or join the ranks of the dead.

A tortuous, fascinating historical mystery whose finally honed descriptions are not for the faint of heart.

**GILLARD’S STING**
*Duffy, Margaret*
Severn House (224 pp.)
$28.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-7278-9054-2

A London crime-solving duo gets pulled into some freakish and dangerous events.

Patrick Gillard resigned from the National Crime Agency after he and his wife, Ingrid, were targeted by criminals. Ingrid continues to write crime novels and Patrick’s taken a job as an insurance investigator. But a man with his many talents is never far from the eyes of his old law enforcement colleagues. It’s no surprise when his former NCA boss, Michael Greenway, shows up with Patrick’s gun and offers him a contract to find John Brinkley, a missing senior cop accused of dishonesty.
A Mississippi newlywed takes a pre-honeymoon break to solve a case of murder.

COLD READING MURDER

Lee, R.J.
Kensington (304 pp.)
$15.95 paper | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-4967-3147-0

A Mississippi newlywed takes a pre-honeymoon break to solve a case of murder.

Wendy Lyons Winchester and Detective Ross Riereson have just tied the knot under the benevolent gaze of her father, Police Chief Bax Winchester. Wendy, whose job as investigative reporter for the Rosalie Citizen still leaves her plenty of time for bridge, has started teaching a group of five novice players. One of them, Rosalie native Sarah Ann O'Rourke, is under the thumb of her extremely religious mother. The others, all new arrivals, are Charlotte Ruth, the nervous widow of a man who died by suicide; Vance Quimby, an author who's soaking up Mississippi atmosphere; Aurelia Spangler, who claims to be psychic; and talented Milton Bagdad, who delivers singing telegrams for Party Palooza. Wendy agrees to give the first lesson at the home of Aurelia, whose prognostications make the others so nervous that Milton actually flees town. When Wendy discovers Aurelia dead of a cocaine overdose, the intuition that's helped her solve several murders encourages her to insist that her husband and father ignore Aurelia's suicide note and investigate. After Bax asks an old friend with ties to dope dealers to sniff around for the source of the cocaine, the friend's murder makes Wendy even more certain that Aurelia was murdered. She digs up plenty of hidden secrets about the people who visited Aurelia the day of her death, but which of them was worth killing for?

A very Southern mystery with authentic characters, a well-hidden killer, and some helpful bridge tips.

SUMMER OF SECRETS

Harrison, Cora
Severn House (224 pp.)
$28.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-7278-9039-9

Harrison continues the Victorian adventures of unlikely sleuths Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins.

The more celebrated Dickens has taken Collins under his wing and procured an invitation for him to a house party at the estate of Lord Edward Bulwer-Lytton. The literary work leaves Collins cold. The staid party is shaken up when Lady Rosina Bulwer-Lytton arrives after a long separation, part of which she's spent in one of those posh lunatic asylums where unhappy men hide their troublesome wives. Collins finds Rosina charming and takes her part against Bulwer-Lytton and his loathsome secretary, Tom Maguire, whom Rosina easily bests when he tries to get rid of her. Meanwhile, Dickens' son Charley has fallen for Nelly, the lovely young actress who's been hired to help stage one of Bulwer-Lytton's plays, with guests playing the other parts. Taking Bulwer-Lytton's place at the dress rehearsal, Maguire is shot dead. Was he the intended victim, or was it a case of mistaken identity? Dickens and an estate dog he befriended saved Nelly from an attempted rape by Maguire that gives Nelly one motive and Rosina another. Resolved to protect them both for different reasons, Dickens and Collins cleverly misdirect the police as they seek a satisfactory solution.

An inspired premise and compelling characters make the third in this series the best to date.
deadly enemy. Once a friend deciphers Poole’s notebook, it leads Simon to two cavalry officers stationed at the local barracks. Since Poole is dead and his fence has left town, the officers are seeking an alternative to deal with. Simon gradually encourages them to consider him. Meantime, his wife, Rosie, finds that the soldiers are badly in debt, and Jane turns up an amazing find from a friend of Poole’s: an exquisite and priceless Book of Hours. As Simon plays a dangerous game with the officers, hoping to lure them into a trap, Jane’s doubts about Martha deepen.

Another cleverly detailed mystery thick with historical atmosphere and nuanced characters.

MURDER IN AN IRISH BOOKSHOP

O’Connor, Carlene
Kensington (304 pp.)
$26.00 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-4967-3079-4

Garda Siobhán O’Sullivan dithers over her wedding plans and learns some important life lessons while solving two murders.

Siobhán and her fiance, DS MacDara Flannery, are eagerly anticipating the opening of a new bookshop in Kilbane when the body of book lover Margaret O’Shea is found near the shop, a long way from the Twins’ Inn, where she lived. Margaret had been in declining health but still full of life, and Siobhán’s unease over her death. Author Deirdre Walsh is in town for the opening along with fellow authors Nessa Lamb and Lorcan Murphy and literary agent Darren Kilroy, whose client Michael O’Mara, author of a wildly popular fantasy dragon series, is rumored to be in danger because of his drinking. Siobhán notices there’s no lost love between the authors as they snipe at each other and vie to be signed by Kilroy. An event at the bookshop is combined with a surprise for Siobhán’s 29th birthday. While the lights are out, someone kills Deirdre. The obvious suspects are the other authors, who the Garda find are all hiding secrets. But the list of suspects expands when the pathologist finds that both Deirdre and Margaret were killed with arsenic placed on old wallpaper stuck under their tongues.

A mélange of clues from classic mysteries plus plenty of Irish charm produce an enjoyable read, middling for this series.

A SIDE OF MURDER

Pershing, Amy
Berkley (320 pp.)
$7.99 paper | Feb. 23, 2021
978-0-593-19914-5

A Cape Cod native returning home to settle an estate barely escapes death—and not all her neighbors are so lucky.

Samantha Barnes left the Cape to follow her love of cooking to the Culinary Institute of America and New York’s finest restaurant. When her great-aunt Ida passes away, leaving everything to Sam, soon after an embarrassing feud with her ex, another chef, goes viral, she decides to bid farewell to New York. Although Ida’s house needs work, it’s in a prime location, and seeing Jenny and Miles, her high school best buds, is an added treat. Sam also enjoys the company of next-door neighbor Helene, though not so much the enormous puppy that comes with Ida’s house. Sam also enjoys the company of next-door neighbor Helene, though not so much the enormous puppy that comes with Ida’s house. Sam also enjoys the company of next-door neighbor Helene, though not so much the enormous puppy that comes with Ida’s house. Sam also enjoys the company of next-door neighbor Helene, though not so much the enormous puppy that comes with Ida’s house. Sam also enjoys the company of next-door neighbor Helene, though not so much the enormous puppy that comes with Ida’s house.

Cape Cod provides a stunning background for a debut that offers the ideal combination of mystery, romance, and recipes.

BECOMING INSPECTOR CHEN

Qiu Xiaolong
Severn House (240 pp.)
$28.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-7278-9044-3

Reinvigorated by a baffling murder puzzle, a veteran Chinese detective contemplates his past.

The title of Inspector Chen’s 11th case has a sly double meaning, introducing both a deep dive into the literary detective’s early life and an unexpected professional resurgence late in his career. On the verge of retirement and relegated to a peripheral post in the Shanghai Police Bureau, Chen reflects on the early years of his career and recalls his childhood in the 1960s amid the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. “Little Chen” is a budding man of letters who finds inspiration in a forbidden copy of Doctor Zhivago. He grows up just a few blocks away from the infamous Red Dust Lane. His literary career begins in the 1970s, as a poet and translator. Series fans will be rewarded by another elegant mix of recent history and
literary embellishments and a richer Chen backstory, though newcomers may be impatient. In the present, Chen has earned the disfavor of Party Secretary Li, who orders him to translate an American police procedural booklet and freezes him out of important investigations. Chen is still writing poetry and translating The Unbearable Lightness of Being when a murder case involving Red Dust Lane piques his interest. He can’t resist circumventing Detective Ding, the arrogant young colleague in charge of the probe, to question witnesses in the death of Mr. Fu, an eccentric elderly widower. As Chen makes strides, Ding can only grumble. Though Chen unearths a handful of suspects, the vengeful police focus only on an ex-Red Guard member named Pei. What should Chen do?

Qiu’s stylish hybrid is half fictional literary memoir and half crisp whodunit.

**AN UNEXPECTED PERIL**
Raybourn, Deanna
Berkley (352 pp.)
$26.00 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-393-39726-4

A scandalous Victorian couple test the limits of their relationship when they get involved in yet another murder.

Why is lepidopterist Veronica Speedwell bored with life in London? After all, she and her love, the Hon. Revelstoke Templeton-Vane, better known as Stoker, are living on a lovely estate while they work on a vast collection of objects of natural history and help design an exhibit to honor Alice Baker-Greene, an intrepid mountaineer and feminist, who died in a climbing accident in the tiny country of the Alpenwald. Princess Gisela of the Alpenwald herself comes to open the exhibit. All goes smoothly until Stoker finds Alice’s climbing rope among the exhibition items and notices that it wasn’t frayed but cut with a knife, turning her fatal accident into murder. Veronica, who’d met and admired Alice, is keen to investigate, but Stoker’s not interested in expanding their case files. Their discoveries soon put them at odds with a clever killer.

Oodles of diverse characters add extra interest to a knotty mystery.

**WHAT WAITS FOR YOU**
Schneider, Joseph
Poisoned Pen (384 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Jan. 5, 2021
978-1-4926-8447-3

An abrasive, erudite detective matches wits with an uber-violent serial killer.

When Bill and Joanne Lauterbach’s worried daughter is unable to reach them for days, police check out the couple’s home. Rookie patrolman Evan Porter and his training supervisor, Sgt. Melissa Banning, find a chaotic, horrific scene. Porter announces cryptically that “the house is bleeding” before going inside, where he’s violently attacked, ending up in the ICU. Banning’s not so lucky. This is the fourth bloody incident involving The Eastside Creeper, a killer believed to spend hours hiding inside other people’s homes before he violently strikes. Nerves in Los Angeles are already frayed because of a massive earthquake a week earlier, and morale at the Hollywood police station is understandably low. Enter sardonic, overeducated LAPD detective Tully Jarsdel, who banters with his partner, Morales, over the killer’s profile. Bureaucratic scrambling comes to the fore as Jarsdel’s taken off the case, then invited onto Hollywood Special, the new unit handling it. Tensions rise even higher after the wife of the lieutenant leading the Special becomes a victim. The road to apprehension is full of detours that accommodate Schneider’s juicy prose and quirky characters. There’s an extended feud with Jarsdel’s increasingly irrational father. And Jarsdel, who left a Ph.D. program in English to join the force, describes the opinions of colleague and possible love interest Alisha Varna as “obelisks of intellectual rigor.”

A buoyant, unrestrained Grand Guignol noir, relishing the journey, indifferent to the destination.

**LAST NOCTURNE**
Trow, M.J.
Severn House (224 pp.)
$28.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-78029-130-7

More skulduggery high and low knocks at the door of a pair of Victorian enquiry agents.

Prostitution has never guaranteed a long life, but a rash of poisonings has taken London working girls at distressingly young ages. A year and a half ago, 17-year-old Mabel Glossop was discovered in Cremorne Gardens with a copy of Moby-Dick. Now she’s joined by Clara Jenkins, only four years older, posed with a copy of The Fruits of Philosophy. But it’s the third victim who’s the most shocking: Lt. Anstruther Peebles, found dead in woman’s apparel even though no one in his regiment would have suspected him of turning tricks. All three victims, it turns out, were artists’ models, and
so is Evangeline French, discovered with a copy of John Ruskin’s *King of the Golden River*. The Ruskin novel is of special interest to American-born painter James McNeill Whistler, who’s already hired his compatriot Matthew Grand and his English counterpart James Batchelor to conduct a thorough investigation of his enemy Ruskin. The stakes rise, and the case broadens, when Whistler’s *Nocturne in Blue and Gold* is one of several paintings vandalized as they hang in the Grosvenor Gallery, which, as Ruskin’s ex-wife, Effie Gray, assures Grand’s inamorata, Lady Caroline Wentworth, everyone knows is haunted. Series fans will know better than to expect all these threads to be tightly wound up. But Trow piles on the society gossip, celebrity cameos, and blood and thunder with the panache of a pastry chef concocting a mega-calorie dessert.

**Blink and you’ll miss the killer, who has to fight for attention with all the rest of the period mayhem.**

**DEATH GRIP**  
*Viets, Elaine*  
Severn House (208 pp.)  
$28.99 | Mar. 2, 2021  
978-0-7278-9018-4

Death is altogether too great a part of life for Missouri death investigator Angela Richman. Neither medical professionals nor law enforcement agents, death investigators occupy a peculiar niche in states where they serve. They examine the remains of those who die unexpectedly, suspiciously, or violently, collecting evidence to be used by coroners and police. Their job is not to investigate crimes, as Angela is constantly reminded. So she doesn’t usually investigate. Not when elderly Ruby Davis is found deceased in her living room with her finger partway hacked off. Not when plastic surgeon Robert Beningham Scott expires behind the wheel of his fancy sports car with other significant body parts waving in the wind. But when a corpse found in the woods is identified as that of high school track star Terri Gibbons, who disappeared months ago after a practice run, it’s hard for Angela to leave it be. Especially not when she finds a gum wrapper hidden in Terri’s shoe with a note scrawled on it implicating a prominent landowner in her death. Angela’s growing obsession with nailing Terri’s killer puts her own job and that of her best friend, Detective Jace Budewitz, in jeopardy. Does Angela care that much about the demise of a girl she never met? Or is she using Terri’s murder to tamp down her feelings about the passing that haunts her most of all: her husband’s fatal heart attack?

Viets produces chills with a murder hunt turned on its head.

**THE BRIDE WORE BLACK**  
*Woolrich, Cornell*  
American Mystery Classics (288 pp.)  
$25.95 | Jan. 5, 2021  
978-1-61316-199-9

The founding novel by the founding father of American noir returns to print. Woolrich (1903-1968) kicked off his Black series with this dark 1940 fantasy about a woman who targets five men for death for reasons that would be teasingly obscure if it weren’t for the title. Following the rule that “the really clever woman is all things to all men. Like the chameleon, she takes her coloring from his ideal of her,” Julie Killeen studies each of her targets at her leisure, discovers what they’re looking for in a woman, and then assumes that role. She crosses the path of man-about-town Ken Bliss just long enough to kill him. For the marginal recluse Mitchell, she poses as the partner in an impossible romance. Luring his wife away from home, she turns up on Frank Moran’s doorstep as his son’s solicitous kindergarten teacher. After posing as an irresistible model for the painter Ferguson, she sets her eye on her final target, the popular writer Holmes. Detective Lew Wanger has his suspicions about the murders even though the women who committed them seem to have little in common. Will he catch up with Julie before she finishes her work? After ratcheting up the tension bit by unnerving bit, Woolrich ends his tale with an ironic postmortem that casts Julie’s labors in an even darker light. The pattern behind her crimes is so stark, simple, and compelling that Woolrich couldn’t resist reprising it in *Rendezvous in Black* (1948), which readers may want to seek out if they’re still able to sleep after gulping this nightmare down.

A point-by-point inversion of romantic idealism that’s still memorably disturbing 80 years on.

**SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY**

**THE UNFINISHED LAND**  
*Bear, Greg*  
John Joseph Adams/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (384 pp.)  
$26.00 | Feb. 16, 2021  
978-1-328-58990-3

In this Elizabethan historical fantasy, a young apprentice fisherman finds himself pushed north by strange currents to a ring of magic islands.
The Pale Dreamer is back after narrowly surviving torture at the hands of the clairvoyant-hating Republic of Scion.

THE MASK FALLING
Shannon, Samantha
Bloomsbury (528 pp.)
$26.00 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-1-63557-032-8

The Pale Dreamer is back after narrowly surviving torture at the hands of the clairvoyant-hating Republic of Scion in The Song Rising (2017).

Scion would prefer you to think the Pale Dreamer is dead. And the dreamer herself, Paige Mahoney, is OK with that. The girl from the clairvoyant underworld of London is no more. Since defeating her previous mime-lord, Jaxon, and becoming Under-queen of London’s clairvoyant community—turned-rebellion, Paige has molded herself into the leader known as Black Moth. And while Black Moth has gained a vast following for the rumor that she single-handedly destroyed the clairvoyant-detecting system Senshield, she has barely escaped that victory with her life. After Paige is forced to flee London, the start of this long-awaited fourth installment of Shannon’s Bone Season series finds her with her battle armor off, convalescing while in hiding in Paris alongside Arcturus Mesarthim, her controversial guardian and supporter. For those with rusty memories, Arcturus belongs to an immortal race known as the Rephaim, who were forced to leave the Netherworld as their home fell to ruin. Scion’s biggest secret is that it’s run by the Rephaim behind the scenes, most notably by Nashira Sargara, who seeks to control the world’s clairvoyant community to serve the Rephaim. Arcturus defied Nashira to help Paige seek rebellion, and now this oddly matched pair are bound to one another. Paige barely has time to rest when a new underground group, the Domino Programme, comes knocking. This network of free-world spies wants her help as they attempt to undercut Scion—which is planning to invade the Iberian Peninsula—from the inside using Paige’s gift as a Dreamwalker. Not used to taking orders, Paige balances risky operations within the inner circles of Scion leadership while trying to establish connections with the Paris clairvoyant sydicate. Between her duties as an agent as well as Black Moth, coupled with the exhausting will they, won’t they bit with Arcturus, it’s enough to make Paige literally out of breath. The constant slew of injuries, action scenes, and near-death escapes, which further shift the series’ genre from fantasy toward the dystopian realm, detracts from the excellent worldbuilding that is the tale’s beating heart. Sticking with Paige to the end will leave you with new secrets about the Rephaim and Scion’s future plans, along with an emerging threat that is sure to surprise—and will give readers hope to know her sister better, but once the action starts, it rarely lets up. The no-nonsense, rough-and-tumble Lizbeth is not afraid to pull the trigger, especially when protecting those she loves, no matter the cost.

Well conceived but deeply flawed.

THE RUSSIAN CAGE
Harris, Charlaine
Saga/Simon & Schuster (304 pp.)
$27.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-4814-9499-1

In Harris’ third novel set in an alternate, fractured America, bodyguard/gun for hire Lizbeth Rose must travel to the Holy Russian Empire to stage a risky prison break for her sweetheart, Eli Savorov.

Lizbeth is still recovering from having been shot during a recent mission with Eli (who is a grigori, or wizard), during which she found out she had a half sister named Felicia Karkarov. The last time Lizbeth saw Felicia was when she put Eli and the girl on a train to the Holy Russian Empire (formerly known as California and Oregon) after a daring shootout with a group that wants Czar Alexei dead. When Lizbeth receives a coded letter from Felicia with news of Eli’s imprisonment, she hops a train to the HRE, confident that she’ll hatch a plan to spring him from jail along the way. Luckily, she’ll have help from some capable allies: Felicia, who is attending the grigori Raspustin school in San Diego; Felix, a grigori whose power for raising the dead comes in mighty handy; and Eli’s very proper mother and sisters, who are much tougher than they look. They’ll need all the help she can get in one of her most dangerous, and personal, missions yet. Harris takes some time to introduce readers to the Holy Russian Empire, and Lizbeth delights in getting to know her sister better, but once the action starts, it rarely lets up. The no-nonsense, rough-and-tumble Lizbeth is not afraid to pull the trigger, especially when protecting those she loves, no matter the cost.

An entertaining addition to a consistently fun series.
that we have yet to learn everything about the potential of human clairvoyance. Thrilling, indeed.

A tantalizing, strategic setup for the next installment, which has all the ingredients to be a knockout.

**ACCIDENTALLY ENGAGED**

*Heron, Farah*

Forever (368 pp.)

$15.99 paper | Mar. 2, 2021

978-1-5387-3498-8

A Toronto woman joins forces with her handsome neighbor to win a scholarship to culinary school.

Reena Manji’s strong circle of friends and her cooking and baking projects keep her happy despite her lackluster finance job. However, being 31 and having a dozen failed relationships behind her means that her loving but overbearing parents have stepped up their efforts to find her the perfect Muslim husband. Their newest prospect is Nadim Remtulla. He grew up in Dar es Salaam, attended boarding school in England, and now he’s in Toronto working on a real estate deal important to both of their families. Reena can afford her city apartment since her father owns the building, and he offered Nadim an apartment next to hers, hoping to throw them together. Reena has artfully dodged all of her family’s previous matchmaking attempts, but Nadim proves impossible to resist. He’s charming and attractive, but most importantly he agrees to be her partner in a local cooking contest. If Reena wins, she can attend culinary school and leave her boring finance job behind. Heron writes a compelling story of a woman trying to balance personal fulfillment against the intense pressures of familial duty and cultural expectations. Reena’s relationships with her father, mother, and sister are filled with past hurts and secrets, creating a realistically thorny and complex family dynamic. Although Reena makes progress in understanding her place in the family, the solutions are not pat and easy. Nadim is not a point-of-view character and not as well developed; Reena’s personal journey is the main focus of the novel.

Will appeal to readers looking for complex family dramas and sumptuous descriptions of food and cooking.
OWN THE ARENA
Getting Ahead, Making a Difference, and Succeeding as the Only One
Adams, Katrina M.
Amistad/HarperCollins (288 pp.)
$26.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-0-06-293682-0

Former United States Tennis Association president Adams reflects on her career and the lessons she has learned.

Never a superstar but always a solid player, the author began playing tennis as a 6-year-old in Chicago and turned pro in 1987, after two years at Northwestern. She retired as a singles player in 1998 and as a doubles player a couple years later. She went on to coach tennis; in 2003, she became a commentator on the Tennis Channel after asking aloud, “How can you not have a diverse analyst when your No. 1 and 2 players in the world are African American?” In 2015, she became the youngest person, the first former player, and the first African American to head the USTA as well as the first person to serve two two-year terms in the role. Eschewing a straightforward chronological narrative, the author arranges the book by topic. A chapter on her experience playing doubles segues into a discussion on how to collaborate with other people in various business settings, and one on her work with the Harlem Junior Tennis and Education Program expands to cover the stories of several of the kids who have benefited from it. Throughout the book, Adams pays tribute to her many mentors and coaches and the “sheroes” who have inspired her, including Billie Jean King and Althea Gibson, as well as her thoughts on star players like Venus and Serena Williams. The author comes across as reserved rather than revealing. While she sprinkles in amusing anecdotes about jokes she and her tennis buddies played on each other and hints at disappointment that she does not have a romantic partner, readers shouldn’t expect any shocking revelations. For the majority of the text, Adams focuses on sharing what she has learned along the way.

A modest, likable, and encouraging account of a life in progress.
Despite what Fox News and other propaganda machines like to proclaim, the concept of a so-called “post-racial America” is a myth. There was no such thing when Barack Obama was our first non-White U.S. president, and it certainly doesn’t exist now—even as we finally rid ourselves of the racist instigator that has occupied the White House for four interminable years.

As a White man, I won’t ever claim to speak for Black Americans. What I will do, however, is listen, learn, and continue to educate myself and voice my opinion about issues that I think are worthy of discussion and action. In the U.S., topping that list is systemic racism, a moral disease that is more deeply ingrained in American history than any other societal ill. But I have been heartened and emboldened by the burgeoning anti-racism movement, led by Ibram X. Kendi, the Black Lives Matter warriors, and countless other brave heroes—even in the face of constant attack from the president, his followers and enablers, and a discouragingly growing number of hate groups.

I’m also inspired by the concomitant celebration of Black culture in all its forms, exemplified in two standout December books.

**Black Futures** (One World/Random House, Dec. 1), edited by Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham, is a dynamic, beautifully rendered exploration of Black culture and creativity, a brilliant mixed-media feast for the eyes, mind, heart, and soul. As our reviewer notes in a starred review, “the work is vivid, juicy, thick—as fecund as all of Black culture—and equal parts anthology, scrapbook, and art exhibition. The editors and contributors make clear the ‘infinite’ nature of Blackness via more than 500 crammed pages of essays, art, interviews, and ephemera.” Drew and Wortham are refreshingly bold and ambitious, noting that “this is just one manifestation of a project that spans millennia....Like us, this book lives and breathes beyond temporal Western frameworks.”

I think infinite is the right descriptor, as the editors pull together significant contributions from an all-star roster of writers and artists—among them, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Teju Cole, Zadie Smith, Kiese Laymon, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Samantha Irby, Hanif Abdurraqib, and Deborah Roberts. (If that list alone doesn’t get your attention, check your pulse.) Thankfully, it appears that this book may be the first in a series of sorts, as the introduction presents the book as “the first iteration of ‘The Black Futures Project.’”

The vibrancy of Black culture is also on full display in **Girl Gurl Grrrl: On Womanhood and Belonging in the Age of Black Girl Magic** (Amistad/HarperCollins, Dec. 8), Kenya Hunt’s debut book “highlighting the successes, challenges, and perseverance of Black women in the 2010s.” In addition to her own story, Hunt offers contributions from other potent voices, including Ebele Okobi, Facebook’s Head of Public Policy for Africa; Funmi Fetto, executive director and beauty director at *Vogue*; and Candice Carty-Williams, author of the breakout novel *Queenie*, which Kirkus called “a black Bridget Jones, perfectly of the moment.”

Hunt is certainly attuned to the gravity of our current moment. “I hope this book reminds you,” she writes in the introduction, “that even in the midst of angst and chaos, we’re here, loving, persevering, growing, and finding the meaning in life as we go.” In our starred review of **Girl**, our critic notes that, “taken together, the essays form a chorus of Black diasporic voices across continents, covering the politics of Black hair, self-acceptance and White beauty standards, activism, motherhood, ‘the abysmally poor maternal health outcomes of Black women in the US,’ and more.” This vital collection is as passionate and celebratory as **Black Futures**, and both are must-reads.

*Eric Liebetrau is the nonfiction and managing editor.*
THE HOSPITAL

Life, Death, and Dollars in a Small American Town
Alexander, Brian
St. Martin's (320 pp.)
$28.99 | Mar. 9, 2021
978-1-250-23735-4

A superb account of a small-town hospital whose first priority is delivering high-quality medical care. Sadly, in today's brutally competitive free market, that means it's barely surviving.

In this eye-opening investigative study, journalist Alexander takes us to Bryan, Ohio, which has mostly recovered from the 2008 recession and possesses a surprisingly good hospital for its size (pop. 8,000). The author offers vivid portraits of a dozen individuals, including the hospital's CEO, Phil Ennen, and readers will receive an expert education in his duties. Delivering care is one, but the business side is difficult. If rival medical centers steal business, customers don't pay, or income doesn't match expenses, his hospital will fail. Small hospitals have two strikes against them: Suppliers charge them more, and insurance companies pay them less (big medical systems negotiate for higher reimbursement; small ones have no clout). The free market extols efficiency above all. Once part of a larger system, Bryan's hospital would see its staff trimmed, unprofitable services eliminated, and specialists moved to bigger cities. With less to offer, the hospital would become a drag on larger facilities; if it continued down that path, it would eventually close, a process that is playing out across the U.S. As of 2020, the hospital is hanging on and may even survive the pandemic, which is proving equally disastrous to rival hospitals. However, the future looks grim. Like all hospitals, Bryan's depends heavily on government money, especially Medicare and Medicaid, but it's not adequate, and this is unlikely to change in the near future. Like many states, Ohio has been cutting taxes and social services since the Reagan years, producing stagnant wages and declining health but only scattered calls for reform—certainly not in Bryan, where “a local politician could blame problems associated with a...business on the fact the owner was ‘not of American extraction’ and know he wouldn’t hear any disapproval.”

A deeply insightful and disheartening portrait of America's diseased health care system.

BOOMERS

The Men and Women Who Promised Freedom and Delivered Disaster
Andrews, Helen
Sentinel (256 pp.)
$27.00 | Jan. 12, 2021
978-0-593-08675-9

A cultural critic offers a takedown of baby boomers.

In a book modeled on Lytton Strachey's Eminent Victorians (1918), Andrews delivers a millennial's arguments against the boomers and their lofty ideals. Though the author's idea is well conceived, the narrative suffers from disorganization and conservative pieties. Rather than broadly attacking a vast and complex generation, Andrews wisely sets her sights on six well-known targets: Steve Jobs, Aaron Sorkin, Jeffrey Sachs, Camille Paglia, Al Sharpton, and Sonia Sotomayor. These figures give the author the opportunity to tee off on many of her bêtes noires, including Silicon Valley, school busing, and the idea that pop culture should be taken seriously. The narrative is a loosely organized collection of essays, the best of which is the one about Sorkin, in a fairly conservative intellectual vein; it's well researched and written with brio and attitude but not enough cohesion. A few of these pieces loop back to the boomer premise in only the most superficial way, with a paragraph about boomers inserted seemingly as an afterthought. Andrews lays out her case clearly in the preface: “They inherited prosperity, social cohesion and functioning institutions. They passed on debt, inequality, moribund churches, and a broken democracy...."
The boomers should not be allowed to shuffle off the world stage until they have been made to regret" their failures. The prose is mostly engaging, but sometimes the author simply misses the mark—e.g., when she tries to take down James Baldwin: “Baldwin’s writing was inspired not by oppression but by his personal neuroses...his error was to project his pain onto the black experience.” Were Baldwin still alive, he might remind Andrews that he’s not a boomer. For a more incisive exploration of the millennial-boomer rift, try Anne Helen Petersen’s Can’t Even (2020).

Andrews is fair in much of her criticism, but one wishes for a more cogent argument.

As this slim yet philosophically dense volume suggests, consent doesn’t guarantee enjoyable sex—and may in fact inhibit it.

British academic Angel considers the relatively new concept that sexual interaction should rely on a man asking for, and a woman granting, permission for each sequential act involved. (For the purposes of this book, she focuses on cis men and women: “The particular quandaries affecting trans people’s experience of sex, as well as those in same-sex relationships will, I hope, find some resonance and recognition in the dynamics I explore here, but the fine-grained texture of those quandaries are not mine to explore, and others are better placed to be doing (and to have done) that vital work.”) In chapters about consent and vulnerability, the author makes the point that “we do not always know what we want” and that clearly stating your desires does nothing to prevent “miserable, unpleasant, humiliating” sex. The book’s ironic title—borrowed from a 1976 essay by French philosopher Michel Foucault that criticized contemporary “sexual liberationists”—suggests that positive sexual interactions cannot be willed into existence. Rather, they depend on “conversation, mutual exploration, curiosity, uncertainty—all things, as it happens, that are stigmatized within traditional masculinity.” Angel argues that sexual relationships don’t have much to do with the conscious and the verbal but, especially for women, with what goes on beneath the surface of consciousness. The one certainty she returns to repeatedly is that “we shouldn’t have to know ourselves in order to be safe from violence.” Because she builds her case on her own observations and experiences more than scholarly research, some readers may be skeptical about her authority while others will find the logical arguments that she makes convincing. Some might also wish for even more personal stories to be woven into what is generally a cerebral and abstract book. Still, Angel raises intriguing questions about commonly accepted assumptions, and she offers reassurance to female readers.

A provocative counterargument to recent feminist dogma.
Hate that mask you have to wear to the store? Get used to it if you want to stay alive.

Ashton, chief medical correspondent for ABC News, dismisses the often heard refrain that one day things will get back to normal. Covid-19, she writes, has introduced an invisible, perhaps indomitable threat into our lives, and even if a vaccine is developed, it’s likely that it will have to be modified every year or two to take into account the mutations of the virus. Additionally, there are different levels of risk: If you’re of retirement age, a male, and a person of color, the odds are not in your favor; neither are they if you are overweight or have diabetes, high blood pressure, or some other chronic health condition. As the author shows, it’s up to each person to determine their health-risk quotient and make decisions such as whether to eat in restaurants. This quotient can be altered, of course. Making changes in diet to favor a low-sugar, low-carb regimen will help along with exercise, adequate sleep, and limiting alcohol intake. As for the rest: Flying is fairly safe, she writes, as long as you fly with an airline that blocks middle seats and “book a window seat to keep your distance from people moving up and down the aisle.” But stay away from gyms, which “have always been prime places for infectious illness.” Ashton sees “silver linings” in all the grim news, one of them being the dawning awareness that it’s up to us to improve our health and thus our chances for survival; another is a reordered sense of priorities. For the medical profession as a whole, she urges that “we need more health research on race,” and “we need to rethink the drug supply chain.”

A sobering, educative assessment of the changes that the pandemic has wrought on our world.
A gripping, true-life account of three young people whose promising lives are brutally interrupted by war.

“A beautiful, moving and important book about survival and the power of the human spirit.”
—Simon Reeve, Broadcaster and Author

“A harrowing, intimate examination of civil war’s toll.”
—Kirkus Reviews

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THE OCEAN IS CLOSED
Journalistic Adventures and Investigations
Bradshaw, Jon
Ed. by Belth, Alex
ZE Books (320 pp.)
$35.00 | Mar. 17, 2021
978-1-73354-014-8

A long-overdue anthology of writings by a great—and now largely forgotten—long-form journalist.

Charming, handsome, and erudite, Bradshaw, who died in 1986 at age 48, surprised no one when Mick Jagger crossed a room to spend an hour chatting with him. Said biographer A. Scott Berg, according to editor Belth, “he was possibly the most social animal I ever knew.” Yet while the parties were in full swing, Bradshaw would get to his typewriter, writing impeccable stories that embodied top-flight literary journalism. Some of the pieces here touch writers such as W.H. Auden, who emerges as somewhat grumpy slob, just this side of a hoarder, who saw himself as a working stiff who worked in language as others worked at lathes. For any Auden admirer, this opening sketch is worth the price of admission. The same holds for Bradshaw’s piece on Tom Stoppard, who observes that he preferred to write for the stage rather than the far more lucrative medium of TV because “in a theater one has the full attention of one’s audience, whereas while watching television one tends to glance at the newspaper, to talk, or to answer the telephone.” Bradshaw
I MEANT TO DIVORCE MY WIFE, NOT MY DAUGHTER
BY ZEV LEWINSON

This searing personal narrative of beautifully-woven bricolage events will leave the Orthodox Jewish community, our criminal Divorce Court system, and God himself torn to shreds.

ISBN: 978-1-940649-10-8

EARLY 2021

For Information on Publishing and Film Rights, Email:
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Barack Before Obama: Life Before the Presidency (Ecco/ HarperCollins, Dec. 1) is a visually arresting collection of photos that illustrate Obama’s trajectory from state politician to U.S. president. After college in 2004, David Katz spent months on the road with Obama and his team, serving as official photographer—and driver, aide, confidant, coordinator, and a host of other roles. After Katz graduated from Stanford Business School, the campaign brought him back to serve as the photographer for Obama’s 2008 presidential run. Our starred review calls this beautiful book “a brilliantly photographed tribute to the rise of the 44th president.” I spoke to Katz via Zoom; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

When you started, did you have a sense of how high Obama could rise?

If I told you that I thought he was going to be president, I would be lying. When I joined him, he was in third place in the Democratic primary. In addition to photographing him, I drove him around the state for campaign events, so we spent a lot of time together in the car. At one point, I told him, “Someday, Ken Burns is going to do a documentary on you.” And he said, “Don’t be ridiculous. Ken Burns does documentaries on the Civil War. He does documentaries on baseball. He’s not going to do a documentary on me.” He was completely flabbergasted that I said something like that.

Tell me about the genesis of your position.

I was the photo editor of the University of Michigan newspaper, and after college, I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do: Photography was one route, or politics, or something in the newspaper business. It just so happened that Obama’s campaign was ramping up, and I wondered how I could contribute immediately. Looking at the website and the photos, I thought I could improve it right away. In January 2004, I went to the campaign office and was introduced to the manager, Jim Cauley. He liked my portfolio, offered me a volunteer role due to cash constraints, but said that if they won the primaries in March, he would hire me to be the campaign photographer.

At the beginning, you attended one of Obama’s speeches at a church, and you were struck by his ability to connect with a variety of generations and people of different backgrounds. Can you elaborate?

From the very beginning, I observed that he had a unique ability to talk to multiple generations and have it ring true. To see him in that environment—where he had different age groups in one place and was able to address their needs without alienating another group and really get them together around a few core values—that was unique and special. I’ve seen him give graduation speeches, sobering messages to young folks about the level of competition out
there and the need to stay focused, and I’ve seen him give heartfelt speeches to seniors about challenges they face in their golden years. That ability to speak to such a wide variety of experiences drew me to him. Of course, everyone talks about how he connects across race. I’m half Chinese American and half Caucasian, so we shared a little of that connection — how we’re constantly having to code-switch or fit into different environments depending on the circumstance. He’s a natural at that. Obviously, there’s tons of pictures of him energizing young people, but I didn’t want people to forget that he had a strong connection to the older population as well.

His engaged demeanor feels authentic. Is that intuitive to him or something you and your colleagues had to consistently emphasize?

It comes natural to him. I included a quote by David Plouffe [Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign manager] about how Obama actually enjoys talking to people and listening to them. Plouffe said that most politicians are waiting until people stop talking so they can talk again, but Obama was actually interested in those conversations. That’s an important word, authenticity, and it came through with folks. They felt like they could trust him, and even though they may have had policy differences, they could respect him as a person, that they would be heard and taken into consideration. That comfort level is something I wanted to show.

Take me through your process of capturing a political candidate in such a wide variety of settings, from personal to professional. How do you navigate that?

He was remarkable at not getting distracted by a camera. There was only one time when he didn’t want me shooting: November 2004, the night he was elected as a senator and was preparing his speech for his supporters. He scolded me that one time. But I think the best political photographs come through when people don’t know that you’re there. During election night in 2008, I was literally lying sideways under the TV as they’re watching the results. No one in his family is looking at me; obviously, they’re looking at the TV, but I hope what comes through to readers is how they are feeling at that moment, that it just jumps off the page. Political photography is not just about the technical aspects and taking the picture. It’s about having a personal relationship strong enough that you almost blend in as a member of the family.

I can imagine it takes some time to develop that kind of comfort level.

Exactly, that’s a great point. Remember, we spent six out of seven days per week, 12 to 14 hours per day, campaigning outside of Chicago. We could do four to six events each day, and then we might drive five hours back to Chicago for a campaign fundraiser at 9 p.m. It was very hectic, and it was often just me, so we got a lot of one-on-one time.

Tell me about some of your favorite photos. Early on in the book, you point out a significant moment between Obama and his barber.

Yes, the barbershop one. I’ll just add one little bit on that. I actually grew up in that neighborhood in Hyde Park, and though this wasn’t my barbershop, I walked by this place all the time. The other special thing is that Zariff, the barber, would open the shop late at night because we were campaigning all day. Which meant we had an empty barbershop, and you rarely see that — so maybe his guard was let down a little bit.

Another series of photos I cherish is the one with Robin Williams and Stevie Wonder with Obama after a fundraising event. In one photo, Robin is doing an impersonation of Stevie, and it was just one of those great memories. And Williams’ son gave me a quote — “Three people at the top of their profession just being normal, joking around” — which I thought was a nice unguarded moment. The party was particularly meaningful for the Obamas because I think Stevie played a song that they heard on their first date. I left around midnight, and 40 minutes later, he played a concert for the 20 people who were left for another two hours.

Tell me about the timeline after Obama became president in 2008.

I worked in the administration for the first term, for the secretary of energy, and in the White House on the National Economic Council. Then I came back to California and have been in the business world ever since. I still see President Obama fairly frequently to play golf, and he is focused on his work with his foundation.

Barack Before Obama received a starred review in the Oct. 1, 2020, issue.
loved the social scenes on both coasts, as his portrait of the Polo Lounge reveals in a time just after W.C. Fields, John Barrymore, Sadakichi Hartmann, and others “formed the nucleus of an eccentric group of drinkers.” Surveying the lounge in all its seedy glory, he wrote, “dark, and filled with smoke and noise, it is populated with an unspeakable motley….The place creates an instant and malign impression on the mind and one turns away as from a lazaretto.” Alas, one suspects that it was a few too many cocktails and cigarettes that felled Bradshaw at such a young age—but not before turning in definitive character studies of the likes of Chris Blackwell, New York proto-gangbangers, and, perhaps best of the lot, Germany’s Baader-Meinhof gang.

Exemplary journalism by a writer who deserves to be in every nonfiction anthology and textbook henceforth.

TO RAISE A BOY
Classrooms, Locker Rooms, Bedrooms, and the Hidden Struggles of American Boyhood
Brown, Emma
One Signal/Atria (320 pp.)
$27.00 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-982128-08-1

An eye-opening exploration of modern boyhood and how parents can raise their sons to be better men.

The phrase “boys will be boys” is often used to dismiss violent and/or abusive behavior in boys and men. In this insightful, sometimes disturbing book, Washington Post investigative reporter Brown effectively demonstrates how such behavior can be avoided, a process that starts right after birth. Every interaction, relationship, discussion—even choice of toy—can affect the way boys view themselves, each other, and the girls and women around them. After hundreds of interviews with public health officials, parents, teachers, and boys across the country, the author was forced to “reexamine” her thoughts about boyhood. “We have failed boys,” she writes, “and our failure amounts to a public health crisis: they face staggering levels of physical and sexual violence, suicide rates that keep climbing, tight constraints on who and how they can be, and so much shame and fear….We simply have not given boys what they need to build relationships with themselves, with other boys and men, and with girls and women.” The author ranges widely, discussing the effect all-boys schools have on how boys perceive their peers and the opposite sex; the difficulty in understanding sexual boundaries and consent; the benefits of male friendships; and the efficacy of outreach programs that open venues for discussion with boys. In graphic detail, Brown explains the types of physical and sexual abuse that boys suffer at the hands of peers, older men, and even women, which may be a surprise to some readers. The author’s research findings and excerpts from interviews clearly convey the message that boys need better education about relationships, dating, sex, consent, pornography, and other relevant matters. Change is possible, notes Brown, and her informative book is a vital addition to the conversation.

A groundbreaking sociological investigation.

PURE AMERICA
Eugenics and the Making of Modern Virginia
Catte, Elizabeth
Belt Publishing (176 pp.)
$26.00 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-948742-73-3

The author of What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia (2018) returns with a history of Virginia’s eugenics movement and its interconnections with racial, gender, and class prejudices.
In this grounded, well-rendered, and highly disturbing account, Catte examines the period from the late 1920s to 1979 at the Western State Lunatic Asylum. It was, she writes, "a long era in the history of psychiatric medicine when therapeutic efforts primarily focused on containment and control, not care or cure." As part of the eugenics movement, Western State advanced its purity-of-race ideology, which taught that people with disabilities—and the just plain poor—were expensive social burdens. They were viewed as a disorderly class populated by "undesirables." Proponents of this concept were worried that the "unfit" would reproduce and create an ongoing social debt that could never be repaid. With justified outrage backed by copious archival evidence, Catte describes the process by which Virginia made eugenic sterilization legal. Importantly, the author also demonstrates how practitioners of eugenics did more than just sterilize the mentally ill and those who were not considered "pure." They also advanced the cause of White supremacy, controlled anti-establishment women, and exploited the impoverished. The movement created a comprehensive, hateful belief system about the kinds of lives that marginalized people deserved. Catte details the dire consequences for a whole galaxy of "mongrels"—a reprehensible classification that included immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Blacks, poor Whites, and Native Americans—from the illegalization of intermarriage ("when interbreeding between two races occurred, the worst traits always became the dominant traits") to the displacement of more than 500 families to create Shenandoah National Park. The author closes by examining the suppression of memory as it pertains to the thousands of sterilizations that occurred as well as Western State’s use of patients for free labor.

A well-told, richly contextualized investigation of an appalling episode in American history.
A beautifully written contribution to recent work of the African diaspora.

**FLOATING IN A MOST PECULIAR WAY**

*A Memoir*

Chude-Sokei, Louis

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (240 pp.)

$27.00 | Feb. 2, 2021

978-1-328-84158-2

A distinguished literary scholar delivers an affecting memoir of life as an exile, with a David Bowie soundtrack in the background.

“We were from Biafra, mind you. *Not* Nigeria.” So writes Boston University professor Chude-Sokei, who left his homeland after what has been called “Africa’s first televised war.” His father, a major, died in the conflict—assassinated, it was said—whereupon his mother, a Jamaican, returned to her native country with her young son. “All I had with me when I arrived in Jamaica,” writes the author, “was a song, not an Igbo song but a Western one played on the radio about floating in space and choosing never to come down. It was a song about someone named Major Tom, and it eventually became my only memory of my origins in Africa.”

Early on, as he shows in this forthright, deftly profound narrative, he stood as a definitive outsider, given to reading what an aunt called “foolish space books,” among the many things left behind when his mother moved her family to America. In the U.S., Chude-Sokei discovered further mysteries, including something he’d never heard before—the N-word—and something he’d never encountered before: an odd sort of racism that came at him from both sides, from Whites and from Blacks, such as a teacher who informed his schoolmates that “Africans were backward and spent all their time killing one another, like in Uganda and Biafra, and were an embarrassment to real black people.” With Bowie’s “Space Oddity” as his madeleine, the author grew up to explore both his adopted country and his native one. Just as Major Tom died along with his creator, so Chude-Sokei’s old world was eventually foreclosed as his cancer-stricken mother extracted a promise from him to bury her in Nigeria. And so he did, “placing my mother’s remains next to my father’s grave near the house he’d built for her before the war scattered us.”

A beautifully written contribution to recent work of the African diaspora.

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**THE TEN YEAR WAR**

*Obamacare and the Unfinished Crusade for Universal Coverage*

Cohn, Jonathan

St. Martin’s (416 pp.)

$28.99 | Feb. 23, 2021

978-1-250-27093-1

In a book that took 10 years to research and write, journalist Cohn offers a thorough history of the persistent controversy over health care insurance in the U.S.

In other developed countries, writes the author, governments “are firmly in charge, using some form of taxes or mandatory premiums to finance benefits.” But the U.S. has seen an often vociferous debate “over what obligations society has to its most vulnerable members.” Cohn provides an informative overview of health coverage efforts beginning in the 1920s. Franklin Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, and Carter all supported public health plans, but they faced opposition from private insurers and conservative politicians. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan led that opposition as president, tapping into widespread anger over federal support programs. Bill Clinton’s efforts to devise a plan encountered opposition from multiple fronts, including within his own party. In 2006, as governor of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney instituted bold reforms that gave the state’s citizens better access to health care and increased financial security, a model that later inspired Obama’s plans for national health care. Nevertheless, in 2010, Scott Brown won election as senator from Massachusetts by attacking Romney’s measure “as a corrupt, secretive exercise by political insiders.”
Cohn traces the fraught development of the Affordable Care Act, the controversy and compromises that led to its passage, and the continuing debate. Republican opposition, he asserts, began immediately after the law was signed on March 23, 2010, and became a rallying cry for Trump and his supporters. “At its core,” Cohn writes, “universal health care is all about common strength in common vulnerability. It’s a recognition that anybody can get sick or injured—that, by pooling resources together, everybody will be safe. It’s the same exact concept as Social Security and Medicare, and why the party responsible for them has spent nearly a century trying to extend health care guarantees to the rest of the population.”

A timely contribution to the literature on an urgent issue.

FEELING & KNOWING
Making Minds Conscious
Damasio, Antonio
Pantheon (224 pp.)
$23.00 | Apr. 13, 2021
978-1-5247-4755-8

The renowned neuroscientist delivers a short but definitely not superficial investigation of consciousness, widely but wrongly looked on as mysterious.

Damasio—the chair of neuroscience and professor of psychology, neurology, and philosophy at USC, where he heads the Brain and Creativity Institute—emphasizes that he has no patience with efforts to solve the “hard problem”—i.e., explaining how the mass of neurons in the physical brain generates conscious mental states. His reason: They don’t, at least not by themselves. While the brain plays an indispensable role, it requires input from “non-neural tissues of the organism’s body proper.” At the simplest level, our
On the bill of fare is deliciousness in all its manifestations—not simply taste, but the entire sensory experience of eating: taste, aroma, texture, color.

**PIRATING & PUBLISHING**

*The Book Trade in the Age of Enlightenment*

Darnton, Robert

Oxford Univ. (392 pp.)

$34.95 | Feb. 1, 2021

978-0-19-514452-9

A dusty window into the obscure world of the burgeoning publishing industry in 18th-century France and its environs.

At the time, the regulation of the industry and the resulting economics engendered a new enterprise: pirate publishing. Only a narrow band of elites could afford to produce and buy books, an economic reality that created a market ripe for counterfeiting. Without copyright laws, however, it was not technically illegal to reproduce these works outside of France. Thus began the “Fertile Crescent” of underground bookmaking. “From Amsterdam to Brussels, through the Rhineland, across Switzerland, and down to Avignon, which was papal territory in the eighteenth century, publishers pirated everything that could be sold with any success in France,” writes Darnton. “The foreign houses also produced everything that could not get past censors employed by the French government.” Though these literary bandits operated legally within their own countries, as soon as they smuggled their goods into France, they were on the wrong side of the law. In this erudite yet dry text, Darnton seems to have included every detail that emerged from his meticulous research, devoting attention to every book detail that did, or did not, occur for authors both familiar and unknown.

Darnton offers some intriguing economic insights, though few are unique to the publishing industry. Still, literary-minded readers will be impressed with the process by which a small number of men and women transformed a small book club for nobles into the massive cultural force that we know today. To be sure, many were just trying to make a living, but we owe them a great debt nonetheless. Unfortunately, the dense scholarly prose may fail to capture an audience beyond academics and students of the business of the Enlightenment.

General readers seeking enlightenment should skip the middle 75% of the book and go read Voltaire.

**DELICIOUS**

*The Evolution of Flavor and How It Made Us Human*

Dunn, Rob & Sanchez, Monica

Princeton Univ. (280 pp.)

$27.95 | Mar. 23, 2021

978-0-691-19947-4

A history of the influence of food and flavor on human evolution.

Dunn, a professor of applied ecology, and Sanchez, a medical anthropologist, ponder the role of deliciousness in the choices our ancestors made about food. The answers may seem obvious, but the authors reveal a deeper, broader story than many readers may expect. They note that while anthropologists and historians often talk about the diets and foods available to ancient peoples, seldom discussed is what their favorite foods might have been, what flavors enticed them, and why. Since the scientific literature has comparatively little to say about gastronomy, the authors speculate on the evolution of deliciousness in light of evolution, ecology, agriculture, and history. They also amplify their findings with considerations of neurobiology, physics, chemistry, and psychology. Our hosts at this empirical dinner party envision a new future for the study of flavor, with seats for the curious of every stripe. On the bill of fare is deliciousness in all its manifestations—not simply taste, but the entire sensory experience of eating: taste, aroma, texture, color. They also serve up theories on how early culinary traditions may have played a key role in the development of certain tools designed to make foods available, engendering further evolutionary changes, as well as considerations on how flavor and aroma seduce other species. In their view, food choice has been almost as much about pleasure as survival, and our ancestors set the table. Among the most interesting chapters is one that examines why humans began to use spices, likely as much for our primitive understanding of preservation (their ability to kill food pathogens) as for the novel flavors they imparted. On a darker note, Dunn and Sanchez investigate how, abetted by climate change, we have eaten many species to extinction. Their diligent research is evident in the 50 pages of notes.

A persuasive, entertaining argument about how our avid pursuit of deliciousness helped shape our evolutionary path.
MEDICARE FOR ALL
A Citizen’s Guide
El-Sayed, Abdul & Johnson, Micah
Oxford Univ. (344 pp.)
$19.95 | Feb. 1, 2021
978-0-19-005662-9

A guide to the policy, politics, and potential of health care for everyone. This book addresses significant questions that have bedeviled the American electorate for more than two centuries: Is health care a collective right? Should the government guarantee comprehensive coverage to its citizens under a single, publicly funded plan, or is a market-driven system more amenable to the public? El-Sayed, a physician, epidemiologist, and former health director of the City of Detroit, and Johnson, a resident physician at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, address these concepts as they apply to the “Medicare for All” proposition, uncovering its history and the nature of the policy through its design, implementation, and financing. The writing is passionately strong and candid, featuring a sense of balance and connect-the-dots scrutiny that conveys a well-rounded appreciation of the subject matter. The authors identify the key problems of the existing system, including expense, monopolization, lack of oversight, and the undermining of the doctor-patient relationship—all of which are the hallmarks of a system dominated by pharmaceutical and insurance companies and the hospital industry. The authors advance the notion that individual health care is crucial to our societal health, and they dissect the strengths and weaknesses of the Medicare for All proposal, which would offer comprehensive coverage, greater efficiency, and public accountability. There are few easy answers regarding its implementation, particularly in a politically charged atmosphere in which questions of abortion and immigration are on the front burner. Regardless, an awareness about the ins and outs of the Medicare for All system is a good start, and the authors demonstrate the need for a grassroots movement to generate a more informed electorate and thwart the disinformation and outright lies that permeate any discussion of health.
care. The book also features forewords by Bernie Sanders and Pramila Jayapal.

Cuts through the fog of health care complexity to offer a clear-eyed picture of a fairer, more sustainable system.

MATCHSTICKS
An Education in
Black and White
Engh, Fred with Seal, Jann
SquareOne Publishers (288 pp.)
$24.95 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-7570-0505-3

A memoir from “the first white student to receive his diploma at an all-Black college.”

“I was raised at a time when overt racism was practically everywhere,” writes Engh. In 1961, the author was a husband and father working a part-time job, and he had no real ambitions for a future. Then, one day, his mother told him he was a “failure,” sparking Engh to make some changes. He enrolled at Maryland State College (now the University of Maryland Eastern Shore), determined to get a degree in physical education. In this intriguing, entertaining look into the past, the author shares what it was like to become fully aware of the insidious entrenchment of racism in American society. He shares insights into his reeducation via his relationship with his friend Bob Taylor, a Black athlete who helped him on numerous occasions. Taylor’s friendship made Engh realize that shared interests and goals are significant elements in the struggle against prejudice. Interspersed with the primary narrative are sidebar timelines of major events that occurred between 1941 and 2020, which help anchor the author’s personal story in a historical context. Engh’s story, he writes, “is about an education and a friendship, and how anyone can change for the better given the right environment.” Given the “rampant” division that currently plagues our social landscape, the author’s lesson of acceptance and intellectual growth is heartening. Engh went on to found a nonprofit called the National Alliance for Youth Sports, which works to provide rewarding athletic activities for kids regardless of “color or ethnicity.” The author concludes that “racism will only become a thing of the past if we teach future generations not to hate others simply because they are different. We still have a long way to go, but it can be done. My relationship with Bob Taylor is only one example—my example—that shows that it is possible.”

Thought-provoking memories of a civil rights–era friendship that crossed racial lines.

CONFESSIONS OF
THE FLESH
The History of Sexuality,
Volume 4
Foucault, Michel
Ed. by Gros, Frédéric
Trans. by Hurley, Robert
Pantheon (416 pp.)
$32.50 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-1-5247-4803-6

The long-awaited culmination of the noted historian and philosopher’s multivolume work on human sexuality.

It has long been rumored that acolytes of Foucault, who died in 1984, would complete a work that the scholar intended to remain incomplete, having publicly stated that he wanted no posthumous publications. While it is true, writes Gros, that some of the draft work in the History of Sexuality series will not be published, the present volume was substantially complete. The subject is largely the “problematization of the flesh by the Christian fathers,” involving exegetical and teleological leaps. Following the teachings of second-century apologist Justin, it is dogma that one has sex only to produce children. This being a Foucauldian investigation, there are fascinating wrinkles and arcana aplenty. In the case of Justin, for instance, sex figures in a long catalog of “a code for living,” one that includes what one should drink, what sorts of shoes and jewelry are appropriate to Christians, what kind of furniture one should buy, etc. For his part, Clement of Alexandria and other theologians further the insistence that sex is for procreation, but again with a wrinkle, namely the “seemingly rather arbitrary distinction that Clement introduces between the generation of progeny, which must be the ‘goal’ of sexual relations, and the value of having descendants, which must be its ‘end.’ ” Foucault also explores how Adam and Eve must have been virgins, according to Augustine and others, operating along the lines of sexual magic that incorporates parthenogenesis, while the sexual act followed by later humans is an aspect of a “paroxysmal bloc” that binds together “sex, truth, and law.” That bloc was also closely monitored, surrounded by prescriptions and proscriptions, and governed by “a very precise codification of the moments, the initiatives, the invitations, the acceptances, the refusals, the positions, the gestures, the caresses, even the words...that can take place in sexual relations.”

A brilliant, challenging contribution to the history of ideas.
Lively history of the teenagers and young adults who fought some of the hardest battles of the civil rights movement.

Franklin, a former professor of history and education, begins with a moment unknown to most students of the civil rights era: its largest single demonstration, “not the August 1963 March on Washington, but the system-wide school boycott in New York City on February 3, 1964, when over 360,000 elementary and secondary school students went on strike.” Across the nation, schools became battlegrounds, with the students who integrated such places as Lanier High School in small-town Mississippi, some of them fresh from sitting in at a lunch counter in Jackson, serving as frontline soldiers. They were subject to verbal and physical abuse, and one young woman who answered back was expelled from Little Rock’s Central High School. Franklin reports the absurdities built into public school systems around the country as they integrated, willingly or not. In Milwaukee, for instance, Black students were bused to a White school in the morning, bused back to their old school for lunch, then bused back to the White school for afternoon classes. The young people who rose up in protest were sometimes brave, sometimes merely sick and tired, as when, nine months before Rosa Parks, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin refused to relinquish her seat on a public bus. “I was just angry,” she explained. “Like any teenager might be. I was downright angry.” No matter what their motivation, the students eventually won allies—the adult leaders of the civil rights movement, of course, but also Mexican American and White students who, radicalized in the later 1960s, took their side. The author finds reason for the struggle to continue today. “Children and teenagers must mobilize and demand that student loan debt be forgiven and that future generations of students leave college debt-free,” he urges, among other planks in a youth platform for today.

A compelling narrative that sheds light on a little-known aspect of the struggle for social justice.
An authoritative takedown of a corporation that evidently cares little for public health.

**THE MONSANTO PAPERS**

*Deadly Secrets, Corporate Corruption, and One Man’s Search for Justice*

Gillam, Carey

Island Press (320 pp.)

$30.00 | Mar. 2, 2021

978-1-64283-056-9

The story of a cancer victim’s search for justice against the multinational chemical conglomerate.

In this follow-up to *Whitewash: The Story of a Weed Killer, Cancer, and the Corruption of Science* (2017), which won the Rachel Carson Book Award, investigative journalist Gillam once again takes on Monsanto for its continuing distribution of Roundup, an herbicide whose active ingredient had been classified, in independent testing, as a carcinogen. The narrative follows Lee Johnson, a groundskeeper whose non–Hodgkin lymphoma was linked to his exposure to the herbicide. Gillam writes convincingly about Monsanto’s shameful misdeeds. Examining the nature of mass tort cases and medical malpractice, the gathering of depositions and internal corporate records, jury selection and the trial, the author provides consistent insight into the legal process as well as the moves and countermoves of the lawyers involved. The corporation’s deceptive intent is galling enough, but more shocking is the “cozy relationship between Monsanto and the EPA laid out so clearly in the employees’ own words.” In a careful, sometimes overly detailed text, the author builds a convincing case that Monsanto was more interested in protecting the reputation of its cash cow than heeding scientific evidence of its dangerous properties. Gillam is especially good at rendering the complex dynamics of the legal personalities, which adds a further humanizing dimension to Johnson’s story. In a careful, sometimes overly detailed text, the author builds a convincing case that Monsanto was more interested in protecting the reputation of its cash cow than heeding scientific evidence of its dangerous properties. Gillam is especially good at rendering the complex dynamics of the legal personalities, which adds a further humanizing dimension to Johnson’s story. For their part, the authors, Monsanto’s lawyers acted with “arrogance,” “hubris,” and a “lack of professional courtesy,” all in an effort to “wear down the will of the plaintiffs’ legal team.”

An authoritative takedown of a corporation that evidently cares little for public health.

Though rethinking and unlearning are not new intellectual exercises (Socrates: “The unexamined life is not worth living”), they are worth revisiting. Our worldview—that assemblage of instincts, habits, assumptions, and experiences—is something we hold dear. Grant, who teaches organizational psychology at the Wharton School of Business, challenges readers to rethink their outlooks on an ongoing basis, and he often makes time-tested concepts feel fresh. The author consistently emphasizes the importance of lifelong learning and maintaining an open, flexible mind. Grant investigates rethinking in three areas—the individual, changing others’ minds, and collective environments—and supports his text with research in numerous disciplines as well as entertaining anecdotes on a variety of topics, including the Blackberry, the presidency of Iceland, confirmation and desirability biases, the mindsets of totalitarians, and the values of scientific thinking (“favors humility over pride, doubt over certainty, curiosity over closure”) and confident humility. Regarding the last, leaders of all stripes can learn from Grant’s incisive discussion of how “you can be confident in your ability to achieve a goal in the future while maintaining the humility to question whether you have the right tools in the present.” As in his previous books, Grant employs earnest, crisp prose and thorough research. While readers will nod along in agreement with many of his points, some may give pause. For example: “Even if we disagree strongly with someone on a social issue, when we discover that she cares deeply about the issue, we trust her more. We might still dislike her, but we see her passion for a principle as a sign of integrity. We reject the belief but grow to respect the person behind it.” Activist readers, especially those involved in anti-racism work, will certainly disagree.

Grant breaks little to no ground but offers well-intentioned, valuable advice on periodically testing one’s beliefs.

**LAST CALL**

*A True Story of Love, Lust, and Murder in Queer New York*

Green, Elon

Celadon Books (272 pp.)

$27.00 | Mar. 9, 2021

978-1-250-22435-4

The grisly account of a serial killer’s stint of murders in Manhattan in the early 1990s, unknown to many true-crime fans because his victims—older gay men—were viewed as dispensable.

It’s not until nearly halfway through this gripping book that Green cites the name of the killer, Richard Rogers Jr. That approach allows the author to expertly direct the suspense, leading readers to speculate about the background and personality of someone who was capable of dismembering a victim and placing the remains in trash bags. Those bags in particular—Rogers had a penchant for stuffing his targets in bags—were discovered by a maintenance worker at a rest area along the Pennsylvania Turnpike in 1991. Born in 1950 in Plymouth,
Massachusetts, Rogers was a “gangly, awkward teenager” teased for his effeminacy, and he had few friends. Eventually, he developed into a bland, fanatic neatnik who commuted from his apartment on Staten Island to his job as a nurse at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan. Rogers liked to chat up patrons of the Townhouse, a gay bar in Midtown that catered to professionals and had a “famous tendency for generous pours.” Green focuses on five of Rogers’ victims, though there is speculation he may have killed more. In addition to bestowing humanity and dignity on the victims, Green demonstrates impressive reporting chops. For example, he unearthed Rogers’ earliest killing in Maine even though the trial ended in an expunged record. The author also provides substantive documentation of the New York media’s and New York Police Department’s callous neglect of the murders. Only occasionally is the text marred by insipid writing—e.g., “Dead bodies tend to smell bad after a while.” Even though Green made dogged, repeated attempts to interview Rogers, who refused, the narrative would have benefitted from an analysis of the abnormal psychology that compelled Rogers, a gay man, to choose other gay men as his prey. A deeply researched reclamation of a series of unfairly forgotten, gruesome crimes.

**BLOOD GUN MONEY**
How America Arms Gangs and Cartels
Grillo, Ioan
Bloomsbury (400 pp.)
$28.00 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-63557-278-0

An eye-opening investigation of the relationship among gun violence and the drug and arms trades, all closely connected.

British journalist Grillo, who has worked the Latin America beat for more than two decades, begins with the trial of “El Chapo” Guzmán, who was extradited to New York to stand trial for running narcotics into the U.S.—$14 billion worth, by prosecutorial claim. Yet, as the author shows, Guzmán was more than a mere drug lord: “He would be seen as a war criminal if it were to be understood as a war.” The weapons that he bought and sold formed a large branch of the “iron river” that flows between the legal and illegal arms trades, a river defended by the National Rifle Association and Second Amendment fundamentalists everywhere even while enriching people like Guzmán. In this lively and incisive report, the author demonstrates that even as guns overrun the U.S., at least there are some checks on crime; most Latin American governments “cannot contain the gun-toting gangsters.” The author, a diligent and courageous investigator, traces the vehemence of some of these gun supporters to a larger anti-government ethos—e.g., biker gangs such as the Mongols are at war with both law enforcement and the Mexican Mafia. Drug runners are not always killers, Grillo notes; looking closely at Baltimore street gangs, he observes that “a small hardcore group is behind most of the bloodshed.” The real bad guys are political operatives and dealers, such as the Reagan administration officials who supplied the Salvadoran army with more than 260,000 hand grenades that now turn up in turf wars, 300 thrown in a single 2010 intergang battle in Mexico alone. Legalizing some drugs and tightening controls on gun sales, notes the author, will lessen the violence but won’t contain it all: “Claiming we can abolish the entire drug trade through enforcement is an unhelpful fantasy.” Vigorous on-the-ground reporting and a big-picture view combine to make this a jarring portrait of clear and present danger.

**A BEGINNER’S GUIDE TO AMERICA**
For the Immigrant and the Curious
Hakakian, Roya
Knopf (240 pp.)
$26.95 | Mar. 16, 2021
978-0-525-65606-7

The Iranian American poet, journalist, and immigrant offers a clearedey introduction to America.

Hakakian, a Guggenheim fellow who has worked with the Council on Foreign Relations, the Wilson Center for International Scholars, and other organizations, delivers a book that serves as both a primer for immigrants and a knowledgeable alternative viewpoint on a fractured nation. The narrative is pleasingly intimate, as well, with the author speaking directly to “you,” not only exploring her own experiences, but also using the exercise to emphasize the shared anxiety faced by any stranger in a strange land. She breaks the book into two equally useful and thoughtful halves, the first of which tackles the hurdles of arrival in the U.S. From tense moments at customs and immigration to the overwhelming nature of shopping in the land of plenty to the woes of public transportation, Hakakian somehow manages to make the drudgeries of entry into a new culture both fascinating and frightening. In the second half, the author takes a more introspective approach and adds useful cultural and historical context to the experiences of immigrants when they arrive in America. This part opens with a long series of “lessons,” starting with love and sex and including segments on “The Vices and Virtue of an American Lover” and “Your First American Romance: A Few Warnings.” Equally reflective is the following series of essays on the diaspora and the disconnect between how things worked in your home country and how things work in the U.S. This is heavy stuff, not least Hakakian’s breakdown of the love-hate relationship between immigrants and their chosen country as well as a peek behind the curtain at “Anti-American Vitriol.” The author maintains a smooth narrative pace punctuated by intriguing anecdotes about everything from the first Persian to meet an American president to the biography of American asparagus.

An enlightening reminder about human rights and civic responsibility, all too relevant in a troubled time.
RADIANT
The Dancer, the Scientist, and a Friendship Forged in Light
Heinecke, Liz
Grand Central Publishing (336 pp.)
$28.00 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-1-5387-1736-3

A science communicator tells the story of the extraordinary friendship between a Nobel Prize–winning female scientist and a forgotten pioneer in modern dance and theatrical lighting.

Influenced by “extensive research, letters, personal memoirs and biographies,” Heinecke offers a uniquely envisioned recreation of the relationship between Marie Curie (1867-1932) and Loïe Fuller (1862-1928). An American dancer famed for incorporating electricity into innovative dances, Fuller seemed the polar opposite of Curie, who lived for her work in physics and chemistry. Yet both found common ground in a shared passion for science. In 1896, Thomas Edison told Fuller about crystals that “emitted colorful light.” An inventor who held multiple patents, the dancer was eager to experiment with Edison’s crystals to enhance her celebrated dances. In the meantime, Curie had been obsessively studying a substance that “emitted…mysterious energy, which she named ‘radioactivity.’ ” When Fuller heard about Curie’s discovery, she wrote to her in hopes of procuring some of the substance—radium—for new dances. Curie responded, intrigued that the dancer also had scientific interests. From that point on, the two women would maintain a lifelong connection, and they “met various times over the years—at their homes, in the Curie laboratories, in August Rodin’s studios, and once at the theater.” A solid researcher and an engaging storyteller, Heinecke focuses only on interpreting known details (such as those Fuller provides in her journal about Curie) rather than speculating on unknowns—e.g., what Curie thought of Fuller. The author’s careful attention to history—especially as it pertains to the struggle creative women like Curie and Fuller faced for acceptance as creative equals to men—helps round out the text with feminist insights. The result is a unique, satisfying biography/creative nonfiction hybrid that celebrates the achievements of two women who revolutionized the artistic and scientific worlds.

An illuminating book for fans of biography and popular science.

WE ARE BELLINGCAT
Global Crime, Online Sleuths, and the Bold Future of News
Higgins, Eliot
Bloomsbury (272 pp.)
$28.00 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-63557-730-3

A lively account of the rise of “something that has never been before: an intelligence agency for the people.”

A dozen or so years ago, writes Bellingcat founder Higgins, he “was just another computer enthusiast, an office worker in my early thirties with an unsatisfying job and an interest in the news.” Then came a light-bulb moment: It was possible to leverage the internet for facts that had not yet been fully vetted by the putative authorities, judge their truth and/or value, and put them into the service of advocacy at the intersection of journalism, civil rights, and the investigation of crime. In what Higgins dubs OSINT, for “open source intelligence,” a sprawling network of fellow researchers—called Bellingcat, after an old folktale in which daring mice hang an alarm bell on the neck of a predator—has both exposed official wrongdoing and helped battle the “ecosystem I call the Countercultural Community.” Its foundational principles, Higgins writes, are “Identify, Verify, Amplify,” and the record of his case studies is impressive: Bellingcat activists were able to identify the man who, during the Charlottesville demonstrations of 2017, savagely beat an African American bystander, netting him a four-year prison term. They were able to prove that video footage of Nancy Pelosi slurring her speech as if drunk was a “shallow fake,” meaning footage that has been doctored, and proved the involvement of Russian intelligence in countless episodes outside the nation’s borders, including several assassinations of dissidents in Britain. As Higgins writes in this compelling study of trolls, stalkers, tech-savvy nationalists whose “nerd flippancy congealed into sadism,” and the misguided followers of QAnon and other conspiracy theories, there is an awful lot to be on guard against in cyberspace but also a willing and utterly capable army of defenders against those who would disinform, misinform, and outright lie for political advantage.

Those who are not allergic to facts will find this a provocative, even inspirational read.
An eye-opening narrative of two standoffs with the U.S. government that played out very differently.

Keeler, a Dine/Ihanktonwan Dakota writer based in Portland, Oregon, chronicles “two major American standoffs that bookended 2016: white men with guns fighting for unfettered exploitation of natural resources and Native Americans fighting for treaty rights…the Bundy takeover of the Malheur Wildlife Refuge and the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s demand for consultation over the Dakota Access Pipeline.” Recounting the standoffs, the author offers a potent study in contrast between how these two events were handled by the people involved, the media, and the government. At Standing Rock, the tribe paid $1,000 per day “for chemical toilets and dumpsters to minimize the impact of their supporters” while at Malheur, “an enthusiastic Bundy follower had commandeered a backhoe they had found on-site and dug trenches for latrines, inadvertently digging up Paiute graves and artifacts. Human feces were found in the pit they left behind.” The author provides deep discussions of the context in which each event originated. She examines the Bundy family’s claims of “original ownership” of the land, their ideas about the powers of local authorities, and their beliefs about the broad concept of natural law, which “may seem undefined and pliable, that is, whatever Bundy may need it to be.” By contrast, Keeler looks at significant moments of Native history in America, encompassing treaties, sovereign nations, and unceded lands. Throughout this engaging tale, the author is especially good with perspective, moving smoothly among shifting viewpoints. Though these events took place four years ago, Keeler’s book is also timely. “I hope this book will provide some basis,” she writes, “to understand the 58 percent of white voters who voted for Trump in 2016 versus the broad coalition of Americans who did not.”

By turns compelling and frustrating, this is required reading for those who would call this land home.

If extraterrestrials exist, Darwin’s theory of evolution may provide a powerful key to determining how aliens live and behave. As technologies used to explore the universe become more sophisticated, scientists are increasingly optimistic that life outside of Earth may exist. In this enjoyable and informative book, Cambridge zoologist Kershenbaum argues that because the theory of natural selection and the laws of biology are universal, they can be applied to habitats other than Earth to understand how complex life may evolve in those places. The author explains that much of evolution relates to predictable patterns of problem-solving, whether the result is propelling through water using fins, walking on two legs, or soaring through the air using wings. “Convergent evolution is not just a phenomenon restricted to life on Earth,” writes Kershenbaum. “The same principles that lead birds and bats to evolve similar solutions will also lead alien birds and bats to fly.” In captivating detail, the author explores how the concept of convergent evolution can be used to deduce how aliens may use language and communication, socialize, move, and develop organic and artificial intelligence. Depending on the habitat, alien life may be strikingly similar to that on Earth, or aliens may exist in a dark, wet world and communicate using electricity—just one example of how odd alien life may be even as it exists within universal physical laws. The author successfully conveys tricky subjects without sacrificing clarity or letting his narrative get buried in technical discussions, and he writes with an enthusiasm that is infectious despite the fact that his core argument—that alien life must exist—has no empirical evidence. This is a fun, rewarding journey, and by the end, his analysis teaches readers as much about life on Earth as it does elsewhere.

A fresh take on an always fascinating subject.
Anyone who pays the slightest bit of attention to modern culture is aware of the rampant objectification of women’s bodies, which has become even more prevalent and insidious with the expanding reach and scope of social media outlets. In their attempts to obtain an “ideal” weight or body type, women embark on often fruitless diet, exercise, and beauty routines. Kite and Kite, identical twin doctors whose physical attributes have been scrutinized by others and each other all their lives, provide refreshingly straightforward advice to help women let go of impossible goals and learn to love their bodies regardless of their outward appearances. They provide engaging arguments against comparing oneself to the images on social media, and they point out the problems with relying too much on the body mass index metric. “Other ways to evaluate our own health (often with the help of a medical professional) include measuring internal indicators like heart rate, blood pressure, blood sugar, blood lipids, and respiratory fitness,” they write. “Blood tests can reveal much more about a person’s metabolic health than their dress size can.” With the authors’ guidance and a commitment to self-acceptance, women will be able to ditch yo-yo dieting and costly beauty regimens. Perhaps more importantly, they will find the confidence to avoid jealous comparisons and even leave abusive relationships. “When you know...that you are more than a body,” they write, “you will find that your sense of self, empowerment, and life possibilities are expanding. You will find out that the path to fulfillment and achieving your personal potential is bigger and better than simply forcing your body to fit a perfect mold.”

A fresh interpretation of a simple yet powerful lesson about self-liberation.

RACELESS
In Search of Family, Identity, and the Truth About Where I Belong
Lawton, Georgina
Perennial/HarperCollins (304 pp.)
$17.99 paper | Feb. 23, 2021
978-0-06-300948-6

An intimate story about the meaning of family and the subjectivity of race.

In her debut memoir, Guardian columnist Lawton offers a unique perspective on identity and family in an era of racial awakening. The author guides readers through her childhood as a mixed-race girl raised by two White parents who insisted that her darker skin was the product of a so-called “throwback gene.” After the death of her father, Lawton took a DNA test that forced her to confront why her Blackness was always treated as a burden instead of a self-evident truth. “I was an inquisitive child with an anti-authoritarian streak that would rear its head at inopportune times, but which was probably linked to the fact that my very existence was contradictory and nonsensical,” she writes. “I was looking to find my place in the world around me.” As she tells her personal story, the author weaves discussions of such relevant concepts as transracial identity, Afro-futurism and the importance of Black hair, without assuming that readers are familiar with any of them. She helpfully situates her epiphanies about identity within the robust canon of contemporary Black thinkers, from bell hooks to Zora Neale Hurston to Solange. But the book isn’t just a passive examination of race. Lawton uprooted her life in search of community, traveling to Cuba, Nicaragua, Morocco, and Vietnam. The book is sure to resonate with those who have had to negotiate their existence in the “in-between” or who possess identities that defy old-fashioned, traditional norms. Lawton gives herself, and others, permission to contain multitudes. “Being yourself,” she writes, “is easier once you free yourself from the baggage of other people’s expectations, when you look in the mirror and accept that the person staring back at you is a culmination of everything you have always wanted to be.”

A timely, engaging exploration of family and racial belonging featuring many valuable lessons.

THE DAUGHTERS OF KOBANI
A Story of Rebellion, Courage, and Justice
Lemmon, Gayle Tzemach
Penguin Press (304 pp.)
$27.00 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-525-56068-5

A group portrait of a band of trailblazing female soldiers who helped to take back territory that the Islamic State group had claimed in Syria.

Lemmon, an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, follows a group of Kurdish women who made a remarkable decision during the Syrian civil war: They would lead men in battle, creating “an all-female command structure.” They were members of the “plucky ragtag militia” known as the Kurdish Women’s Protection Units, or YPJ, adherents of the Marxist-Leninist-inspired teachings of the imprisoned Turkish Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan, who believed that the “Kurds couldn’t be free if women weren’t.” Skepticism of the women’s efforts diminished after the battle of Kobani, when all-female units—toting AK-47s and serving as snipers, battlefield commanders, and more—helped to defeat IS its first loss, a turning point in the war. The YPJ later fought at Manbij, Raqqqa, and elsewhere, gaining an acceptance by male soldiers that astonished a U.S. Army member: “The men have no issue with them at all. It’s almost bizarre.” Lemmon adroitly sets the women’s battlefield exploits against the backdrop of shifting regional alliances and U.S. policies, evenhandedly showing Barack Obama’s slowness to respond to the IS threat—“In January 2014, Obama characterized ISIS as ‘junior varsity’”—as well as the risks of the Trump administration’s decision to pull out of Kobani and stand back when NATO ally Turkey attacked Kurdish-led northern Syria in 2019. The author focuses on the YPJ women in their fighting roles, which makes for a steady pace but at times limited characterizations. As a group, however, these
soldiers display a wholly admirable bravery and commitment to women's equality even when it cost them—as it sometimes did—their lives.

A well-told story of contemporary female warriors and the complex geopolitical realities behind their battles.

THADEUS STEVENS
Civil War Revolutionary
Levine, Bruce
Simon & Schuster (320 pp.)
$28.00 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-4767-9337-5

The notorious “Radical Republican” gets his day in the sun.

Though Congressman Thaddeus Stevens (1792-1868) was considered a villain for decades after his death, many historians now agree that he fought for the highest ideals of democracy. An ambitious Pennsylvania lawyer, he became an abolitionist in the 1830s, writes Levine in this useful biographical portrait. Most contemporaries and historians, at least until the 1960s, considered abolitionists fanatics and devoted much energy to analyzing their motives (a sense of justice was apparently off-limits). Although the author admits that Stevens excelled in sarcasm and invective, regularly enraging Southern representatives, who considered abuse their monopoly, the demagogue portrayed by previous historians is nowhere in evidence here. Stevens chaired the powerful Ways and Means Committee when war broke out in 1861. A pivotal figure, he urged Lincoln to free the slaves long before the president came around. By 1865, Northern leaders, exasperated by the war, had lost their objection to emancipation, but almost everyone (historians included) considered that an end in itself. Only Radical Republicans urged that the freed slaves receive legal protection, the vote, and opportunity to make a living. Lincoln’s successor, Andrew Johnson, aided moderates to vote with Radicals who were always a minority.

A convincing rehabilitation of a statesman who fought for equality before it became fashionable.

GAY BAR
Why We Went Out
Lin, Jeremy Atherton
Little, Brown (320 pp.)
$25.00 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-316-45873-3

A writer’s intimate trans-Atlantic history of gay bars.

In his first book, Lin examines queer history through the lens of what he sees as a vanishing institution: the gay bar, which, in recent years, has been “under threat not so much by police, but a juncture of economic factors like unchecked property speculation and an upsurge in stay-at-home gays.” With raw, voyeuristically explicit detail, the author escorts readers through the crowded, smoky gay bars of London before turning to erotic adventures in California, where he came of age in the early 1990s. Lin chronicles his experiences with his husband, “Famous,” and their barhopping days cruising together for sex, but there’s a lot more here than just sex in dark corners. Lin vividly describes the evolution of gay hot spots in London, including details on a two-mile viaduct channeling through the city, which has housed “raunchy clubs” and even “a small theater [that put] on gay plays.” He also looks at the ever-evolving nature of queer life in San Francisco and vividly recalls his memorable early experiences there. “The streets,” he writes, “were like advent calendars: I wanted to open each door and reveal a bisexual hippie, leather daddy, elegant transvestite, friendly bull dyke wielding tattoo gun, sleazy yogi, stoned poet, skateboarder too lazy to resist my advances. I wanted to eat it all up.” Lin grounds his randy travels with sobering ruminations on the deleterious effects of lingering prejudice, gentrification, cultural assimilation, and homonormativity. Though the narrative occasionally darts around too frenetically—it would have benefited from a tighter organizational structure—the author remains locked in on his subject, creating a consistently engrossing story. As last call descends on many iconic gay bars, Lin’s unfettered reminiscence and sharp wit will resonate especially with older readers, who will enjoy the sweet nostalgia embedded in this entertaining history: “Gay bars are not about arriving,” he writes. “The best ones were always a departure.”

A vibrant and wistful report on a bygone era in gay culture.

FRACTALS
On the Edge of Chaos
Linton, Oliver
Bloomsbury (64 pp.)
$14.00 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-63557-508-8

A densely wrought exploration of Mandelbrot equations, the Droste effect, the Barnsley theorem, and other thorny problems of mathematics.

“How long is the coastline of Cornwall, UK?” That’s a question that would have sent Newton and even Einstein into the
depths of despair. It’s owing to an insight by Polish-born mathematician Benoit B. Mandelbrot that we can map out the three-dimensional world in which we live to some degree of certainty thanks to fractals, which, in nature, reveal themselves to be miniature images of the larger whole: “the magnified detail,” writes Cambridge econometrician Linton, “is exactly the same as the whole thing.” The attendant conceptual difficulty is that any map that is sufficiently detailed to reveal the whole accurately will be the size of the whole thing itself: A map of the universe would be the size of the universe, a thought that would have pleased Jorge Luis Borges. Lacking room and the wherewithal to prove the point with that map, mathematicians have come to develop numerical shortcuts—but those shortcuts are extraordinarily demanding of data, such that the GPS in your car relies on billions of numbers even as “nature...uses fractals for reasons of economy.” This is not a book for the mathematically weak of heart. Although it’s admirably short, certainly as compared to what might have happened to the discussion in the hands of a Douglas Hofstadter, each page bristles with equations and heady prose: “The pattern is clear; if you need unit objects to make it $m$ times larger then the number of dimensions the object has is $d$ where $l = md$.” If that sort of writing is your cup of pi, then Linton’s compact explication of fractals will be child’s play; others will be flummoxed.

A small treasure for those who enjoy brain teasers and mathematical formulas.

Earth’s Wild Music
Celebrating and Defending the Songs of the Natural World
Moore, Kathleen Dean
Catapult (256 pp.)
$26.00 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-1-64009-367-6

A heartfelt plea to save nature’s cacophony.
In a series of essays, many previously published, nature writer and environmentalist Moore offers an ardent warning against the perils of climate change and species endangerment. Writing mostly from Alaska and the Sonoran Desert, the author focuses on sound, which she evokes in sensual prose that reflects her “deep love for the world’s music—the birdsong, the frog song, the crickets and toads, the whales and wolves, even old hymns and Girl Scout songs.” The peril of extinction means that “each time a creature dies, a song dies.” Moore hears sonority throughout nature, from the operaticplaints of humpback whales to the relentless drumbeat of sap-suckers. Even the saguaro cactus emits music: “When the wind blows across the spines, they sing like violin strings.” Dinosaurs, too, the author speculates, sang, much like their descendants, the birds. Each essay ends with a sidebar detailing threats to creatures such as grizzly bears, red-legged frogs, and monarch butterflies; providing evidence of pollution; and noting the rise of eco-anxiety. Although Moore shares that anxiety, she also encourages “active hope” that comes from listening to nature “with thoughtful attention” and making a decision to change the course of natural degradation by taking three steps: “Stop the killing. Defend everything that is left. Create new lifeways in harmony with the Earth.” She regrets that during the pandemic, humans have been forced to live like birds: “we flutter across the street or around bushes to avoid people, knowing that we are vulnerable to every miasmic wind, that a human touch could kill us. Now and then, we sing from high or hidden places, but mostly we are quiet.” That silence is dangerous. “What we need,” she writes, “is strength—strength in numbers and strength in...
A top-notch political memoir and serious exercise in practical politics for every reader.

A PROMISED LAND

An enthusiastic argument that love, care, and defiance may still save the Earth.

HOOKEFood, Free Will, and How the Food Giants Exploit Our Addictions

Moss, Michael
Random House (304 pp.)
$28.00 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-8129-9729-3

A hard-hitting follow-up to Salt Sugar Fat (2013).

Pulitzer Prize–winning investigative journalist Moss is a powerhouse when it comes to research and analysis, and much like his contemporary Michael Lewis, he possesses the ability to maintain a solid narrative arc. Characteristically, the author opens his deep dive back into the processed food industry with a story about a Brooklyn schoolgirl whose craving for McDonald’s led to morbid obesity during adolescence. In addition to examining the chemistry of food, appetite, and addiction (highly prevalent), Moss breaks down the complex and contentious arguments at the intersection of the food industry and the law. More disturbingly, he explores the often devious and potentially dangerous ways that manufacturers manipulate foods to trigger addictive behavior, spark sense memories of foods from our childhoods, and treat addiction and dependence as a corporate strategy—much like the tobacco industry. The author covers much of the same ground as his previous book, but readers will be engaged and shocked by the sheer velocity of the process for changing foods to boost consumption. “In a sense, we’ve become unwitting allies to the processed food industry, and not just by falling for their marketing tricks,” he writes. “We’ve allowed them to tap into and take advantage of all the biology we inherited from our forebears, including our love for variety and the cheapest source of calories, as well as the dramatic shifts in our work and family life that have played right into the companies’ hands. When we changed the way we ate, they changed their food to exploit that.” From maltodextrin to trans fats to a diet industry largely owned and controlled by the same companies manufacturing unhealthy, processed foods, Moss takes a second shot at corporate villains and once again finds a soulless industry hard at work.

Another cleareyed inquiry into the companies that feed us, hook us, and leave us wanting more.

FIERCE POISE
Helen Frankenthaler and 1950s New York

Nemerov, Alexander
Penguin Press (288 pp.)
$28.00 | Mar. 23, 2021
978-0-525-56018-0

An art historian assesses the career of one of the 20th century’s great painters. A “child of the Upper East Side,” youngest of three daughters of a New York State Supreme Court justice, and graduate of Bennington College, Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) was determined from a young age to become a painter. As a child, she would “dispense droplets of her mother’s bloodred nail polish into the [sink] basin, watching the patterns spread before draining the water and studying the stains on the white porcelain.” Inspired by Jackson Pollock, she developed a form of abstract painting whereby she thinned paint with turpentine and applied the mixture to an unprimed canvas. In this admiring, occasionally intimate biography, Nemerov focuses on “the formative decade of her life and career” by highlighting specific dates, one each from 1950 to 1960, as launching pads for a broader discussion of her work. The book has the misfortune to appear after Mary Gabriel’s magnificent Ninth Street Women, which covered Frankenthaler and four other women artists in greater detail. This volume is considerably shorter and not as rich, and the sections only tangentially related to Frankenthaler’s story—such as a passage on a friend’s acting career—could have been excised. Nemerov is at his best in his analyses of Frankenthaler’s paintings and artistic process; her romance with critic Clement Greenberg and his “insistent, demanding, pleading, hoping” behavior when she broke up with him; her marriage to abstract painter Robert Motherwell; and the backlash from some female detractors, including the ARTnews critic who wrote that Frankenthaler made “hysterical paintings” and called her a fraud. Nemerov is also cleareyed and evenhanded enough to note his subject’s tendency to throw tantrums, as when she berated a furrier for delivering her new coat to the basement of the building next door rather than to her apartment. A fascinating but thin appreciation of a pioneering artist.

A PROMISED LAND
Obama, Barack
Crown (768 pp.)
$45.00 | Nov. 17, 2020
978-1-5247-6316-9

In the first volume of his presidential memoir, Obama recounts the hard path to the White House. In this long, often surprisingly candid narrative, Obama depicts a callow youth spent playing basketball and “getting loaded,” his early reading of difficult authors serving as a
way to impress coed classmates. (“As a strategy for picking up
girls, my pseudo-intellectualism proved mostly worthless,” he
admits.) Yet seriousness did come to him in time and, with it,
the conviction that America could live up to its stated aspira-
tions. His early political role as an Illinois state senator, itself
an unlikely victory, was not big enough to contain Obama’s
early ambition, nor was his term as U.S. Senator. Only the
presidency would do, a path he painstakingly carved out, vote
by vote and speech by careful speech. As he writes, “By nature
I’m a deliberate speaker, which, by the standards of presiden-
tial candidates, helped keep my gaffe quotient relatively low.”
The author speaks freely about the many obstacles of the
race—not just the question of race and racism itself, but also
the rise, with “potent disruptor” Sarah Palin, of a know-noth-
ingism that would manifest itself in an obdurate, ideologically
driven Republican legislature. Not to mention the meddling
of Donald Trump, who turns up in this volume for his idiotic
“birther” campaign while simultaneously fishing for a contract
to build “a beautiful ballroom” on the White House lawn. A
born moderate, Obama allows that he might not have been
ideological enough in the face of Mitch McConnell, whose
primary concern was then “clawing [his] way back to power.”
Indeed, one of the most compelling aspects of the book, as
smoothly written as his previous books, is Obama’s clear-eyed
scene-setting for how the political landscape would become so
fractured—surely a topic he’ll expand on in the next volume.

A top-notch political memoir and serious exercise in
practical politics for every reader.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR
CLIMATE CHANGE
A Practical Guide to Surviving the Chaos
Pogue, David
Simon & Schuster (656 pp.)
$22.00 paper | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-982134-51-8

A preparatory guidebook on acclimatizing in the era of accelerating climate
change.

In agreement with scientists around the world, Pogue, an
Emmy-winning science and technology correspondent for CBS
Sunday Morning, argues that the deleterious effects of global
warming are inescapable. “Even if we stopped burning fos-
sil fuels and chopping down forests tomorrow,” he writes, “we
wouldn’t stop climate change.” The author’s overall approach is
less daunting and more refreshingly proactive than many simi-
lar books, as he seeks to educate readers on important topics
such as observable weather extremes, disease outbreaks, and
resource shortages. Though adaptation measures have been
enacted worldwide to counteract the encroaching climate chaos,
Pogue’s charts and graphs portend near-future calamities. This
urgency makes the book an indispensable resource. The author
encourages readers to act personally, arming them with sec-
tions on stress relief and mitigating the psychological effects of
“eco-despair”; relocation options (aim northward) and household
modifications (generators, storm-proofing); and sustainable
organic gardening and simple water conservation tips. Pogue
also offers information on evacuation plans for wildfires and
hurricanes, sheltering during tornadoes, and the possible break-
down of social order (already underway). Given the persistence
of the Covid-19 pandemic, readers will welcome the author’s
meticulously detailed chapters on protective protocols against
the increasing prevalence of disease-spreading insects like mos-
quitos, ticks, and other pests that are proliferating in chang-
ing climates. Even those who are somehow still skeptical about
the planet’s deteriorating condition will find useful knowledge,
including action items that can be adopted regardless of one’s
level of denial. As he discusses the more catastrophic decades
to come, Pogue provides an overview of pragmatic, optimistic,
big-idea initiatives by corporations and citizens, which leavens
his foreboding message but never diminishes its criticality. It’s
a long, comprehensive book perfect for reading in parts, one
that consistently reminds us that while it’s too late for a climate
rewind, being prepared is the next best thing.

Practicality, awareness, and survivalism converge in
a sturdy cautionary handbook on enduring Earth’s new
realities.

FEARS OF A SETTING SUN
The Disillusionment of
America’s Founders
Rasmussen, Dennis C.
Princeton Univ. (280 pp.)
$29.95 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-691-21023-0

Why the Founding Fathers believed
the political system they created was
“an utter failure that was unlikely to last
beyond their own generation.”

Making the striking argument that all but one of the major
founders of the U.S. died disillusioned with their creation, Ras-
mussen nevertheless offers hope for our current predicaments.
Focusing on George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jef-
ferson, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison, the author
scrutinizes their surviving papers for a single element of their
thought: their confidence in the future of the federal republic.
His distinctive approach yields something overlooked by histo-
rians. All of them—and there were others—save Madison died
pessimistic about their country’s future. The partisanship that
broke out during Washington’s presidency deeply troubled him.
Hamilton’s dark mood arose from what he saw as the govern-
ment’s feebleness. Adams was forever despondent about his
fellow citizens’ lack of virtue. Jefferson became deeply anx-
ious about disunion; he went to his death “riddled with doubts”
about the young nation’s survival. Only Madison—a man less
troubled by partisanship, weak government, and the union’s
breakup and more confident that institutions could offset a lack
of public virtue—escaped the other founders’ dark forebodings.
But should we see their misgivings as the realism of mature
A soulful, essential boot-camp-in-a-book that raises the bar significantly in the field of anti-racism training.

DO BETTER

Spiritual Activism for Fighting and Healing From White Supremacy
Ricketts, Rachel
Atria (384 pp.)
$27.00 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-982151-27-0

A holistic how-to guide for people of all backgrounds willing to look inward in their fight against racial injustice.

White supremacy is a systemic issue, but it starts and is perpetuated in “hearts and minds,” writes Ricketts, a queer Black woman and “trained racial justice educator, attorney, grief coach, and spiritual activist.” The battle for justice must be fought on both fronts, but White people typically fight racism as something outside of themselves, as a matter of comfort. Ricketts, however, refuses to coddle readers. Those who most need her guidance to do the “deep inner work” of anti-racism may be the least willing to stay the course. Her righteous, “loving anger” shines through on every page. She warns White women, in particular, that they will not like what she has to say. But it is to their advantage to keep reading this challenging but hopeful extension of the author's in-person workshops, designed for “all those who are ready to fight for a more equitable world, in which everyone, most notably Black and Indigenous women+, can finally find freedom.” With a 20-page glossary of terms to help meet readers where they are, the book is exhaustive in its breadth and depth. Ricketts examines the consistent insidiousness of racism, from “friendship fails” to inequity in the workplace. She unpacks concepts such as prejudice, privilege, anti-Indigeneity, and decolonization, and she explores the differences among anti-Blackness, racism, and White supremacy. Ricketts speaks directly to readers via blunt, infectious, and at times humorous prose, including deeply personal anecdotes of her experiences of racism, which began in early childhood. Practical action items—e.g., meditations, affirmations, writing prompts, and “heart check-ins”—will get readers “spiritually activated” and able to work through the defensiveness and fear that can hinder growth beyond the superficial.

A soulful, essential boot-camp-in-a-book that raises the bar significantly in the field of anti-racism training.

CROSSING THE LINE
A Fearless Team of Brothers and the Sport That Changed Their Lives Forever
Rosser, Kareem
St. Martin's (304 pp.)
$28.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-250-27086-3

From a Philadelphia neighborhood beset by poverty and violence to the head of the first all-Black interscholastic polo championship team.

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A soulful, essential boot-camp-in-a-book that raises the bar significantly in the field of anti-racism training.
Rosser was one of a cohort of young men who might have been steered into a gang given other circumstances. Instead, he and his brothers took a wrong turn on a back road and found themselves at a riding stable whose cash-strapped owner took them under her wing and taught them about horses—and, in time, the game of polo, ordinarily the province of the rich, condescending White boys they played. In time, after some humiliating defeats, the preteens pulled themselves together, and Rosser so distinguished himself that he was given a full scholarship to a military academy. The rigid discipline there stood in sharp contrast to a home life bounded by violence and addiction. “She’d bring strangers and friends into the house at night,” he writes of his mother, “and we’d wake up to the thick skunky smell of last night’s weed in the air, empty crack vials strewn on the kitchen table, tipped over beer bottles dripping a skunky smell of last night’s weed in the air, empty crack vials strewn on the kitchen table, tipped over beer bottles dripping the floor.” Both polo and school pulled him out of that life, he writes, even as members of his own family and close friends were murdered, imprisoned, and lost in an indifferent system. Affectingly, the author writes that the sight of an African American on a horse was not unknown even in “The Bottom,” where he lived, with “a history of horses and horsemanship…that goes back a century or more.” What was unusual was “a bunch of scrawny-ass Black kids galloping some second-hand horses around a soccer field, mallets in hand,” a pleasing vision that one hopes to see more often, just as one celebrates Rosser’s poetically spun tale of championship: “We never missed a step. We were young kings. We were brothers.”

Rosser’s aspirational tale, though full of sorrow and hardship, is one that readers will cheer.

**EVERY BODY**

*An Honest and Open Look at Sex From Every Angle*

Rothman, Julia & Feinberg, Shana
Illus. by Rothman, Julia
Voracious/Little, Brown (272 pp.)
$28.00 | Jan. 5, 2021
978-0-316-42658-9

A creative appreciation of human sexuality through art and anecdotes.

Inspired by the sexy stories of others, Rothman began gathering anonymous submissions of people’s intimate tales, and she presents the material in a narrative diversified across location, gender, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation. In this attractive volume, she teams up with frequent *New York Times* co-collaborator Feinberg, hitting the streets of New York and New Orleans to solicit stories about people’s carnal desires and apprehensions. The result is a book brimming with titillating, provocative artwork and essays about the vast terrain of the human sexual experience. Among the most memorable topics and sections: gender and sexual fluidity; the trials and triumphs of an intersex advocate; Feinberg’s poignant essay about the “twisted mindset” caused by her body dysmorphic disorder; a section about a “professional masturbator” who “teach[es] groups how to masturbate”; a female contributor’s list of “10 Things To Do When You’re Horny & Lonely”; a 67-year-old man’s first experience with gay sex; a gay man’s celebration of his HIV-positive status, which “gave me the gift of having to look at myself….It saved my life”; and the enigmas of vaginismus and sexsomnia (“While asleep, not consciously, I will initiate sex with the person I’m in bed with”). An impressively diverse blend of artistry and perspective, Rothman and Feinberg’s book is an entertaining and insightful voyeuristic playground affording a sneak peek inside the bedrooms of everyday people divulging their unbridled desires, fetishes, and complex relationship dynamics. These stories mirror the sexual conventions of a mostly liberated modern society—though some contributors have been challenged by conservative religious upbringings or racial polarization, and others emerged from cultures that shame or restrict the pursuit of sexual fulfillment. Most of the material is explicitly frank and features a liberating body-positive honesty sure to delight any reader fascinated by stories of human sexuality.

A delightfully audacious anthology of carnal confessions.

**MR. HUMBLE & DR. BUTCHER**

*A Monkey’s Head, the Pope’s Neuroscientist, and the Quest To Transplant the Soul*

Schillace, Brandy
Simon & Schuster (320 pp.)
$27.00 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-982113-77-3

A story about medicine, morals, religion, and human head transplants.

Schillace, editor-in-chief of the academic journal *Medical Humanities*, has a knack for writing about intriguing, offbeat topics, and her third book, she admits, is “perhaps the strangest story I have ever encountered.” The author tells the captivating tale of Robert J. White (1926-2010), a brilliant “doctor with two selves, two impulses, and even two names,” who was obsessed with transplanting organs. White, who referred to himself as “Humble Bob,” came from a middle-class, devout Catholic background, and he would serve as a bioethics adviser to Pope John Paul II. In medical school, he developed an interest in the brain’s physiology, writing that the organ is the “physical repository for the soul.” In the 1950s, inspired by a Russian physiologist’s grotesque creation of a living, two-headed dog, White began experimenting with hemispherectomy of dogs, keeping the brain alive using pioneering hypothermic cold. A new position in neurosurgery provided White with a platform for his research. Considering his work, the author ponders “what it would mean to be a brain, alive but bodiless.” With ease, she explains in detail White’s complex medical research and procedures, many of which would have substantial real-world applications. In 1963, White successfully removed a monkey’s brain and hooked it up to a “laboratory cyborg” of a donor monkey and a machine White had designed. Still, writes Schillace, “he needed to prove that consciousness could be transplanted.” A 1967 article about White’s surgeries
by journalist Oriana Fallaci resulted in outrage from animal rights activists, a surge in brain death debates, and a nickname: Dr. Butcher. In 1970, White successfully completed a brain transplant, inserting one monkey’s brain into another monkey’s head; it lived for nine days. Swirling around inside this absorbing biography are Schillace’s thoughtful discussions of the knotty issues involved in medical and religious ethics. At times Frankenstein-esque, it’s unquestionably a "strange journey from science fiction to science fact."

Odd, engrossing science history capably related.

**CHAIRMAN AT THE BOARD**

*Recording the Soundtrack of a Generation*

Schnee, Bill

Backbeat Books (304 pp.)

$29.95 | Mar. 1, 2021

978-1-4930-5613-2

Behind-the-scenes tales from the producer and engineer of albums by leading 1970s pop acts.

Schnee started his music career as a teenager in 1964, playing keyboards in a garage-rock act called the LA Teens. The band went nowhere, but cutting singles introduced him to recording studios, where he developed a knack for the close listening that record-making demands. His first love was R&B, and he has worked with acts like Gladys Knight and the Pointer Sisters. His most prominent production gigs, though, were with adult-contemporary artists like Barbra Streisand, Carly Simon, Art Garfunkel, Boz Scaggs, and Huey Lewis. (His work on Steely Dan’s 1977 album, *Aja*, is probably his most admired achievement, earning him the first of his two engineering Grammys.) Schnee is a respected name in the production world thanks to his well-trained ear and persnickety approach to studio details, and he sometimes lapses into jargon. The appeal for casual music fans is shakier. The author’s recollections of most artists are anodyne; almost every big-name performer is a class act, at worst grousing about the presence of instruments in the mix. Diva behavior is mostly kept anonymous, though Schnee does recall Julio Iglesias being officious and Rickie Lee Jones driving Toto drummer Jeff Porcaro to stab his drumsticks into his kit. A certain politesse, he argues, is necessary to get the best out of artists, and he knows his place. “I’ll go to the mats for something I believe in, but I’ll never force it because the artist’s name goes in big letters on the front of the album and the producer’s in little letters on the back. As a result, I have a good relationship with anyone I’ve ever worked with.”

A modest and modestly revealing memoir of life among the soft-rock titans.

**GRAND TRANSITIONS**

*How the Modern World Was Made*

Smil, Václav

Oxford Univ. (368 pp.)

$34.95 | Mar. 1, 2021

978-0-19-006066-4

An intense exploration of the fundamental transformations that led to the modern world.

Historian Smil begins with population transitions before moving on to agriculture, energy, economics, and environments. All premodern societies had high birth and death rates and slow population growth. Improved food production in the 18th century and sanitary and medical advances reduced death rates, but birth rates remained high until entire societies felt secure. The result was a period of hyperbolic growth after World War II that peaked in the 1960s. Today, except for Pakistan, Yemen, Bolivia, and sub-Saharan Africa, population growth is low, and some nations, such as Japan and Russia, are shrinking. Though modern agriculture has become massively efficient, it depends far more on fossil fuel and chemicals than sunlight and rain. Smil maintains that the greatest economic impact on human life is the gasoline-fueled internal combustion engine. By 1929, it provided 88% of America’s mechanical power. “Electrification,” writes the author, “has…been partially a transition within a transition (from direct uses to an indirect exploitation of fossil fuels)” and is “perhaps the most important of all transformative processes originating from technical innovations: ‘electric’ might be the single most important adjective used to describe the functioning of modern societies.” Readers will encounter the usual bad news about the environment—e.g., the burning of fossil fuels provided 91% of Earth’s energy in 1992; by 2017, it was…91%—but Smil’s focus on facts and recent history situates him in a moderate position between catastrophists and those who tout a future of “general and unstoppable improvement.” The author mostly (but not entirely) avoids turgid academic prose, and he isn’t shy about delivering information, often overwhelming readers with facts, statistics, and analyses. The result is an expert portrait of spectacular technical and economic advances that many in the 21st century enjoy but which exclude large segments of the population and are creating problems that may or may not be solvable.

Ingenious, insightful, and disturbing.
An unflinching portrayal of an often unwieldy character—further proof of Bacon’s enduring influence.

GEORGE WASHINGTON
The Political Rise of America’s Founding Father
Stewart, David O.
Dutton (576 pp.)
$32.00 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-525-4898-5

A study of Washington’s political education, ambition, and leadership.

Stewart begins with the French and Indian War, during which Washington achieved his first military glory. As a colonel in the Virginia militia, he led several expeditions into the wilderness and became nationally known for bravery during Gen. Edward Braddock’s disastrous 1755 defeat. During the following years, Washington displayed much energy but little talent, and he resigned his commission in 1758 to marry “a pleasingly rich widow about his age” and live as a wealthy Virginia planter, which included serving in the state House of Burgesses. Traditionally, historians describe these civilian years (1759–1775) as the period when he developed political skills and self-mastery. “The George Washington who arrived at the First Continental Congress in 1774,” writes the author, “is almost unrecognizable compared to the man who led the Virginia regiment two decades before.” Stewart has no more success than his predecessors in explaining what happened, but this is the least known period of his life, and readers will enjoy the author’s insightful nuts-and-bolts account of his handling of the politics and infighting of local government. In the second half of the book, Stewart chronicles several “political minefields” that Washington navigated as a national figure. He kept his army intact through the miserable winter at Valley Forge while fending off a plot by more successful generals to supersede him. As president, he created a federal government from almost nothing, restored the nation’s credit, and kept it neutral in the war that followed the French Revolution, which bitterly divided the nation and subjected him to a torrent of abuse. In the author’s chapter on slavery, Washington emerges mostly unscathed—though it’s a low bar. Every slave-owning Founding Father deplored the institution and took no action, but only Washington freed his slaves in his will. All serious biographies emphasize Washington’s political genius, and Stewart, an experienced biographer as well as a good writer, accomplishes his goal.

Another straightforward life of Washington, but a fine one.

JOHN MARSHALL
The Final Founder
Strauss, Robert
Lyons Press (272 pp.)
$27.95 | Mar. 1, 2021
978-1-4930-3747-6

A new biography of America’s most significant chief justice. Active until late in the Andrew Jackson administration, John Marshall (1755–1835) was the last of his generation still in high office. The only founder who outlived him, James Madison, was long retired. Son of a small Virginia landowner, Marshall served several years in the Continental Army during the Revolution. After studying law, he became an influential figure in the conservative Tidewater establishment and a Federalist. Together with Madison, he worked hard to persuade Virginia to ratify the Constitution, which it did, narrowly. George Washington offered him several jobs in his administration, but he declined. He traveled to France on a diplomatic mission under John Adams, who appointed him secretary of
state in 1800 and then chief justice in 1801, two months before leaving office. This annoyed the incoming president, Thomas Jefferson (already an enemy); at the time, however, the Supreme Court was not a powerful body, so he didn’t make an issue of it. Despite exceptions such as Stephen Budiansky’s *Oliver Wendell Holmes* (2019), biographies of judges rarely make for gripping reading. Though not on that level, journalist and historian Strauss’ interpretation is solid, stressing that Marshall’s vigorous leadership elevated the court to a co-equal branch of government and gave it the power (not mentioned in the Constitution) to invalidate state and federal laws. The author examines Marshall’s landmark legal accomplishments, but he also digresses into sections on a host of intriguing historical ideas. After mentioning that Marshall was considered a potential presidential candidate, Strauss inserts a long chapter describing a dozen Americans who yearned to be president—a mythical figure. Strauss devotes a chapter to other leaders who attained mythical status, from Washington to Kennedy. Readers concerned with the present makeup of the court may be reassured to learn about the worst justices of the past.

Entertaining historical tidbits within a fine short biography.

**THE ROPE**

*A True Story of Murder, Heroism, and the Dawn of the NAACP*

Tresniowski, Alex

37 Ink/Simon & Schuster (336 pp.)

$28.00 | Feb. 9, 2021

978-1-982114-02-2

Journalist Tresniowski links the work of a fearless detective and the anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells as he reconstructs the case of a Black man arrested on a trumped-up murder charge.

This suspenseful, well-written true-crime tale will be an eye-opener for anyone who assumes that after Reconstruction, lynching remained a serious threat only in the South. The author tells the story of Thomas Williams, a Black odd-jobs man wrongfully accused of murdering Marie Smith, a 10-year-old White girl who was also sexually assaulted, in Asbury Park, New Jersey, in 1910. Shortly after the crime, the police arrested Williams on circumstantial evidence and had to sneak him out of town to protect him from a lynch mob. With the consent of the police, a businessman skeptical of Williams’ guilt hired private detective Raymond C. Schindler—later praised as “the most brilliant and charismatic investigator of his time”—who developed his own theory of the case. In order to get a more plausible suspect to confess, the resourceful Schindler set up an elaborate sting, full of cloak-and-dagger intrigue that unfolds with mounting tension. Wells wasn’t involved in the Asbury Park murder, but the author gives that case a broad context by weaving in accounts of her anti-lynching campaigns and of her role in founding the NAACP, which helped with Williams’ legal defense. Unfortunately, Tresniowski supplies no endnotes, bibliography, or other data on how he reconstructed the details of his narrative, and their absence leaves open to question some aspects of his story. The section recounting the killer’s confession will be painful reading for sexual assault victims or parents of sexually abused children. Still, Tresniowski more than proves his point that early in the 20th century, “even in a northern state like New Jersey, a black prisoner had no guarantee of any safety in jail anywhere.”

High-velocity historical true crime lacking supporting data that would have enhanced its credibility.

**USEFUL DELUSIONS**

*The Power and Paradox of the Self-Deceiving Brain*

Vedantam, Shankar & Mesler, Bill

Norton (264 pp.)

$27.95 | Mar. 2, 2021

978-0-393-65220-8

According to this ingenious and unsettling account, deception is essential to our well-being.

Vedantam and Mesler note that when we ask an acquaintance, “how are you?” we usually don’t want an honest answer—and don’t get one. If you don’t believe in Santa Claus or the second coming, it’s because “your life does not depend on your believing such things.” However, if matters took a turn for the worse, you might reconsider. “There are no atheists in foxholes” is a cliché but not entirely false. The authors emphasize that evolution did not design our brain to seek the truth but to survive. Seeking the truth is beside the point. Depressed people often see the world more realistically. Deception, including self-deception, write the authors, “enables us to accomplish useful social, psychological, or biological goals. Holding false beliefs is not always the mark of idiocy, pathology, or villainy.” Much of the book recounts often squirm-inducing examples to prove the case. For example, in the late 1980s, a group called the “Church of Love” sent affectionate form letters to purportedly distressed young women to lonely men, many of whom engaged in extensive correspondence and sent money, not always when requested. At the author’s trail, many victims, despite knowing the facts, fervently defended him. Digging deeper, the authors examine American patriotism and how our collective “national fictions give us a shared sense of identity and purpose, the cohesion to accomplish great things, the will and capability to defend ourselves against mortal threats.” The authors also examine the concept of the placebo, which in certain cases is “the most benevolent of lies,” and they defend their position that optimists with fatal diseases live longer than “realists,” quoting studies that show this and ignoring those that show the opposite.

A passionate, often counterintuitive, disturbingly convincing addition to the why-people-believe-stupid-things genre.
In a captivating memoir illustrated with photographs of cherished objects, the author describes, in radiant, sensuous prose, her often painstaking tasks and her development as a curator.

**PATCH WORK**

**A Life Amongst Clothes**
Wilcox, Claire
Bloomsbury (388 pp.)
$26.00 | Jan. 26, 2021
978-1-5266-439-1

A museum curator sifts gently through treasures from the past.

Wilcox, senior curator of fashion at the Victoria and Albert Museum, has devoted her professional life to the care, protection, and exhibition of objects: a silk-lined wallet, delicately hand-stitched linen, fragile lace garments resplendent with spangles and gilt. In a captivating memoir illustrated with photographs of cherished objects, the author describes, in radiant, sensuous prose, her often painstaking tasks and her development as a curator, which began with an entry-level part-time position. “I knew how far I had to go,” she writes of those early years, “and how hard I had to work to become an expert. But I was out of my depth, and my French—the language of textile history—shaky.” To bolster her ability, she enrolled at the Camberwell Art School, which enabled her to look at the collections “with the eye of a nearly-artist.” Wilcox alludes to several exhibitions that she mounted: of Alexander McQueen, Frida Kahlo, and Vivienne Westwood, from whom she learned “through the particularity of her eyes, about pun and protest and her role” in fashion. Although these glimpses backstage at the museum are fascinating, equally so are Wilcox’s evocative recollections of childhood, marriage, her parents’ deaths, and motherhood to three children, including a daughter who suffered a frightening illness and a son who died very young. The author portrays herself as a child, defiantly “not brushing my hair, allowing it to spring in all directions. Its wildness suggested I was carefree, although in truth I was not.” As she grew up, she yearned to “have interesting things, to be well informed”—a goal that she seems to have amply fulfilled.

A finely crafted memoir of luminous vignettes.

**ANTI-RACIST ALLY**

**An Introduction to Activism and Action**
Williams, Sophie
Amistad/HarperCollins (176 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-06-308135-2

“Not being racist is not enough.” The founder of @officialmillennialblack on Instagram delivers a simple guide for those “who wish to join the fight against racism.”

Early on, Williams, an experienced social justice activist, describes her process: “I began writing this book in the wake of the series of tragic murders that shocked the world in 2020 and galvanized many who had never considered their role in anti-racism to take action in their own lives.” In this “deliberately small book,” Williams aims to assist those who want to become more active by outlining how to be an effective anti-racist ally. The author lays out a series of focus areas for would-be allies, all of which are meant to “challenge the things we’ve been taught based on white supremacy, and to seek better and fairer ways moving forward.” Williams begins with definitions and first steps, including “Becoming an Anti-Racist Ally” or “What Does Racism Look Like Now?” She addresses common questions and concerns about terminology, misconceptions, and intersectionality. After the introductory concepts, the author moves on to proactive elements — e.g. how to be an ally in your social circle, workplace, and community. Throughout, she uses a conversational tone to explain the reasons behind each of her suggestions, such as examining the diversity of the communities you are a part of, and then suggests simple ways in which to talk with the leadership of those groups about the vitality of anti-racism. Williams is clear that the “allyship journey” is rarely easy or quick, which makes it that much more important to implement sturdy support structures, make space for messy feelings, and celebrate small victories. Williams also provides two helpful lists for further reading, one for adults (White Fragility, Between the World and Me, How To Be an Antiracist) and one for younger readers.

Essential reading for our times, with the goal of true human equality.

**ENDPAPERS**

**A Family Story of Books, War, Escape, and Home**
Wolff, Alexander
Atlantic Monthly (336 pp.)
$26.00 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-8021-5825-3

Former Sports Illustrated staffer Wolff turns inward with this deeply personal story about family and book publishing.

In 2017, the author moved to Berlin for a year to research and chronicle his German family’s roots going back to the early 19th century. He wryly reflects that the welcoming journeys his grandfather Kurt and father Nikolaus took to America years ago “stand as a rebuke to the anti-immigrant mood in much of the United States.” Book lovers will find Kurt’s story especially interesting. In 1912, he was working for a German publisher when he first met a young Franz Kafka and his friend Max Brod. A year later, he used family money and cash raised “by auctioning off parts of his book collection” to buy out the publisher and create Kurt Wolff Verlag, bringing Kafka and Brod along with him. He quickly added Franz Werfel and Rabindranath Tagore, serving as a steward for cutting-edge writing and what he described as the “absolute belief in the authentic word and worth of what you champion.” After fighting in World War I, Kurt went on to publish “Émile Zola and Guy de Maupassant, Maxim Gorky and Anton Chekhov, even Sinclair Lewis.” Niko was born in 1921. Wolff chronicles in detail how
Hitler’s rise to power affected many family members, some incarcerated in concentration camps. The atmosphere greatly worried the Jewish publisher of “degenerate” literature. Kurt moved to the U.S. in 1941 while Niko, who served in the army, struggled in harsh postwar Germany before coming to America in 1948. This new phase in the Wolff family story included Kurt’s founding of a new press in their “grungy” New York City apartment: Pantheon. With the venture, Kurt hoped “to present to the American public works of lasting value,” including those by André Gide, Albert Camus, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Boris Pasternak, and Günter Grass. Wolff concludes with unsettling discoveries about his family’s relationships with the Merck pharmaceutical company and the Nazis.

An affecting, emotional, and sometimes harrowing saga.

**WHO SAYS?**

**Mastering Point of View in Fiction**

*Zeidner, Lisa*

Norton (240 pp.)

$16.95 paper | Feb. 9, 2021

978-0-393-35611-3

A thorough, practical guide for writers focused on the problem of point of view.

Via astute close readings of myriad literary examples, poet and novelist Zeidner argues persuasively that point-of-view decisions “are the very heart of fiction, more central and crucial than plot.” After a chapter devoted to examining first lines and first paragraphs, Zeidner considers a variety of narrative possibilities: omniscience, third-person limited, first person, telling a story from the point of view of a child—sometimes reminiscing as a grown-up—or an animal, the effect of using *you* or *we*, and the difference in point of view in fiction vs. film. She offers helpful advice for revision and ends with exercises geared to each chapter. When writers select one point of view rather than another, Zeidner maintains, they determine their relationship to their subject and their characters: “whether you’re moving toward your subject, or whether you’re moving away. Whether you’re going to encourage the reader to bathe in the character’s view of the world, or offer a complementary or even competing one.” Choosing a third-person point of view opens up “gradations with infinite possibilities,” depending on the writer’s “spectrum of closeness and distance from a character.” Zeidner cites novels in which the narrative unfolds from several characters’ views, a popular choice in contemporary fiction and one that creates a complex picture of the fictional world. She nods to the controversy over authenticity and appropriation, which she thinks largely depends on point of view. As much as she focuses on technique, Zeidner asserts that “a fiction writer’s most important tool isn’t technical. It’s profound interest in other people.” As a rich resource for further reading, the author includes hundreds of stories, novels, writing guides, and movies in her comprehensive list of Works Cited.

An engaging and well-informed writing companion.
PROJECT STARTUP
Alexander, Heather with D’Asaro, Laura & Wang, Rose
Illus. by Flores, Vanessa
Penguin Workshop (224 pp.)
$14.99 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-593-09617-8
Series: Eat Bugs, 1

Young entrepreneurs develop a bug-based business model.

On a school field trip to the zoo, sixth grade vegetarian Hallie Amberose tries a spicy fried cricket and it changes her life. Hallie dives into researching bugs, learning that they’re eaten all over the world, and becomes enamored with possibilities of ending world hunger and saving the planet at the same time. When a business opportunity in the form of a school business pitch project presents itself, Hallie finds herself paired with Jaye Wu—who refuses to do a school project on bugs, let alone eat them. The story is filled with realistic conflicts typical of the middle school years that move the plot forward; Hallie struggles with loneliness while Jaye worries about fitting in. After an unexpected incident, the two forge an unlikely yet believable bond and learn to work together through bug-catching and -cooking experiments. Told through Hallie’s and Jaye’s distinctly alternating perspectives, the book acquaints readers with both headstrong girls and the motivations for their actions. The expressive illustrations peppered throughout complement the descriptive and informative text well, capturing characters’ emotions and personalities. Based on the true story of co-authors and Chirps cricket chips co-founders D’Asaro and Wang, Hallie and Jaye’s bug adventures for the greater good will entrance readers and even encourage them to try eating bugs. Hallie presents White; Jaye is Chinese American.

An unusual, inspiring, and intriguing story. (cricket cookie recipe, interview) (Fiction. 8-12)

LAXMI’S MOOCH
Anand, Shelly
Illus. by Ali, Nabi H.
Kokila (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-984815-65-1

Laxmi, an Indian American elementary school student, has a mooch.

A mooch, Laxmi explains, is a sprinkling of hairs on her upper lip; it’s also the Hindi word for mustache. Laxmi is
American Carmen and Rocky the talking rat-rabbit. But in trying Brooklyn. Gabrielle is a charming narrator, and of course, fully fuses distinct immigrant experiences with the supernatural dread she feels in leaving everything she knows behind. A preternaturally sensitive child, Gabrielle feels responsible for not only her own success, but her whole family’s, so the stakes of moving in with her uncle, aunt, and cousins in Brooklyn are high—even before Lady Lydia, a witch, tries to steal her essence. Lydia makes her an offer she can’t refuse: achieving assimilation. Arnold skillfully fuses distinct immigrant experiences with the supernatural to express a universally felt desire for belonging. Gabrielle desperately wants to fit in despite the xenophobia she experiences every day and despite making new, accepting friends in Mexican American Carmen and Rocky the talking rat-rabbit. But in trying to change herself, Gabrielle risks giving Lydia the power to conquer Brooklyn. Gabrielle is a charming narrator, and of course, good guy (girl) magic wins out in the end, but the threat to immigrant lives and identities is presented poignantly nonetheless in this richly imaginative origin story of one Haitian American girl that offers a fantastical take on immigrant narratives.

Pratchett-like worldbuilding centers immigrant kids in a story filled with culture, humor, and heart. (Fiction. 9-12)

unaware of her mooch until her friends Zoe and Noah point it out during recess. At first, Laxmi is mortified—especially when she realizes she doesn’t have fine, dark hairs just on her top lip but all over her whole body. At the end of the day, she runs home to her parents, who react to her distress with humor and compassion. Mummy explains that Laxmi comes from generations of women with mooches. When Laxmi complains about the hair between her eyebrows, her parents compare her to feminist icon Frida Kahlo. Laxmi is still upset, but that night she dreams of tigers, and, appropriately, in the morning she has a tally with 8.5 by-22-inch spreads viewed at 22.5% of actual size.)

THE YEAR I FLEW AWAY
Arnold, Marie
Versify/HMH (256 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-0-358-27275-5

At home in Haiti, 10-year-old Gabrielle Marie Jean loves the rain, scary stories, beating the boys in mango-eating contests, and her family, most of all.

When her parents’ paperwork issues mean she must immigrate to the United States alone, every heavenly thing she believes about America can’t outweigh the sense of dread she feels in leaving everything she knows behind. A preternaturally sensitive child, Gabrielle feels responsible for not only her own success, but her whole family’s, so the stakes of moving in with her uncle, aunt, and cousins in Brooklyn are high—even before Lady Lydia, a witch, tries to steal her essence. Lydia makes her an offer she can’t refuse: achieving assimilation. Arnold skillfully fuses distinct immigrant experiences with the supernatural to express a universally felt desire for belonging. Gabrielle desperately wants to fit in despite the xenophobia she experiences every day and despite making new, accepting friends in Mexican American Carmen and Rocky the talking rat-rabbit. But in trying to change herself, Gabrielle risks giving Lydia the power to conquer Brooklyn. Gabrielle is a charming narrator, and of course, good guy (girl) magic wins out in the end, but the threat to immigrant lives and identities is presented poignantly nonetheless in this richly imaginative origin story of one Haitian American girl that offers a fantastical take on immigrant narratives.

Pratchett-like worldbuilding centers immigrant kids in a story filled with culture, humor, and heart. (Fiction. 9-12)

SUPER DETECTIVES
Atkinson, Cale
Illus. by the author
Tundra (64 pp.)
$12.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-7352-6742-8
Series: Simon and Chester, 1


Ghost Simon is busy typing a detective story when bored human child Chester interrupts. Grandma’s napping, and Chester’s going to “IMplode from boredom.” Irritated, Simon admonishes Chester to find something to do, which leads to the unearthing of Grandma’s old theater paraphernalia. When Chester discovers a detective costume, Simon is enamored (his eyes turn into hearts at the sight of the deerstalker) and suggests they become real detectives, “taking names, solving cases.” When flyers don’t produce any clients, the pair happily goes looking; when they find a strange dog in their home, the game is afoot! How did the adorable pooch make its way into their house? Whose dog is it? The sleuthing duo is on the case (though Simon may be taking things more seriously—too seriously?—than strictly necessary...) with lots of laughs along the way. The mystery dog is not the only adorable creature in this book: Both traditionally white and amorphous ghost Simon and brown-skinned boy Chester are equally charming. Atkinson easily shifts format with panels that are both colorful and clear. With simple and engaging text and a straightforward plot that moves right along, this story is a winner for new readers and aspiring gumshoes alike. Readers will look forward to seeing more of this entertaining detective duo in the future.

It’s no mystery—all clues point to fun! (Graphic mystery. 6-9)

DAISY
Bagley, Jessixa
Illus. by the author
Neal Porter/Holiday House (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-0-8234-4650-6

Finding friendship is the greatest treasure.

Daisy is a shy little warthog eager for friends. But at her forest school, which is filled with woodland creatures of all sorts, her bristly, tusked appearance draws sneers and teasing from some of the other girls. Who knew a raccoon could be so catty? ostracized and feeling alone, Daisy creates her own world in a verdant thicket of the leafy forest, hidden away from others. And while the other children play and make fun, Daisy collects broken, discarded bits and pieces that she carefully displays in her little forest fort. To her the finds are treasure. As her treasures accumulate, she realizes that someone is leaving objects for her to find. “Hi, I’m Fern,” says her visitor, a shy little skunk.
At a time when the world seems both very distant from the United States, due to the current administration's xenophobic foreign policy, it also seems closer than ever, due to the spread of Covid-19 around the globe. As the pandemic and climate change have made abundantly clear, our children are growing up in a world of porous borders, and inculcating in them an understanding of the myriad cultures that share our globe is an imperative. What better way to begin to do this than through a book that offers a peek into a sensibility from far away?

A number of our Best Picture Books of 2020 originated abroad, including *There Must Be More Than That* by Shinsuke Yoshitake, translated from the Japanese (Chronicle, Oct. 6); *Migrants*, a wordless book by Peruvian creator Issa Watanabe (Gecko Press, Oct. 6); and *Letters From Bear* by Gauthier David, illustrated by Marie Caudry and translated from the French by Sarah Ardizzone (Eerdmans, March 24). But there were so many more, so please join me in one more look.

From the Netherlands comes *Little Wise Wolf* by Gijs van der Hammen, illustrated by Hanneke Siemensma and translated by Laura Watkinson (Kids Can, Sept. 1). The titular lupine protagonist holes himself up in a little cottage in the forest, accumulating wisdom but rebuffing the questions of the neighboring animals. When the king summons Little Wise Wolf, he pulls on his red rubber boots and sets off on a lengthy and arduous journey, eventually becoming lost—and is then rescued by his neighbors, whose kindness and compassion teach Little Wise Wolf a lesson he accepts gracefully.

The Spanish import *Grandparents*, by Chema Heras, illustrated by Rosa Osuna and translated by Elisa Amado (Aldana Libros/Greystone Kids, May 5), offers children a radical story in its centering of an elderly couple. Learning of a dance, Manuel insists that they attend while Manuela protests that she has no intention of going—but gets ready anyway. Their loving banter combines with Osuna’s whimsical touch to present characters that will have children seeing their elders with new eyes: as individuals with rich, full stories of their own.

Spare, striking illustrations help children through a highly metaphorical conversation about loss in Argentine author/illustrator Maria Wernicke’s book *Some Days*, translated from the Spanish by Lawrence Schimel (Amazon Crossing Kids, Sept. 29). As a mother and child hang out laundry, the child imagines that a sheet tightly twisted around their body becomes a passageway to another place, one where “there’s no danger” and a figure in a homburg awaits a hug. Careful use of negative space helps child readers to an intuitive understanding of the grief mother and child share.

Imported from China, *Lemon Butterfly*, by Chinese author Cao Wenxuan and Brazilian illustrator Roger Mello (Reycraft Books, Sept. 30), also uses negative space to depict metaphor. It tells the story of the titular butterfly, which embarks on a transformative journey across dazzlingly abstract landscapes that are by turns tantalizing and frightening. Over a river, a mountain, and a city it goes only to discover the field of flowers it has sought is now submerged—and its sudden, unexpected metamorphosis into a butterfly fish beckons readers to imagine startling possible futures for themselves.

“Bring the world close” with picture books.

Vicky Smith is a young readers’ editor.
Bagley engages with lovely, soft colors that perfectly pair with the quiet, gentle heart of her story; an opening scene of Daisy making her way through a field abloom with her namesake establishing the tone. Daisy is a perfectly adorable warthog with a winningly expressive snout; she, like all the animals, goes unclothed but on hind legs, using human tools and accessories. The language and message resonate like a whisper in the woods—Daisy’s fort is described as “a magical place, hidden from the eyes of others.” (This book was reviewed digitally with 8.5-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 35.3% of actual size.)

This sweet tale of being overlooked and recognizing value others don’t is a perfect treasure. (Picture book. 4-8)

**ARMOR & ANIMALS**
Baill, Elizabeth Toblin
Princeton Architectural Press (40 pp.)
$16.95 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-61689-955-4
Series: Explore Art

A museum educator takes a stab at comparing medieval arms and armor to lobster tails and other animal defenses.

Baill juxtaposes stock animal photos, some in color, some not, with photos of full suits or pieces of armor (ditto) from the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. These accompany either discussion-starting questions like “What do slimy snails and shining armor have in common?” or such audience-friendly observations as “A group of rhinos is called a crash.” Several of the photographed figures are too dark to make out smaller details easily, though, and except for a ladybug on a blade of grass, all are placed without visual context against low-contrast monochrome backgrounds that sometimes darken them further. Claims that rhinos can reach “their top speed in no time” and that armored knights could still run and jump are at best credulity stretching. A comment that every ring in a collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. These accompany either discussion-starting questions like “What do slimy snails and shining armor have in common?” or such audience-friendly observations as “A group of rhinos is called a crash.” Several of the photographed figures are too dark to make out smaller details easily, though, and except for a ladybug on a blade of grass, all are placed without visual context against low-contrast monochrome backgrounds that sometimes darken them further. Claims that rhinos can reach “their top speed in no time” and that armored knights could still run and jump are at best credulity stretching. A comment that every ring in a shirt of chain mail “is stamped with the name of an important person” is, frustratingly, not backed up with a closer look at the shirt. An appendix offers further details about the artifacts but not the animals—which leaves readers to guess, for instance, how that ladybug’s “bright color is a warning to other creatures.” Younger museumgoers might better arm themselves with the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Can You Find It? series.

The premise of this series kickoff is better than the presentation. (author’s note) (Informational picture book. 5-7)
larger scale than those found in the magazine’s busy, black-and-white scenes. When the animals board the ark and then disembark, Bateman reverts to a pleasing rhyming verse (the same both times) that lists the animals’ actions: “The giraffes towered. / The elephants swayed. / The monkeys chittered. / The donkeys brayed.” And God’s repeated refrain to Noah is sure to strike a chord with little listeners who similarly feel out of their depths: “Just do your best, and I’ll do the rest.” An answer key in the backmatter not only both lists the items and highlights where they are hiding in the thumbnails, but also provides three tips for searching for that elusive final item.

Children are sure to pore over the pages…and put those three tips to good use. (Picture book/religion. 4-8)

TROUBLE
Butlersby, Katherine
Illus. by the author
Viking (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-0-593-11404-9

A story about making friends and ditching assumptions.

The anthropomorphic squirrel narrator is alarmed when a bear moves in next door, immediately assuming this new neighbor is Trouble with a capital T. The squirrel lives with a tiny mouse named Chamomile, who acts as a quasi-child and who brings out protective feelings in the squirrel as they overhear noises from the other side of the wall that divides their apartment from the bear’s. Readers privy to a cross section of the building will see that the bear is not doing anything alarming and that the squirrel’s fears are unfounded. Chamomile also discovers this truth before the squirrel does and befriends the bear. When the squirrel can’t find Chamomile after an encounter with the bear at the supermarket and fears the worst, those fears are put to rest with a scene of peaceful tranquility in the bear’s living room, and the squirrel eats crow. Next on the menu are tea and cookies shared among the trio of new friends. “Don’t judge a book by its cover” is the clear message, but readers would do well to judge this book by its eye-catching art. Starting with the cover, it offers playful cartoon characterizations, and the incorporation of collaged photos of teapots and other items from the real world underscores the real-world application of the story’s heartfelt message. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-18-inch double-page spreads viewed at 20% of actual size.)

Trouble yourself to check this one out. (Picture book. 3-6)

LITTLE KID, BIG CITY!
NEW YORK
Beckman, Beth
Illus. by Maher, Holley
Quirk Books (88 pp.)
$19.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-68369-244-7
Series: Little Kid, Big City

A summertime tour of child-friendly sites and sights in the Big Apple, from the Bronx Zoo to Rockaway Beach.

Spinning off from the Little Kid Big City website and Instagram account, this effervescent travelogue is arranged as a series of self-chosen itineraries. After crossing the Brooklyn Bridge, for instance, readers have the option of turning to one page to explore Brooklyn Bridge Park and other attractions on that side of the East River or turning to another to head back toward the National September 11 Memorial in Manhattan. The book exists in a pandemic-free vacuum, and the fact that many of the stops, shops, and festivals highlighted here are either closed or, at best, offering limited access for the foreseeable future goes unmentioned. Nor do the racially and ethnically diverse groups
of smiling, casually posed figures in Maher’s bright, informally drawn street scenes wear masks or practice social distancing. But though Beckman plays a bit fast and loose with her facts too (New York’s transit system is arguably not “the world’s oldest”), in making her selections of places worth visiting she delivers more than perfunctory nods to the city’s outer regions. A fold-out map (not seen) and a set of URLs and further details about each stop at the end will (under non-pandemic circumstances) help prospective young visitors plan their excursions. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-16-inch double-page spreads viewed at 75% of actual size.)

Broader in purview than most such celebratory guides, though it represents a pre-pandemic reality. (Informational picture book. 6-10)

MY DAY WITH THE PANYE
Charles, Tami
Illus. by Palacios, Sara
Candlewick (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 16, 2021
978-0-7636-9749-5

“In the hills of Port-au-Prince,” little Fallon has a lot on her mind as she accompanies her mother into the bustling market, but more than anything, she wants to carry a panye on her head.

When Manman invites her on this rite of passage for the women in their family, Fallon delights in seeing her mother carrying the titular woven basket upon her head through their lively Haitian community. Using rich colors and textures, Palacios imagines a world of plush green spaces and sandy roadways enveloping a Caribbean urban center swirling with brown faces amid colorful buildings. Charles’ story follows the traveling duo as Manman’s enviable grace and strength with the panye upon her head mirror other women’s. Readers’ eyes wander across landscapes of Francophone signage and busy commerce to find Fallon and her mother in the thick of things. At other times, pointed use of negative space makes connections between the panye and family, care and balance, explicit to both Fallon and readers. A friendly yet unacknowledged dog tagging along for the trip is a winsome detail, but readers will notice that Palacios misses some opportunities to expand on the text. Even though Kreyòl dialogue and phrases are at times left untranslated, clarity comes with both contextual clues and the story’s overarching sentiment that things of great importance—like a bird’s nest, or nich zwazo—take time.

Images and text may not always be in sync, but Fallon is as easy to root for as Haiti is lovely to gaze upon in this graceful book. (author’s note) (Picture book 5-9)

REAL
Cujec, Carol & Goddard, Peyton
Shadow Mountain (224 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-62972-789-9

A nonverbal autistic girl stands up for herself and others after she finds a way to communicate.

Thirteen-year-old Charity Wood has a brilliant mind and a photographic memory but has no way of saying so. Labeled “low-functioning autistic,” she’s relegated to Borden Academy, where students with disabilities are mistreated and their education neglected. When Charity’s supportive parents enroll her in a mainstream school, Charity is introduced to facilitated communication; she types on an iPad keyboard while an aide supports her arm. Charity vows to use her newfound voice to help other students with disabilities, but uncontrollable melt-downs, bullying classmates, and skeptical adults threaten to...
silence her. Charity’s anger at being infantilized and spoken over is vividly conveyed, as is her frustration with her uncooperative body. Unfortunately, emotion and suspense are blunted by heavy-handed, clichéd characterization—doctors are callous and physically unappealing while special educators are doting and beautiful. Students with Down syndrome are joyful and loving. Occasionally, stilted dialogue perpetuates the trope that autistic people are preternaturally wise or mystical, as when a teacher comments that Charity possesses “the wisdom of many lifetimes.” An afterword explains that the book was inspired by the experiences of co-author Goddard but does not mention facilitated communication’s controversial history. Most characters, including Charity, default to White; there is some diversity in the supporting cast.

Well-meaning but one-dimensional. (Fiction. 9-13)

BLUE, BARRY & PANCAKES
Dan & Jason
Illus. by the authors
First Second (96 pp.)
$12.99 | Mar. 9, 2021
978-1-250-25555-6
Series: Blue, Barry & Pancakes, 1

This graphic novel might qualify as a Rube Goldberg device. Barry has a simple plan for retrieving his friend Blue’s beach ball. He’s even written it in his notebook. Step No. 1: “Find whale.” Step No. 2: “Tickle fin” and then “Enter mouth.” Later steps turn out to involve an enormous tuba, an upside-down airplane, and an active volcano. The plan gets funnier each time it goes awry, and every few pages, Barry and his friends get catapulted into the air. Near the climax, they drop out of a flying saucer and land in the middle of a duck’s birthday party. The party, of course, is inside the aforementioned volcano. It ends cheerfully for everyone, especially the duck, who was afraid no one would show up for the party. The artwork couldn’t be more colorful or appealing. Every character is made up of the simplest possible shapes and the brightest possible colors. Barry the frog is a green rectangle. A rabbit named Pancakes is, confusingly, shaped like a pear and is yellow except for her pink tail. Blue is, less confusingly, a blue worm. The details are so gloriously loopy that, if anything, the climax, featuring more than a dozen E.T.s with balloons, will seem a little sedate. But even the quietest scene, with hugs and morals, includes an orange sky and a purple bird.

Only Rube Goldberg would find the story realistic, but slapstick fans will rejoice. (Graphic fantasy. 6-10)

SUNNY-SIDE UP
Davis, Jacky
Illus. by Woodcock, Fiona
Greenwillow Books (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-06-257307-0

A rainy day dashes a young child’s plans, but with dad’s help, delight can be found in playing indoors.

The warm glow of morning greets a happy child, who proudly sits at the breakfast table. But when a storm is revealed, a tantrum ensues. Daddy soothes ruffled feathers and fears, encouraging the tot to play inside. Soon, cozy pillow nests and a building-block city bloom; under the table, a clubhouse flourishes as the pale-complexioned child serves treats to a couple of stuffies. When Mommy comes home, the rain has stopped, and the two play at the park before sitting down for a family dinner of spaghetti and ice cream. Traditional gender roles are reversed, with the father as the primary caregiver, cooking meals, keeping the schedule, and gently persuading an obstinate child to nap. First-person, rhyming text perfectly captures a young child’s desire for independence and control over choices.
“I close my eyes, / and dream about my sunny day. / Where I found fun inside when it was gray.” The illustrations, done in a gentle, welcoming pastel palette, feature simple characters, but the interplay of pattern and color creates sophisticated images. The child’s expressive energy under a mop of straight-brown hair is perfectly captured in jumping, stomping, running, and playing; and Woodcock skillfully layers cooler colors to convey the weather and emotional state of the child. Together, the author and artist create an environment full of warmth and love. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11.3-by-18.6-inch double-page spreads viewed at actual size.)

A perfect addition to the rainy-day bookshelf, where joy can be found indoors, knowing the sun will shine again. (Picture book. 3-7)

A Subway Ride Marked by Anxious People-Watching Builds Up to Milo’s Most Important Moment of the Month.

As the subway train pulls away from the station, Milo, holding his drawing pad and pencil, sits beside his big sister, who holds her cellphone. Both kids present Black. Milo is “a shook-up soda” of excitement, confusion, and worry. “To keep himself from bursting,” Milo observes the people around him on the train and imagines the lives they go home to, drawing scenes of their lives in his notebook. He imagines one pale-skinned man with a five o’clock shadow going home to a rat-infested apartment building, eating alone. He imagines a young White boy in a suit going home to a castle in a horse-drawn carriage.

You Are Always Loved
A Story of Hope
Dean, Madeleine & Cunnane, Harry with Wallace, Chelsea Lin
Illus. by Clifton-Brown, Holly
Random House (32 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-593-30924-7
978-0-593-30925-4 PLB

A little bunny learns to find strength during difficult times. Co-written (with an assist from Wallace) by Dean, a Democratic Congresswoman from Pennsylvania, and her son, who have felt firsthand the impact of a substance-use disorder, the book expounds on love and resilience. In the sun-drenched first spread, a tiny rabbit and presumed parent figure cuddle together. “Sometimes you look around, and everything is bright and feels like love.” But then a storm blows through the forest, and the flop-eared tot is left alone. (The larger rabbit is seen hopping away, not turning back—a piercing image of abandonment.) Other woodland creatures appear, helping the bunny on a journey of self-discovery. “When you can’t stop the lightning or calm the crashing thunder, you can look inside your heart, where there’s hope.” An owl gives a ride over a swirling river: “Hope is a friend helping you soar above rough waters.” A deer helps the bunny up a steep slope: “Hope is a friend carrying you up mountains too hard to climb.” The rabbit pair is reunited when the storm passes, with the reassurance that love is always present. An author’s note lightly touches on Cunnane’s experience with addiction but acknowledges that difficult emotions are a part of everyone’s life in many different ways. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-18-inch double-page spreads viewed at 23.6% of actual size.)

A gentle reminder when a bright spot is needed. (Picture book. 3-7)
In 2012, Australian cartoonist Gavin Aung Than launched his blog *Zen Pencils*, in which he adapted inspirational quotations from such figures as Rumi, Stephen King, Frida Kahlo, and Chuck Jones into witty comic strips, later to be published in a two-volume set. He’s put *Zen Pencils* on hiatus to focus on his new project, a graphic-novel series for middle graders called Super Sidekicks, in which a quartet of young sidekicks gets fed up with their adult counterparts and join together to fight crime themselves. The first three titles are already out in Australia; Book 1, *No Adults Allowed* (Random House, Nov. 17), has just published in the U.S., with colors by Sarah Stern. We caught up with Aung Than via Zoom from his home in Perth. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Super Sidekicks is an incredible departure from *Zen Pencils*. What’s behind that transition?

There were a few reasons. I felt an urge to create my own stories—to write and illustrate. And there were also some financial reasons, because I just had my [first child] around that time, and *Zen Pencils* wasn’t really stable financially. A lot of the quotes had copyright issues, so most of my book advance was spent on license fees and getting permission and stuff like that. It was just madness to keep going like that. And another factor was just seeing how wildly popular comics were becoming in the mainstream with kids. You know, with [Dav Pilkey’s] Dog Man and [Aaron Blabey’s] The Bad Guys. It just felt like the right time to make a change.

**What drew you to explore kid sidekicks?**

Growing up, I loved superhero comics. So superheroes were a no-brainer, but I wanted to target kids—so why not focus on the kid sidekicks? If it was full of adult superhero characters, it would probably be a bit too serious. [Also,] people have pointed out that I’m a younger brother. I always looked up to my older brother, and I would do whatever he did and follow him around. Like a little sidekick. Maybe in my subconscious I wanted to “hero” the sidekicks so they become the stars of the show.

**It really struck me that your adult characters are jerks. Is that a reflection on your older brother?**

Don’t tell him that. [Laughs.] No, he’s not a jerk. I just felt [for this project] the kids [should be] the sane ones. And that it would be kind of a funny dynamic to have all the adults as the buffoons and selfish, egotistic characters.

**How did you go about developing their names and their powers?**

It all happened organically. The leader is Junior Justice. I wanted to give him a shorthand name, [so he’s] JJ to his friends. He is based on how I look. I wanted to be an expert martial artist [like JJ], and he’s got a cool gadget belt. I knew that he would be a Robin knockoff. And Robin doesn’t have any powers. He’s just kind of a gymnast and a fighter. So that’s JJ.
Dinomite came from an old, old Zen Pencils comic. It featured this young girl who created some animated characters, a team of dinosaurs, and she called the team the Dinomites. And one of [those] characters looks just like [the Super Sidekick] Dinomite, so I got him from there. Also, I just love to draw dinosaurs. So I thought, how could I create a character where he could satisfy my urge to draw dinosaurs, so his power is to shape-shift into any dinosaur.

Fly Girl doesn’t have the most original name, but every superteam has to have an aerial character. And I thought, there’s been the Moth and there’s been Batgirl, but there hasn’t been a Fly Girl. And Australia is known for its flies.

And Goo is the lovable goofball that every team needs. He’s the simple, quirky, funny character. I thought that just having him be a giant blob of pink slime that I could mold into any scenario would be a good fit.

Is Dinomite a kid? Because he doesn’t talk like one. He’s just a really smart young dinosaur. He’s got a big vocabulary, but he’s one of the kids.

No Adults Allowed is unusual in that rather than going into the origin stories of the individual characters, it’s the entire group’s origin story. I find that origins can kind of weigh a story down, and I wanted to jump right into the action. Goo’s origin is explained. But the other three I’m leaving for future books. Hopefully I can get around to really fleshing out the world and all the characters and all their backstories.

Were there a lot of changes made in bringing the book from Australia to the U.S.?
There weren’t too many, besides the whole actual format itself [from about 7.5 by 5.5 inches in Australia to 6.5 by 9.3 inches in the U.S.]. And the Australian ones are black and white. It was awesome to see the Sidekicks come to life in color. But contentwise in Book 1, there was just one scene in the Australian version which my U.S. editor felt was a little bit too violent. So they just asked me to tone that down a bit. In Book 2, there are a few more changes because it has politicians from around the world. So they wanted to add another female politician.

One of the things that I noticed in Fly Girl’s dialogue is that she refers to everybody as mate. That was something I specifically asked to keep. [The U.S. team] wanted to get rid of that, but I really wanted to keep it Australian. We don’t have an Australian super-team. So I want to make [the Sidekicks] uniquely Australian. They’re based in Sydney; Fly Girl speaks like an Aussie. I thought Australian kids would like seeing characters set in their own country. I’m glad that the U.S. editor didn’t ask me to change that part of it—I was worried that they would say they should be based somewhere in America.

I am interested in the Sidekicks’ future adventures. Book 2 is called Ocean’s Revenge, and it seems pretty socially conscious.
Yes, [it’s got] a big environmental theme. Actually, I just got awarded the 2020 Environment Award For Children’s Literature here. [But] I don’t want to cram lessons down kids’ throats because that’ll turn them away from reading. When I was a kid I didn’t want to be lectured to, so as long as I can wrap it around a really exciting, fun adventure, then I would love to be subversive and put some positive messages in.

Is there anything you’d like to say that I haven’t asked you already?
I just want to make comics for kids. Because I find that the real comics industry is making stories for adults who have grown up loving comics. But no one’s making comics for the next generation of kids. When I was a kid, it would have been right around the middle grades when I really got hooked on comics. And I want to try and do the same for the next generation.

No Adults Allowed was reviewed in the Oct. 15, 2020, issue.
But when Milo gets off the train, he is surprised to find that a White boy heading to the same destination as him. His surprise leads him to rethink his assessment of the people on the train, expanding his ideas of who people might be. With the same combination of wide-eyed observation and suspenseful buildup to a socially conscious revelation that readers cherished in this duo’s award-winning *Last Stop on Market Street* (2017), this picture book offers a child’s view of the impacts of incarceration on families. De la Peña’s descriptive language and Robinson’s innocent, endearing art make for another winning package. (This book was reviewed digitally with 8-by-11-inch double-page spreads viewed at 56.1% of actual size.)

A memorable, thought-provoking story poised to make a difference for many. (Picture book. 4-10)

**PARIS BY PHONE**
Druckerman, Pamela
Illus. by Chaud, Benjamin
Putnam (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-399-16506-1

A telephone transports a girl to her favorite place.

Paris-loving Josephine Harris constantly compares that city to her home—unfavorably. (It’s never explained how Josephine has acquired her enthusiasm for all things French, but it sure is energetic.) Annoyed and on a deadline, Mommy sends Josephine to her room. Incensed, Josephine picks up her phone to call for a replacement parent. After dozing off, she awakens in Paris and is welcomed by Odile, a Frenchwoman who invites Josephine to join her and her son on a city tour; as they go, Odile teaches her French. The adventure includes a visit to an art museum, the ballet, a café, and the Eiffel Tower; Odile urges Josephine to remain in Paris permanently. In the end, our heroine decides home is best; she misses Mommy. Trying the phone again at bedtime, Josephine awakens and... *voilà!* Back home, another international destination teases. This is meant to be light-hearted fare, and it’s narrated in jaunty (though sometimes clunky) verse. Strolling beside the Seine with her companions, Josephine learns that France is “ze nation / zat is always on vacation.” Odile’s stereotypical fake-French accent may strike more than a few as insulting. Quirky, colorful illustrations are expressive; familiar Parisian landscapes are depicted appealingly. The main characters present White, but readers will spot racially diverse boulevardiers in the background. (This book was reviewed digitally with 8-by-11-inch double-page spreads viewed at 48.8% of actual size.)

Traveling via telephone sounds nifty; it doesn’t work, though, in this skippable story. (Picture book. 4-7)

**DEEP INTO THE AMAZON JUNGLE**
Fraioli, James O
Illus. by St. Pierre, Joe
McElderry (112 pp.)
$19.99 | Mar. 16, 2021
978-1-5344-2094-6
Series: Fabien Cousteau Expeditions

Two young explorers get an eyeful and an earful about the Amazon rainforest after joining an expedition searching for a rumored giant piranha.

Like the rainforest itself, St. Pierre’s sequential panels are bursting with bioforms. These range from the human cast—which includes reader stand-ins William, who presents White, and Jaclyn, who has brown skin and dark, curly hair; Indigenous Kukama villagers; and the racially diverse boatload of scientists led by Fabien Cousteau (a White man, grandson of Jacques-Yves)—to lush greenery, pink river dolphins, predatory caimans (six types), vampire bats, small but deadly frogs, really big leeches and snakes, and bevyes of insects and other fauna. In keeping with the pedagogical drift of previous expeditions like *Great White Shark Adventure* (2019), Fraioli’s panel-crowding dialogue consists largely of mini-lectures on the area’s natural history as well as how cattle ranching and logging are threatening its distinctive ecosystems. Found at last in a hidden lagoon, the rare, thrillingly toothy fish are hooked and collected by the bucketload rather than just observed, which is a teeny bit at odds with the overall message. Still, the outing ends with expressions of fervent commitment to greener practices and getting the word out.

The format and melodramatic touches add appeal; the climactic inconsistency doesn’t. (Graphic informational fiction. 9-11)

**UNICORN ISLAND**
Galanti, Donna
Illus. by Stancliffe, Bethany
Andrews McMeel Publishing (224 pp.)
$13.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-5248-6470-5

Help is needed, but is it safe to reveal the secrets of Unicorn Island?

Twelve-year-old Samantha Wells is excited for a regular life after being settled in New York City for a year. But when her mom takes a two-month job as a flautist in Europe and sends Sam off to live with her Uncle Mitch, whom she hasn’t seen in a decade, she shatters Sam’s dreams of stability. Sam travels to South Carolina only to be met by a surprised Uncle Mitch who was not expecting her. Foggy Harbor is a seaside town marked by a nightly mist so heavy it seems magical, and its main street charm includes Dr. Thompson’s veterinary office. The vet’s son, Tuck, becomes fast friends with Sam, and together they discover a secret island hidden in the ocean fog populated by...
When readers learn why the elephant is forgetful—dementia is implied—it threatens to unleash readers’ own elephant tears.

**ARTHUR AND THE FORGETFUL ELEPHANT**

Author/illustrator Girón presents a thoughtful tale that is both quiet and robust. Her gentle use of contrasts begins on the first complete double-page spread, showing ultradiminutive main character Arthur, a bespectacled white boy, beside a supersized elephant that’s so big only its trunk and one leg fit on the page. When the elephant’s gigantic tears splash against Arthur’s head, the boy introduces himself. The sad elephant cannot reciprocate because he doesn’t know his name or where he belongs. No matter. Arthur befriends the elephant, and their play together eventually helps the elephant to recall. When readers learn why the elephant is forgetful—dementia is implied when his joyful, multigenerational family greets him with cries of “Grandpa!” and “Hi, Dad!”—it tugs at the heart and threatens to unleash readers’ own elephant tears. Girón’s careful use of white space gives emotional impact to sparse type and solitary images of Arthur. However, other pages splash with the patterns and colors of nature—tiny leaves, trees, and branches reaching to the infinite beyond, patchwork colors against a vast gray background. The depiction of the nameless elephant is beautifully executed, using techniques that add texture and dimension. Girón’s art has the fluidity of watercolor with the texture of pastel.

A tale of memory and kindness infused with warmth and a splash of color, imported from Spain.

**BEDTIME BALLET**

Bedtime is more fun when ballet’s involved.

As the sun sets, a child and their stuffed bunny dance their way to bed. The insects, frogs, birds, and flowers in the yard join in the dance, jumping and spinning with delight. Then the duo glide into the house to dance through their bedtime routine, brushing teeth, giving kisses to Mama and waving at brother before Papa tucks them in for sleep. With the plot following a fairly standard bedtime-book formula, caregivers looking for a short, sweet bedtime story will be happy with this fluffy book. What distinguishes it are the inclusion and depiction of ballet terms in both text and illustrations, and little ones who are already enrolled in ballet class will be able to understand the text easily. Those less familiar with ballet terminology may find the story less than engaging, but the glossary on the final page that includes a pronunciation guide provides some support. The rhyme scheme bounces the story along, with an instance of assonance perhaps drawing readers up short: “Kitty jumps close / with a grand pas de chat. / Puppy just watches. / His tail thumps to clap.” Softly colored textured washes combine with thick linework to create a cozy atmosphere. Fantastical performing animals add a touch of whimsy. All human characters are depicted with pale skin and brown hair. (This book was reviewed digitally with 8.5-by-22-inch double-page spreads viewed at 40% of actual size.)

A conventional bedtime story that will appeal mostly to balletomanees. (Picture book. 4-7)

**RECKLESS, GLORIOUS, GIRL**

In this novel told in free verse, Beatrice Miller is on the verge of 13 and trying to figure out who she will become. During the summer before seventh grade, Beatrice is at the boundary between childhood and something else. She’s happy with her small family—eccentric and free-spirited grandmother Mamaw and more conventional workaholic Mom—and best friends—dreamy, artsy Mariella and strong, fearless StacyAnn. But she also longs to grow into a beautiful and mature member of the popular clique. Rather than stemming from any overarching external conflict, the narrative tension emerges from Beatrice’s conflicted inner world, illustrated right off the bat through her being torn between love of her Kentucky country
Connections among marches and themes repeated due to unchanging social and political conditions are one of the book’s strengths.

An introspective, sensitive tale that readers can grow along with. (Verse novel. 8-13)

TOGETHER WE MARCH
25 Protest Movements That Marched Into History
Henderson, Leah
Illus. by Feder, Tyler
Atheneum (96 pp.)
$18.99 | Jan. 19, 2021
978-1-5344-4270-2

Marching for the rights of all—children, Black people, women, Indigenous people, DREAMers, the LGBTQ+ community, disabled individuals, and many others—is explored in this history.

From the children who walked with Mother Jones from Pennsylvania to New York in 1903 to speak for better youth labor laws to the worldwide Youth Climate Strike in March 2019, all kinds of marches—many linked to children and youth—are described in lively language and illustrated with bright cartoons that emphasize diversity among participants and illustrate the banners and posters carried. Each two-page spread contains a short history of each march and the actions taken, set in dense type, along with one or two quotes from organizers. Some, like the Longest Walk, a 1978 march from San Francisco to Washington, D.C., undertaken by Indigenous people to bring attention to 11 Congressional bills that threatened sovereignty, were weeks or months long. Widely known events like the recent Women’s March in January 2017 and actions known only to a few historians, like the 1943 march of Bulgarian Jews against the Holocaust, receive equal treatment. Connections among marches and themes repeated due to unchanging social and political conditions are pointed out and are one of the book’s strengths. The visually appealing last spread shows a timeline of each event placed on a long winding road. There is neither a table of contents nor an index, but the information presented is accessible and should really be read straight through for greatest impact. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11- by 20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 27.5% of actual size.)

This inspiring book will encourage activism. (sources, further reading) (Nonfiction. 11-13)

GO AND DO LIKESWISE!
The Parables and Wisdom of Jesus
Hendrix, John
Illus. by the author
Abrams (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-4197-3705-3

A small collection of Jesus’ parables introduces young readers to Jesus’ way of teaching.

The text begins with the parable of the good Samaritan. A brief interlude presents several of the Beatitudes before Hendrix tells the story of two builders, one who built on bedrock, the other on sand. Several brief one- or two-page parables follow this before the longer tales continue with the lost sheep and the prodigal son. In a note on his retelling, Hendrix says that he has paraphrased the Gospel readings for “audience clarity, artistic purpose, and to bring the reader more deeply into the story.” However, his paraphrasing, mainly in the shorter parables, may do the opposite as readers try to remember exactly how the story that seems so familiar really goes. For example, he writes, “Can a hilltop fortress ever be hidden? Should a lamp be tucked under a veil? No! There is no such thing as invisible light.” And when Jesus is asked about the most important commandment, Hendrix styles the question, “Teacher, what should I do to live an eternal life with God?” Bright colors and patterns draw readers’ attention. Hendrix notes that his illustrations are a mix of fantastical and historical; humans have dark hair and olive Complexions and wear, for the most part, Middle Eastern-style robes. Jesus is an almost skeletal thin bearded man wearing sandals and a tattered white garment. His skin tone varies from light to medium-toned. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9.8- by 22-inch spreads viewed at 24.4% of actual size.)

A starting point for children who are not already familiar with Jesus’ parables. (author’s note, sources, about the art) (Picture book/religion. 6-12)

HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?
Hobbie, Holly
Illus. by the author
Random House (40 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Mar. 30, 2021
978-0-593-12467-3 PLB
978-0-593-12466-6
978-0-593-12467-3 PLB
Series: Toot and Puddle

Beloved characters Toot, Puddle, and Opal are back in this garden mystery.

Toot, Puddle, and Puddle’s young cousin Opal are planting a garden full of vegetables and flowers. Each morning they check to see how their garden is growing. Every evening they admire their garden, dreaming of eating their crops. But when they visit the garden one morning, they notice that their lettuce leaves have been snacked on. Realizing there is an uninvited guest, the pigs build a fence around the garden. Unfortunately, that
The book is divided into three sections defined by geography, Poland. Each section has chapters dedicated to individual stories, about the creature, the three pigs decide to stay up all night and catch the culprit. Toot, Puddle, and Opal do everything they can to scare the creature away, but it pays them no mind, leaving at dawn. When it doesn’t come back, they begin to realize that maybe there was enough spinach for everyone. What begins as a story about suspicion and withholding ends as a sweet tale of kindness and sharing. Hobbie’s classic watercolor illustrations create a sweet, whimsical springtime garden. The pigs show great emotion on their faces and with their ears, bringing the text to life. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 27.6% of actual size.)

WE MUST NOT FORGET
Holocaust Stories of Survival and Resistance
Hopkinson, Deborah
Scholastic Focus (384 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-338-25577-5

This essential collection of Holocaust survivors’ memories draws on oral histories, interviews, and other primary sources. The stories of Jewish children and teens who survived against all odds are told in ways that readers will never forget. The book is divided into three sections, defined by geography, with stories from Germany and the Netherlands, France, and Poland. Each section has chapters dedicated to individual stories; the subjects are first briefly introduced in an “about the people” preface that provides helpful context as well as relevant dates to orient readers. Central to all the histories are the unbelievably brave helpers. Most of the children were hidden by neighbors; one photograph depicts an Indonesian Dutch family with the Jewish child they protected. Some people smuggled children across international borders, including a Jewish activist who helped others flee to Spain. Some were religious, for example, a priest in a French village and the American Friends Service Committee. An ongoing theme is that morality is complex in times of crisis. The collaborationist Jewish Council could save hundreds only by helping the Nazis. Many of the historical photographs are quite moving, and links to recordings of the survivors’ telling their stories are provided throughout and extend the impact of the text. One of the survivors died of Covid-19 as the book went to print, emphasizing the urgency of recording these narratives.

Vital and unendurably timely. (glossary, timeline, resources, bibliography, source notes, photo credits, index) (Nonfiction. 10-14)

WHAT ABOUT X?
An Alphabet Adventure
Hoppeurt, Anne Marie
Illus. by Wiseman, Daniel
Abrams Appleseed (40 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-4197-4078-7

Time for a field trip with the alphabet.
Welcome to the Alphabet Academy and meet its 26 rambunctious scholars. Today, teacher Question Mark is gathering the letters for a camping trip. Each has something special to bring except for the book’s protagonist, X. As the individual letters make their choices—A brings apples; F brings fishing poles; S gets sunscreen; etc.—X watches and frets over what to bring along. Inspiration finally hits, but it turns out that X’s perfect item isn’t so perfect, only to be reassured by kind alphabet friends how important it is to any camping experience that involves maps. The book’s strategy of introducing letters and corresponding vocabulary words isn’t new, but the story treads this old ground with some style, with the illustrations presenting the occasional object or design that enhances each letter. B is patterned to look like bricks and sets a baseball cap, bling, and boots in addition to the binoculars mentioned in the text; P is covered in polka dots. These subtle hints go astray with other letters, however. Why does M have three eyes? Is it because M has one more? Why does R wear its green hair in a mohawk? Is that to imply rock-star status? Educators and caregivers may have to take a few minutes to explain some artistic choices to inquisitive and observant readers. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9-by-18-inch double-page spreads viewed at actual size.)

Serviceable but not stellar. (Picture book. 3-6)

TYRONE O’Saurus Dreams
Howe, James
Illus. by Cecil, Randy
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 30, 2021
978-1-5362-1087-3

Can a T. rex pirouette and jeté on a ballet stage?

His father wants him to be a dentist, and his mother wants him to be a lawyer, but Tyrone, a big blue theropod, has a different career dream. His brother diverts him to football, but Tyrone lacks any and all gridiron skills. Then Tyrone meets Brontorina, a tremendously strong sauropod who studies ballet. She takes him to an outdoor dance studio, where he is welcomed, to join the other dinos, children, and cows. Under careful tutelage, and displaying a great talent, Tyrone has a star turn in a solo performance at the school recital. He exits the stage and the book performing a beautiful grand jeté with a perfectly elegant line. Howe presents his danseur noble as a gentle giant who persists and thus can fulfill his balletic vision. Cecil’s dappled art provides a humorous contrast between the hefty dinosaurs and the stick-figure humans. His choice of colors for
the dinos—textured blue for Tyrone and a bright orange for Brontorina—helps them fill the pages to overflowing. Tyrone’s softly edged outline, so dramatically unlike his prehistoric ancestors’, gives him definite cuddly appeal. Brontorina first appeared in her own eponymous tale (2010), in which she made it quite clear that dinosaurs need outdoor studios.

Yes, dreams can come true—even if you are a dancing dinosaur. (Picture book. 3-6)

A TEST OF COURAGE
Ireland, Justina
Illus. by Antonsson, Pétur
Disney Lucasfilm (256 pp.)
$14.99 | Jan. 5, 2021
978-1-368-05730-1
Series: Star Wars: The High Republic

After rogue bandits catastrophically sabotage a luxury liner on its passage across the stars, a group of young survivors finds refuge on a distant moon far from home.

The hubbub at Port Haileap surrounds the opulent Steady Wing, a vessel with a course set for a commemoration of the launch of Starlight Beacon, the Republic’s latest emissary for hope across the wild of the Outer Rim. Vernestra Rwoh—a green-skinned child prodigy and newly appointed Jedi Knight of 16—must accompany and protect senator’s daughter Avon Starros, a precocious 12-year-old brown-skinned girl with a science-oriented mind. Joining Vern’s mission is J-6, Avon’s sassy bodyguard droid. Shortly after takeoff, explosions rock the Steady Wing, killing almost all the passengers. Vern, Avon, and J-6 manage to escape, joined by Honesty Weft, the distraught son of an ambassador who perishes, and Imri Cantaros, a 14-year-old Padawan who loses his master. With little recourse, the group lands on a far-off moon thick with peculiar jungles and deadly rain, eluding the grasp of dangers that shadow them.

This tale ends with a promise of more dangerous times ahead, and Ireland’s attention to conflict building feeds nicely into that guarantee. Rich internal third-person dialogue reveals dollops of inner turmoil for each character (sans droid) at key moments as well as providing some much-needed worldbuilding to make this a winning choice.

A great read for Star Wars fans young and old. (Science fiction. 8-12)

SYLVIE
Kantorovitz, Sylvie
Illus. by the author
Walker US/Candlewick (352 pp.)
$24.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-5362-0762-0

Scenes from a girl’s everyday life.

In charmingly illustrated panels, readers are invited into the small triumphs and sorrows of cartoonist Kantorovitz’s youth. Born in Casablanca, Morocco, in the 1960s, when she was 5, her parents moved back to France, and her father took a job as a school principal. Sylvie and her three siblings grew up on the grounds of the all-boys school, and brief vignettes explore her relationships with her parents and siblings as well as her friendships, romances, and developing creativity. At first each story seems disconnected from the rest, but as Sylvie grows up, a central narrative around her desire to pursue art coalesces, especially after her family moves to a town near Paris. Kantorovitz uses a muted palette, mostly greens, browns, and yellows, with bold lines and pleasingly stolid figures. Similarly, her life is interesting but fairly straightforward—this is not a memoir of war, abuse, or extreme marginalization. Sylvie, a White Jewish girl, is the target of some prejudicial labels for those born in North Africa and experiences mild anti-Semitism, something her mother is always on guard against; her mother is similarly obsessed with Sylvie’s being appropriately feminine. But the overall tone of this story is comforting, warm, calm, and deeply satisfying.

Quietly appealing for young readers with a taste for realism. (Graphic memoir. 9-13)

IT WILL BE OK
Katzenberger, Lisa
Illus. by Sinquett, Jaclyn
Sourcebooks eXplore (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-7282-2255-4

Every day best friends Zebra and Giraffe go to the watering hole together.

But today Giraffe has climbed a tree, hanging on precariously, all because he has seen a terrifying spider. Will it “crawl up [his] hoof”? Will it chase him? Zebra reminds him how strong and fast he is compared to a tiny spider, but Giraffe is adamant about remaining in arboreal safety. Zebra knows that Giraffe’s fears are unwarranted—and perhaps even silly—but understands that they are very real and upsetting. So Zebra just hangs around, allowing his quiet presence to comfort Giraffe. When there is no further sign of the dreaded spider, Giraffe nervously descends, offering heartfelt gratitude to his friend for staying with him. When Giraffe spots the spider again, with Zebra at his side he bravely speaks to the little creature,
who immediately runs up the tree recently vacated by Giraffe. Giraffe understands and, with Zebra, resolutely waits beneath. Katzenberger tells the tale simply and directly, emphasizing the friends’ kindness and patience and (just barely) refraining from preaching. Sinquet’s brightly hued cartoons delightfully express the characters’ emotions and personalities, lightening the message of the text without diminishing it. The subtitle is unnecessary, as is the cloying aftermatter, indicating a lack of trust in the young readers who will easily grasp that message, especially with a grown-up to guide them.

Read the sweet tale of kindness; skip the unnecessary addenda. (Picture book. 4–7)

LIVING THE CONFIDENCE CODE
Real Girls. Real Stories. Real Confidence.
Kay, Katty, & Shipman, Claire & Riley, JillEllyn
Harper/HarperCollins (400 pp.)
$14.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-0-06-295411-4

An impressive group of girls lead with hope and confidence.

Building on the premise of empowering girls, this title showcases 30 true stories from the U.S. and all over the world of young people who are striving toward their goals. The title opens with a foreword by Olympic gold medal winner Laurie Hernandez; an introduction that defines confidence and explains why it matters; and a glossary of terms used in the book. The varied format, which includes Q&As and photos, adds appeal as readers learn about each girl’s story. The featured girls are diverse in ethnicity, national origin, ability, socio-economic status, and religious beliefs as well as in their accomplishments. One example is Autumn Peltier, a member of the Eagle Clan Anishinaabekwe and Wikwemikong First Nation in Ontario. She is a water activist, protesting the pollution of the Great Lakes. Yekaba Abimbola of Ethiopia advocated for herself and sought community support after discovering at age 12 that she was betrothed to a 20-year-old. Passionate about her education, she persuaded her father to cancel the engagement and support her dreams. Handling many subjects, from gender inequality in Nepal to disability access in sports, the stories offer efficient synopses of each girl’s journey. Each also emphasizes that success is not linear and that failure is a normal part of the process. The last chapter is blank, inviting readers to write their own stories.

A high-interest, empowering read. (sources & references, photo credits) (Nonfiction. 8-12)

BINDU’S BINDIS
Ketkan, Supriya
Illus. by Pillai, Parvati
Sterling (32 pp.)
$16.95 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-1-4549-4020-3

Bindu loves bindis, the decorative stickers that some South Asians wear on their foreheads for religious or cosmetic purposes. Bindu’s bindis are particularly special to her because they’re from her grandmother: Every month, her nani sends her a new packet all the way from India, and her delight emanates from every brightly hued page. But when Nani comes to visit, xenophobic White protestors at the airport make Bindu and her family feel scared and out of place, and Bindu briefly questions whether she ought to wear a bindi at all. The feeling returns a few days later, when Bindu must perform a dance onstage at school. In the moment when she experiences stage fright, Bindu isn’t sure if her bindi gives her strength or makes her different—too different for her classmates. With a little bit of courage—and some help from Nani—Bindu gets up on stage and, in the process, remembers why she loves bindis. Bindu is a delightful protagonist whose emotional ups and downs are both familiar-feeling and fun to read about. Bindu’s likability makes it slightly disappointing that it’s Nani and not feisty, resourceful Bindu herself who ultimately resolves the book’s main conflict. Nevertheless, the ending is both realistic and uplifting, tying together a storyline that strikes an expert balance between drama and humor. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10.9-by-17-inch double-page spreads viewed at 58.3% of actual size.)

A beautiful intergenerational tale about the importance of embracing the parts of ourselves that others may find strange. (Picture book 3–6)

SEVEN SPECIAL SOMETHINGS
A Nowruz Story
Khorram, Adib
Illus. by Fatibdi, Zainab
Dial Books (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-593-10826-0

When his cat overturns the carefully set haft-seen table, Kian sets out to re-create one that represents his family.

It’s the first day of spring and the Persian holiday of Nowruz. Kian helps Maman and Baba cook and clean all day, and Baba goes to the airport to pick up the grandparents who will join them for the holiday. The traditional haft-seen table has been set with the seven special items beginning with S, each representing good things to come in the new year. Kian wonders why there are only seven symbols on the haft-seen table. If he can find more items for the table, will that make them even happier in the new year? He tries putting Sonny the cat on the table, but Sonny knocks everything over, ruining it all. Now Kian...
has to find seven new S’s for the haft-seen table. What special items will he choose? This charming picture book introduces the traditional symbols and practices of Nowruz but focuses on the heart of the holiday’s meaning in terms that children can easily understand. Khorram, an award-winning author of young adult novels, creates a fun-loving protagonist and an easygoing family unit readers will warm to. Faidhi’s background in animation shines in these cartoon-style illustrations full of action and movement. (This book was reviewed digitally with 10-by-20-inch double-page spreads viewed at 61% of actual size.)

Welcome this new, modern celebration of an underrepresented holiday. (Picture book. 3-7)

**THE DEEP END**

*Kinney, Jeff*

*Illus. by the author*

Amulet/Abrams (224 pp.)

$14.99 | Oct. 27, 2020

978-1-4197-4868-4

Series: Diary of a Wimpy Kid, 15

The Wimpy Kid hits the road. The Heffley clan has been stuck living together in Gramma’s basement for two months, waiting for the family home to be repaired, and the constant togetherness has been getting on everybody’s nerves. Luckily Greg’s Uncle Gary has a camper waiting for someone to use it, and so the Heffleys set off on the open road looking for an adventurous vacation, hoping the changing scenery will bring a spark back to the family unit. The winding road leads the Heffleys to a sprawling RV park, a setting teeming with possibilities for Greg to get up to his usual shenanigans. Greg’s snarky asides and misadventures continue to entertain. At this point the Wimpy Kid books run like a well-oiled machine, paced perfectly with witty lines, smart gags, and charming cartoons. Kinney knows just where to put a joke, the precise moment to give a character shading, and exactly how to get the narrative rolling, spinning out the oddest plot developments. The appreciation Kinney has for these characters seeps through the novels, endearing the Heffleys to readers even through this title, the 15th installment in a franchise boasting spinoffs, movies, and merchandise. There may come a time when Greg and his family overstay their welcome, but thankfully that day still seems far off.

A witty addition to the long-running series. (Humor. 7-12)

**HOW TO CHANGE EVERYTHING**

*The Young Human’s Guide to Protecting the Planet and Each Other*

*Klein, Naomi*

Atheneum (336 pp.)

$17.99 | Feb. 23, 2021

978-1-5344-7452-9

This guide to climate justice for young people shows the roles of individuals, corporations, and governments in fighting for the planet and vulnerable populations. Divided into three parts—“Where We Are,” “How We Got Here,” and “What Happens Next”—this book explains some well-known facts and exposes many less-acknowledged realities about climate change and its disproportionate impact on poor communities and communities of color. Readers will find details about climate science, disaster capitalism, youth activism, geoengineering, the original New Deal and the Green New Deal, and more. With coverage of Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana, Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, Indigenous people’s initiatives for change, and lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic, the authors make a solid case for changing everything and offer practical and realistic steps for doing so. Klein’s journalistic credentials and Steffoff’s vast experience writing nonfiction for young readers merge to create an engaging account of how and why we find ourselves confronted with these urgent issues as well as how and why we might find our way out—if we work quickly. With its wide focus and pull-no-punches real talk, this book stands out among climate change books for its uniquely inclusive perspective that will inspire conviction, passion, and action.

If you can get only one climate change book for youth, let it be this one. (resources, notes) (Nonfiction. 10-17)

**OUTSIDE AND BEYOND**

*Knetzger, Laura*

*Illus. by the author*

Random House Graphic (272 pp.)

$13.99 | $16.99 PLB | Feb. 9, 2021

978-1-984896-78-0

978-0-593-12535-9 PLB

Series: Bug Boys, 2

Bug BFFs marvel over natural wonders in their bucolic microcosm.

In this graphic-novel sequel to *Bug Boys* (2020), beetle best friends Stag-B and Rhino-B have more quiet adventures told in tiny vignettes. The duo ventures out of their quiet home, Bug Village, seeing new surroundings with wide-eyed awe and contemplating their roles within these settings. In “The Ultimate S’mores,” the pair go on a camping trip, and Stag-B feels inferior when compared to Rhino-B’s outdoorsy know-how until they decide to talk about their feelings,
which helps Stag-B realize his own valuable strengths. In “The Pearl Dragon’s Castle,” the bugs explore a mysterious tower that seems to change uncannily with every step they take. They encounter a strange lavender dragon who claims to need help, leading them on a journey from frustration to collaboration. In the final tale, “Wave’s World,” they help a bat find a lost magical earring; riding on its back and gazing at their village from aloft, they admire the beauty of the night. Knetzger’s tiny tales are rambling and often surreal, thoughtfully examining both the beautiful complexity of nature and one’s place therein. With a muted, earth-toned palette, her illustrations firmly anchor readers in this intricately whimsical world. Perhaps not a splashy crowd pleaser, this sophomore effort may fare best when put in the hands of those seeking that which is both philosophical and introspective.

A dreamlike and existential rumination. (Graphic fantasy. 9-12)

**WALKING TOWARD PEACE**  
*The True Story of a Brave Woman Called Peace Pilgrim*  
Krull, Kathleen  
Illus. by Bowler, Annie  
Flyaway Books (40 pp.)  
$18.00 | Mar. 2, 2021  
978-1-947888-26-5

“Overcome evil with good, falsehood with truth, and hatred with love.” These words are as applicable today as they were when they were spoken by a little-known historical figure who decided to make a pilgrimage for peace.

On New Year’s Day 1953, after years of training to get ready and even giving up her former identity, Peace Pilgrim began her walk from the West Coast to the East Coast. She wore “simple sneakers and a blue shirt printed with her name.” Everywhere she went, she talked to people about peace. In addition to her name, she gave up everything she owned to walk across the United States. She carried no money and “preferred to walk on mountain trails, beaches, paths in the forest—quiet places where she could talk to a few people at a time.” Her goal was to walk 25,000 miles so that “in a country that could think only of war, she would spread peace.” In straightforward, simple text, Krull relates how for Peace Pilgrim, walking was a prayer for peace, and along the way she influenced others to feel the same way. In this inspiring story, the young reader will travel with Peace Pilgrim across the county, guided by Bowler’s engaging illustrations that show the increasingly aged White woman making her way among a diversity of places and people. Calm, stable compositions reinforce the message.

A good way to start conversations about choosing peace. (biographical note, sources) (Picture book/biography. 3-7)

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**MELTDOWN**  
*Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Disaster in Fukushima*  
Langeland, Deirdre  
Roaring Brook (208 pp.)  
$19.99 | Feb. 9, 2021  
978-1-62672-700-7

Like Three Mile Island and Chernobyl before it, Fukushima is now synonymous with nuclear disaster.

On March 11, 2011, the largest earthquake ever measured in Japan occurred off the northeast coast of its largest island, Honshu. It triggered a tsunami with a wall of water 128 feet high. The tsunami damaged the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, triggering meltdowns in its three active reactors—though the damage was far less severe than Chernobyl’s, where radiation emissions were 10 times greater. Langeland’s narrative is impressively concise, with accessible explanations for such complicated technical subjects as plate tectonics, seismology, the fission process of nuclear power plants, radiation and radioactivity, the chain of events that led to the meltdown of the reactors, and the aftermath. The trifecta of catastrophic death and devastation is vividly depicted with well-chosen quotes from survivors recounting their experiences. In particular, the dramatic accounts of employees at the plant desperately working to contain the meltdown and of rescue workers scouring the devastation for survivors and evacuating whole communities are riveting. In the aftermath of the disaster, Japan reconsidered using nuclear fission for generating power, but Langeland notes that alternative fuels like coal and natural gas also adversely impact human health and the environment. Ten years after the disaster, the author warns, “it remains unclear how many people will suffer long-term from radiation exposure.”

A well-researched, sharply written, engrossing account of natural and nuclear disaster. (diagrams, maps, photos, timeline, glossary, notes, bibliography) (Nonfiction. 10-14)

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**RED, WHITE, AND WHOLE**  
LaRocca, Rajani  
Quill Tree Books/HarperCollins (224 pp.)  
$16.99 | Feb. 2, 2021  
978-0-06-304742-6

It’s 1983, and 13-year-old Indian American Reha feels caught between two worlds.

Monday through Friday, she goes to a school where she stands out for not being White but where she has a weekday best friend, Rachel, and does English projects with potential crush Pete. On the weekends, she’s with her other best friend, Suniita (Sunny for short), at gatherings hosted by her Indian community. Reha feels frustrated that her parents refuse to acknowledge her Americanness.
and insist on raising her with Indian values and habits. Then, on the night of the middle school dance, her mother is admitted to the hospital, and Reha’s world is split in two again: this time, between hospital and home. Suddenly she must learn not just how to be both Indian and American, but also how to live with her mother’s leukemia diagnosis. The sections dealing with Reha’s immigrant identity rely on oft-told themes about the overprotectiveness of immigrant parents and lack the nuance found in later pages. Reha’s story of her evolving relationships with her parents, however, feels layered and real, and the scenes in which Reha must grapple with the possible loss of a parent are beautifully and sensitively rendered. The sophistication of the text makes it a valuable and thought-provoking read even for those older than the protagonist.

An intimate novel that beautifully confronts grief and loss. (Verse novel. 11-15)

THE HEDGEHOG OF OZ
Leonardo, Cory
Aladdin (336 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-5344-6759-0

A bespectacled hedgehog named Marcel finds himself on a familiar journey home.

Marcel lives in the rickety, unused balcony of an old movie house, the Emerald City Theater, along with his two chicken friends who escaped from a poultry truck. They live on scavenged candy and popcorn from the concession stand. Marcel’s favorite showing is the weekly matinee of The Wizard of Oz, as he already has most of it memorized from viewings at his former home with a girl named Dorothy who wore red high-tops. After the theater closes for business, the three friends are captured by humans. Marcel is shut up in a box and taken on a truck ride to the countryside, where he is abandoned. He tumbles into Mousekinland, a colony of mice who help him on his way. As he follows the smell of buttered popcorn back to town, Marcel can’t help but notice how his journey bears a striking resemblance to the plot of a certain movie. Woodland critters fill in for the movie characters, and while readers who are familiar with the classic 1939 film will get the most out of the story, the book’s emotional core stands independent of this frequently referenced material. Leonardo incorporates poignantly grand feelings, such as loss and abandonment, into these small animal characters. The humans seem to be White by default apart from the brown-skinned theater owner.

Old-world charm and adventure. (Fiction. 8-12)

OF A FEATHER
Lorentz, Dayna
HMH Books (336 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-358-28353-9

A relationship between a young owl and a young girl helps them both confront their fears.

Reenie is taken away from her grandmother’s house by social services after a fight between her grandmother and her grandmother’s boyfriend endangers her. Reenie has been through this before—when her mother’s depression is bad enough, she has to be hospitalized, leaving Reenie at the mercy of social services. This time she is delivered to Beatrice, a great-aunt she has never met. Beatrice turns out to be a master falconer, and Reenie, despite her overall mistrust of adults, is intrigued. When a young, undernourished owl ends up in a hawk trap by mistake, Reenie convinces Beatrice to bring the owl, whom she names Rufus, back to the house. The story is narrated in alternating first-person chapters from the points of view of Rufus and Reenie, with both protagonists having distinctive, plausible voices. Even before he is caught in the trap, Rufus suffers from a debilitating lack of confidence, being second-hatched and therefore smaller and weaker, which he overcompensates for by (often amusing) deliberations and conjectures. Reenie’s distrust of emotional closeness is deftly played with well-reasoned plot developments. Set in Vermont, the story is fleshed out by thought-provoking forays into the ethics of hunting and the powerlessness of children in determining their own lives. Reenie is in the sixth grade and reads as White.

Unusual and poignant—full of the depth and contradictions of life. (author’s note, bird facts, glossary) (Fiction. 8-11)

DOES EARTH FEEL?
14 Questions for Humans
Majewski, Marc
Illus. by the author
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-06-302153-2

How do you suppose our world is feeling?

In this new picture book, the French author/illustrator asks readers to imagine how the Earth we share might be feeling. On each spread there’s a question that begins: “Does Earth feel...?” Opposite is an acrylic painting of a stylized scene, usually a landscape, reflecting the final word in the question. From “alive,” “calm,” “content,” the writer runs through various moods that gradually darken to “hurt,” “tired,” and “sick” before returning to the more optimistic “heard,” “protected,” and “loved.” Majewski’s concern for the environment comes through strongly in his expressive paintings, in which humans appear as tiny stick figures with dots of many colors for heads.

Unusual and poignant—full of the depth and contradictions of life. (author’s note, bird facts, glossary) (Fiction. 8-11)
His message is valuable. The concluding question, “What do you want Earth to feel?” is a clear invitation for group discussion and potential action. A final author’s note introduces the concept of empathy and the idea that “we are all Earth—dependent on one another for survival.” Unlike some similar titles for very young readers and listeners, this does not end with over-simplified suggestions for saving the environment. Instead, it introduces our current problems relatively subtly and suggests an attitudinal change. Pay attention and care! This would go well, perhaps, with Rafael López’s We’ve Got the Whole World in Our Hands (2018) in library storytimes and preschool and early elementary settings. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9-by-24-inch double-page spreads viewed at 64.6% of actual size.)

Environmental awareness and emotional intelligence in a neat package. (Picture book. 4-8)

A young artist learns that our inner worlds are more than what meets the eye.

An unnamed child is on a seemingly simple mission: to draw a bunch of birds and sketch a house for each of them. At first, the brown-skinned protagonist’s creative process is fairly straightforward, matching each avian to a home that shares their physical characteristics. “Red for red,” the narrator explains, and “tall for tall.” Readers receive a bird’s-eye view of the drawings, rendered in perfect, youthful splendor by Juanita. Despite the child’s best efforts, the birds don’t seem to agree with their housing assignments. Blue Bird and Orange Bird want to swap domains featured here. However, readers will have to go elsewhere for information about the intriguing denizens and domains featured here.

Perceptively celebrates the Salish Sea and its natural elements, from one squid to 1,000,000 raindrops. (author’s note) (Picture book. 3-5)

A fresh and funny take on an old moral. (Picture book. 5-10)

Juanita’s use of texture, color, and detail is the book’s highlight.

A HOUSE FOR EVERY BIRD

McGlauflin, Conor
Illus. by the author
Roaring Brook (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-350-30487-7

SOCK ON THE LOOSE

McClure, Nikki
Illus. by the author
Little Bigfoot/Sasquatch (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-63217-336-2

1, 2, 3 SALISH SEA

McClure introduces children to the creatures and habitats of the Pacific Northwest’s Salish Sea.

The initial spreads, one through 10, interpolate well-known animals—five salmon, seven seals—with wonderfully unfamiliar ones. Each entry provides both the numeric symbol and the written word(s) for the number, along with a short phrase describing action, from “THREE Lumpsuckers hanging on” to “EIGHT Kelp crabs lunching in a forest.” McClure’s exquisite, intricate papercuts, accented with pastel watercolor washes, reveal anatomical details like scales, claws, and suckers and are particularly adept at capturing the flying and diving of birds. Later entries hopscotch from 20 clams, 50 surf scoters, and 100 sculpins to some really big groups: 500 dunlins, 1,000 “Years of a cedar tree sharing life,” 10,000 plankton, and “ONE MILLION Raindrops returning to the Salish Sea.” Beyond 100, McClure understandably abandons the faithfully exact depictions of quantities. For the old-growth cedar tree, her papercut interposes the tree in its natural setting with a crosscut slab, its pink-orange growth rings filling and spilling off the double spread. Embedded in McClure’s teeming compositions and airy text are an impressive knowledge and respect for the habitats fostered by the Salish Sea. However, readers will have to go elsewhere for information about the intriguing denizens and domains featured here.

Counting from one to 1 million, McClure introduces children to the creatures and habitats of the Pacific Northwest’s Salish Sea.

A Pacific Northwest Counting Book

Maynor, Megan
Illus. by Juanita, Kaylani
Knopf (32 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Feb. 16, 2021
978-1-984896-49-0 PLB

We’ve Got the Whole World in Our Hands

Perceptively celebrates the Salish Sea and its natural elements, from one squid to 1,000,000 raindrops. (author’s note) (Picture book. 3-5)
Milford’s rich, complex language hints of magic and connection, of interwoven fates and tragedies.

THE RACONTEUR’S COMMONPLACE BOOK

The child’s humble gratitude is enough for Sunday to return to PoolsOfCottonCandyDay. Amid all this boisterous and frenzied rivalry, a little girl approaches the misunderstood Sunday with a small plant to say thank you and to suggest “simply a nice day. A day when people can show more kindness to each other.”

A story that encourages exploration and finding oneself along the journey. (Picture book: 3-6)

A NEW DAY
Meltzer, Brad
Illus. by Santat, Dan
Dial Books (48 pp.)
$17.99 | Mar. 2, 2021
978-0-525-53444-0

To the consternation of the other six days of the week, Sunday quits in protest, tired of being unappreciated for her consistent delivery of a weekly “beautiful free day.”

Sunday’s abrupt decision prompts the others to look for her replacement with an advertisement inviting auditions before the remaining six days. The competition quickly grows increasingly fierce as ideas are broached for DogDay, Big-BurpDay, PieDay, Band-AidDay, and, ridiculously, FirepoleSlidingIntoPoolsOfCottonCandyDay. Amid all this boisterous and frenzied rivalry, a little girl approaches the misunderstood Sunday with a small plant to say thank you and to suggest “simply a nice day. A day when people can show more kindness to each other.”

The child’s humble gratitude is enough for Sunday to return to her important weekly position and to prompt all the days to value kindness as the key to each day’s possibilities. Bright art captures the mania, with cotton-candy hues representing each of the anthropomorphic days. Though undeniably comical as it unfolds in busy cartoon illustrations and speech balloons, the drawn-out, nonsensical, and unexpected course the narrative takes may be a stretch for youngsters who cannot always distinguish among days. Kindness as the ingredient for achieving a harmonious week is nevertheless a valuable message, however circuitously expressed. (This book was reviewed digitally with 8.5-by-22-inch double-page spreads viewed at 33.4% of actual size.)

A humorous, meandering approach to a life lesson about leading every day with benevolence. (Picture book: 5-7)

THE HATMAKERS
Merchant, Tamzin
Illus. by Escobar, Paola
Norton Young Readers (384 pp.)
$18.95 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-324-01603-8

In her debut novel, British actor Merchant creates an elaborate fantasy world around a family of magical milliners.

Cordelia Hatmaker, almost 12, is smitten with grief at the apparent loss at sea of her beloved father. Despite the tragedy, Cordelia’s extended family members continue to fulfill their duties as Hatmakers to the Crown. Their hats are works of art, custom-made using rare ingredients to magically influence the moods and intentions of their wearers. The family’s present task is to create a Concentration Hat for the king, who turns out to be none other than England’s King George in full insanity mode. Cordelia’s compassion for others leads to friendship with a member of the archival Bootmaker family as well as a street urchin named Sam. The friends work together to overthrow a complicated plot to wage war on France spearheaded by the dastardly Lord Witloof, who stands to profit from war by manufacturing cannons. This is an action-packed story with an appealing role model in feisty, determined Cordelia, who acquires confidence in fighting evil and protecting family and friends. Magical elements, complicated plot twists, and colorful characters will appeal to Philip Pullman and Harry Potter fans, although the subject matter is on the younger side for the reading level. A cliffhanger ending implies a sequel. All characters present White. Illustrations not seen.

A swashbuckling romp for lovers of history and magic. (glossary, note about ingredients) (Fantasy: 9-12)

THE RACONTEUR’S COMMONPLACE BOOK
Milford, Kate
Illus. by Wong, Nicole
Clarion (384 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-328-46690-7
Series: Greenglass House

Rain pours down and waters rise as a group of travelers, trapped by the weather in an inn above the river Skidwrack, tell stories.

Twelve guests plus innkeeper, maid, and neighbor Phineas Amalgam (compiler of these tales, according to the title page) make up the company of 15, including one child, Maisie, who is traveling alone. The stories, part morality tales and part facets of a drawing-room mystery, suggest a hidden conversation among the assembly: supplicating, surmising, interpreting, warning. Each guest is matched with an activity: dancing, building with cards, whittling, offering cigars, binding papers into books.
A Cretaceous counting rhyme leading up to a toothy 10th.

Norman’s latest outing and first collaboration with Collet-Derby is storytime and read-aloud gold, featuring as it does a tight, patterned rhyme, an artful use of page turns, and a mighty “ROAR!” midstream—not to mention lots of dinosaurs. In meter and rhyme scheme, it’s modeled after “One potato, two potato”: “One-osaurus, two-osaurus... / three-osaurus, four....” The count gathers a growing gang of “prehistoric pals” until nine have accumulated, at which point the text begins building tension with first a “dinosaur stampede!” and then four double-page spreads of anticipatory quiet as each dino hunkers down behind a number-shaped rock. Finally an enormous shadow heralds the arrival of “ten-osaurus rex!”...who makes a big, loud entrance but turns out to be (wait for it) huge of personality but superbly menacing, this novel delights.

Deliciously immersive and captivating. (Mystery 9-14)

ONE-OASAURUS, TWO-OASAURUS
Norman, Kim
Illus. by Collet-Derby, Pierre
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$16.99 | Mar. 23, 2021
978-1-5362-0179-6

A dino-delight. (Picture book 3-5)

Told from the point of view of the pet cat, this story shows a reading family and the incremental ways in which a child learns to love books.

A toddler-age boy and his father, who both have beige skin and brown hair, pick out a book every night to read before bed, and the cat thrills to know it’s “Rectangle Time.” That means a “furry nuzzle” against the corners of the book as the father reads The Snowy Day aloud to his child. Time passes with the page turns, marked in the narrative by the cat’s surprise to see the boy, now a bit older, reading an Encyclopedia Brown book on his own and, after that, the even older lad reading rectangles that are “awfully small” (squinting readers will see it’s the Hobbit). The cat’s self-centered but affectionate voice is entertaining as she remarks that the boy is so engaged in reading that he momentarily dismisses his pet. The story, with its warmly colored watercolor illustrations and expressive feline, feels like a primer for adults on how to get their kids to fall in love with books. The house is filled with them; the (apparently single) dad models reading; and he regularly read aloud to the boy before his son could do so himself. (The author, currently the New York Times Book Review editor, co-authored an actual primer, How To Raise a Reader, 2019, with Maria Russo, that outlet’s former children’s-books editor.) It’s not a story with a climax or falling action, but the resolution—in the end, the cat thrills to know it’s “Rectangle Time.”

A sweet story about falling in love with reading. (Picture book .4-8)

RECTANGLE TIME
Paul, Pamela
Illus. by Cameron, Becky
Philomel (32 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-593-11511-4

Disaster overtakes a group of sixth graders on a leadership-building white-water rafting trip.

Deep in the Montana wilderness, a dam breaks, and the resultant rush sweeps away both counselors, the rafts, and nearly all the supplies, leaving five disparate preteens stranded in the wilderness far from where they were expected to be. Narrator Daniel is a mild White kid who’s resourceful and good at keeping the peace but given to worrying over his mentally ill father. Deke, also White, is a determined bully,
unwilling to work with and relentlessly taunting the others, especially Mia, a Latina, who is a natural leader with a plan. Tony, another White boy, is something of a friendly follower and, unfortunately, attaches himself to Deke while Imani, a reserved African American girl, initially keeps her distance. After the disaster, Deke steals the backpack with the remaining food and runs off with Tony, and the other three resolve to do whatever it takes to get it back, eventually having to confront the dangerous bully. The characters come from a variety of backgrounds but are fairly broadly drawn; still, their breathlessly perilous situation keeps the tale moving briskly forward, with one threatening situation after another believably confronting them. As he did with Wildfire (2019), Newbery Honoree Philbrick has crafted another action tale for young readers that’s impossible to put down.

Readers will need to strap on their helmets and prepare for a wild ride. (Fiction. 10-12)

**SQUISH SQUASH SQUISHED**

Rector, Rebecca Kraft
Illus. by Wulfeckotte, Dana
Nancy Paulsen Books (40 pp.)
$17.99  |  Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-525-51683-5

An assortment of farm animals joins siblings for an increasingly crowded car ride.

Max and Molly complain to their mother, who is driving, that they are “squished” and “squashed” in the back seat of their roomy car. Mom knows what to do. She invites Peter Jeeter and his piglet to “wiggle-piggle” in. Max and Molly complain. Mom then invites Dolly Waddle and her ducklings to “flit-feather” in. Max and Molly complain. Mom goes on to invite Inch Pinch and his puppies. Finally, Max and Molly have learned their lesson. They “hush-mush.” Mom drives by Scooter Mooter and his tutu-clad calves and does not invite them in. Family by family, the animals along for the ride get out. Quiet reigns, and all is well in the “gracious-spacious” automobile. It is a tale replete with rhymes and wordplay that tips over into preciosity and well in the “gracious-spacious” automobile. It is a tale replete with rhymes and wordplay that tips over into preciosity and grows silly and tiresome. The animal sounds are the usual ones, but hand-lettered over the illustrations, they feel like an afterthought and do not integrate neatly into a read-aloud. Stories with growing crowds of animals abound—think of the delightful Mr. Gumpy’s Outing—but this one, unfortunately, adds little new to the mix. Delicately penciled and colored cartoons are amusing; in them, the human family appears interracial. *(This book was reviewed digitally with 10.5-by-17-inch double-page spreads viewed at 33.0% of actual size.)*

Let this car pass by. *(Picture book. 3-6)*

**ESCAPE FROM ... POMPEII**

Richmond, Benjamin
Illus. by Chilvers, Nigel
Little Bee (44 pp.)
978-1-4998-1107-0 paper
978-1-4998-1167-4

A patrician boy meets a girl from a tiny company, returned to Pompeii and the shadow of Mount Vesuvius for the first time since she was a baby. Felix is the son of one of Pompeii’s leading politicians in this city full of light-skinned people in the first-century Roman Empire. When Thalia chases after her runaway dog, she meets Felix, who doesn’t want to be a politician like his father. They don’t have much of an encounter, though they interact several times during an evening in which the water smells suddenly sulfurous and the animals seem to have vanished. When the earthquake comes, they think they’ll be OK—but what to do when ash and pumice stone rain down from above? A casual, prosaic style sometimes adds a touch of humor (Felix amuses his mother, who “tries to stop a laugh and snorts instead”), but sometimes the ellipsis-laden language is just too clunky; especially in the nonfiction notes that close out every chapter. Chilvers’ occasional black-and-white illustrations are equally stiff. The occasional regrettable oversimplification occurs: One of the chapter-ending notes enumerates “churches” among the public establishments of ancient Rome, which may well give young readers a misleading impression of Pompeii’s religious landscape. Series companion Escape From the Titanic, by Mary Kay Carson and also illustrated by Chilvers, publishes simultaneously.

*This adventure may briefly entertain. (timeline, bibliography) (Historical fiction. 7-10) (Escape From the Titanic: 978-1-4998-1166-7, 978-1-4998-1106-3 paper)*

**ZEE GROWS A TREE**

Rusch, Elizabeth
Illus. by Hillenbrand, Will
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$17.99  |  Mar. 16, 2021
978-0-7636-9754-9

A little girl and a Douglas fir grow together on a Christmas tree farm.

On the day of Zee’s birth, a Douglas-fir seedling, planted by her parents, also sprouts. Zee’s parents take care of Zee and her tree, and both “[grow] bigger and stronger.” When Zee starts preschool, her tree is transplanted outdoors. As Zee makes new friends and learns the alphabet, her tree experiences new animals and changing weather. On her fourth birthday, Zee is shorter than her classmates and her tree is shorter than other trees, but that summer both have growth spurts. When Zee starts kindergarten, she “[gets] a whole new look,” and her tree
A delightful blend of fact and fiction. (Index, author's note, bibliography) (Picture book: 3-6)

**THE GREATEST SUPERPOWER**
Sanchez, Alex
Capstone Editions (352 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 1, 2021
978-1-68446-278-0

Jorge is about to enter eighth grade when his parents drop a bombshell: They are getting a divorce because his dad is transgender. Jorge is upset and confused, but his twin brother, Cesar, is furious and refuses to speak to their father. While navigating gender, family, friendship, dating—and Cesar’s bid for student body president—Jorge learns about having the confidence to be yourself. This heartfelt novel avoids some pitfalls in representation. Zee and her parents present White.

**RABBIT! RABBIT! RABBIT!**
Scobie, Lorna
Illus. by the author
Henry Holt (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-250-76074-6

A rabbit, once an only child, learns to cope with copious siblings. This gray, speckled bunny declares that it likes its singular status: It doesn’t have to share any favorite belongings. Then its parents announce some unfortunate news: There’s a new child in the family. And guess what? Because rabbits breed like, well, rabbits, more floppy-eared, fluffy, wide-eyed little ones join the bunny brood in an impressive rainbow of colors. The next-door neighbor, a fox, states that she likes rabbits and that they’re all welcome at her place. Eldest sib is thrilled to bid them farewell. Ah, alone again. But, as stories like this inevitably go, the rabbit discovers that being unencumbered is no fun. Accepting the fox’s invitation to join its sibs, our protagonist takes a peek and discovers what happened to them while in the vulpine’s custody. (Spoiler alert: It’s not what you think, and the final illustration’s a hoot.) This sweet, simply told (in first rabbit), gently humorous story will work equally well at laptime or in group reading sessions. Though predictable, this scenario is accessible and will be particularly appreciated by youngsters who were once one-and-onlies but then learned to deal with interlopers. The colorful, delicately winsome illustrations add touches of comic flair. (This book was reviewed digitally with 9-by-22-inch double-page spreads viewed at 75.8% of actual size.) Young bunnies will happily hop along to this one. (Picture book: 3-6)

**ANCESTOR APPROVED**
Intertribal Stories for Kids
Ed. by Smith, Cynthia Leitich
Heartdrum (320 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-06-286994-4

A groundbreaking Indigenous anthology for young people. Readers can join the fun in this collection of 18 contemporary stories and poems about loving families from various parts of the U.S. and Canada who travel to meet, dance, sing, socialize, and honor Native traditions at an intertribal powwow. The entries tell of the personal struggles, family joy, belief systems, and stunning regalia of various nations, including the Cree, Ojibwe, Choctaw, Cherokee, Navajo, Abenaki, and Haudenosaunee, through the eyes of the young protagonists. Enrollment issues, Indian wannabes, and veterans’ histories are just a few of the serious themes addressed in these entertaining stories written by familiar and lesser-known writers alike. Senses of goodwill and humor pervade the book as well as the spirit of community, intersection, resilience, and a desire to remember the past.
The unlikely hero will win readers’ hearts through his sheer determination to fight for what is right by any means necessary.

**Cathedral of Bones**

resilience, and a desire to remember the past. Whether engaging with the quiet spiritual strength displayed in “Fancy Dancer” by Monique Gray Smith or the profound point of view of Brian Young’s “Senecavajo,” the stories are full of surprises. Rebecca Roanhorse writes from a dog’s vantage point, and Dawn Quigley asks about the nature of intelligence. Many other original tales complete this anthology of modern Natives celebrating their diversity together. An especially winning feature is the glossary in which various Indigenous vocabulary words in the stories are defined.

A joyful invitation to celebrate the circle of ancestors together. (about the authors) (Anthology. 10-14)

**We Adopted a Baby Lamb**

Smith, Lori Joy
Illus. by the author
Tundra (48 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-0-7352-6653-7

Adopting a young animal teaches responsibility and caring.

When Ila and her family move to the country in search of a simpler life, they take on more than they imagine when they adopt a newborn lamb. Ila lives with her hipster parents, her “grumpy teenage sister,” her baby sister, and three cats. The lamb, christened Albert, gives her a focus for maternal love and an education in caring for a young animal. Although the lamb is very tiny (“smaller than our cats!”), he has outsize needs. At first he lives in the kitchen but, due to his bathroom habits, is quickly moved to an outside barn, where he requires regular feeding and protection from predators. In spite of his material needs, he wins the hearts of the family. Even sister Sosi becomes, for a time, a “baby she took to Woodstock in 1969. Yet “your” youthful-looking mother must be in her 40s as she holds a swaddled-up “you,” with “your” ex-hippie grandma and other relatives snapping pics on their smartphones. This is not the only extreme generational step. Desierto’s colorful collage images are also out of sync with the narrative. A family with only one bowl to their name has a tablecloth, a pitcher, and a matching cup? A concluding page presents a chart illustrating the number of grandmas that converge in a single person. For a story that places its emphasis on the exponential math of doubling generations, the facts don’t add up. (Picture book. 4-9)

**Grandmas Are Greater Than Great**

Solheim, James
Illus. by Desierto, Derek
Greenwillow Books (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-06-267123-3

Witnesses in turn to wagon trains west, the first streetlight, the Great Depression, and World War II, the generations give way to Woodstock’s wild child and social media maniacs.

Regardless of when in time one happens to browse, a grandmother is making sure the next generations are happy and whole. The narration unfolds in a second-person address, so eight greats in the past has “your” ancestor cruising the 1700s. Five greats back finds “your” three-steps-nearer forebear in a one-room schoolhouse in the 1800s. Three greats has her feet planted in the early 1900s. And finally, the latest in a line of grinning wonders (all White-presenting) is smiling out into the 21st century. Solheim takes a 250-year-long trek to illustrate the generational chain that ends with a young mother and her daughter. However, his chronology doesn’t quite mesh with the narrative. “You” are the young hippie’s grandchild, newborn child of the baby she took to Woodstock in 1969. Yet “your” youthful-looking mother must be in her 40s as she holds a swaddled-up “you,” with “your” ex-hippie grandma and other relatives snapping pics on their smartphones. Regardless of when in time one happens to browse, a grandmother is making sure the next generations are happy and whole.

For a story that places its emphasis on the exponential math of doubling generations, the facts don’t add up. (Picture book. 4-9)

**Cathedral of Bones**

Steiger, A.J.
Harper/HarperCollins (368 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-06-293479-6

Simon Frost has been struggling for years. When he was 10, his mother disappeared and his twin sister, Olivia, died. Now Simon is 12, and his father is distant, a formerly powerful Animist who has become the subject of dreadful rumors. Simon is struggling to master the magic that would make him a true Animist, one who can create and control monstrous creatures large and small. After heading off to attend Eidendel’s Foundation Academy and miserably failing his apprenticeship, Simon is reassigned to work in the drudgery of a dusty, old mailroom. When the
Foundation ignores a letter that arrives from the tiny village of Splithead Creek—begging for an Animist to rescue them from a terrorizing monster—Simon disobeys orders to drop it and sets out alone to save the tiny village. But things are not as he expected, and instead he winds up on a journey to right past wrongs, change his world, and rethink everything he ever thought he knew about his own life. Simon is an unlikely hero who will win readers’ hearts through his sheer determination to fight for what is right by any means necessary. Steiger has developed an original fantasy with creative worldbuilding, strong pacing, and a sympathetic protagonist. The complex narrative structure may be challenging to younger readers. Most characters are presumed to be White.

An imaginative, thrilling page-turner. (Fantasy. 9-13)

THE DRAGON IN THE LIBRARY
Stowell, Louie
Illus. by Ortu, Davide
Walker US/Candlewick (208 pp.)
$17.99 | $7.99 paper | Mar. 16, 2021
978-1-5362-1493-2
978-1-5362-1960-9 paper
Series: Kit the Wizard, 1

Three friends fight an evil developer who wants to tear down the magical library.

What should this trio of friends do during summer vacation? Outdoorsy Kit, a White girl, despairs of her friends, Alita and Josh, both kids of color, she really does. Why do they want to read when they could go to the cemetery and get muddy instead? But in the library, Kit discovers an ability: When she touches certain books, she travels to a magical place. Faith, the Black head librarian, her hair in locs, explains with some surprise that Kit is a wizard. It’s a puzzler, Faith tells her, because wizardry doesn’t typically show up until someone turns 18, and Kit is only 10. Faith wants Kit to keep her wizardry a secret, but good luck keeping the knowledge from Alita and Josh, who eavesdrop. So the friends tag along while Kit learns magic (a significant component of which seems to be librarianship), gains a wizard cloak, and befriends Dogon, the half-dog, half-dragon who lives in the magical library forest. With Josh’s and Alita’s attention to detail and Kit’s natural magic, maybe they’ll be able to defeat Mr. Salt, the pink-faced CEO who plans to tear down the library—if impulsive Kit learns to channel her inner chaos and trust her friends. Playful illustrations complement the witty dialogue, dryly ironic narrative voice, and comical villainy.

Joyful and funny. (Fantasy. 7-10)

TREASURE OF THE WORLD
Sullivan, Tara
Putnam (584 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-0-525-51696-5

Hoping to escape the harsh labor that binds her Bolivian mining village to the mountain called Cerro Rico, 12-year-old Ana risks life and soul to unchain herself and her family.

For Ana and her sickly younger brother, Daniel, cherished school days come to a premature close when Papi, a man filled with meanness, forces Daniel to join him in the mines. Daniel, however, doesn’t last long, returning sick on his second day. Brave Ana volunteers to take her brother’s place until he can recover, much to the disapproval of Mami, Abuelita, and, particularly, the other miners, who deem her appearance in the mines a bad omen. The dreaded misfortune comes in the form of a cave-in: Papi dies and Daniel goes missing. Though everyone believes that Daniel is dead, Ana doesn’t give up hope and secretly enters the mountain one quiet night to find him, ending up lost, disoriented, and on the verge of death. But when she returns to the land of the living, she finds her world forever altered. The bittersweet splendors in Sullivan’s latest offer an intense meditation on community, child labor, and ancestral roots, among other themes. Rich with memorable characters and streaks of brilliant writing, as in the author’s previous works, Ana’s story takes readers on an arduous and ultimately rewarding journey that illuminates a fraction of the human toll behind the profit-driven pursuits of a materialistic world.

Heartbreakingly splendid. (author’s note, note on language use, glossary) (Fiction. 10-14)

THIS BOOK IS NOT GARBAGE
Practical actions for reducing waste for young readers concerned about the environment.

Science writer Thomas offers 50 doable suggestions for readers keen to reduce their “eco-impact.” The book was originally published in the U.K. in 2018 as This Book Is Not Rubbish, and language, examples, and statistics have been changed for a U.S. readership in most cases. But the title change is misleading. Only a portion of this book is about garbage in the usual sense of kitchen waste; the writer defines waste broadly. Her “eco-tips” include using less water, especially hot water; changing gift
and party habits; avoiding glitter and plastic straws; composting and reducing food waste; picking up litter; trading clothing and goods; reducing energy use in myriad ways; repairing and reusing what we have; and avoiding unnecessary use of paper—even gifting cards and school assignments! Even more broadly, she suggests helping the nearby environment, thinking about the environmental costs of food and clothing, and reducing video gaming (evidently an energy hog). One chapter introduces five young eco-warriors; another suggests projects for aspiring citizen scientists. Art projects and even geocaching are other ways to get closer to nature and to show appreciation. Though there is some overlap, most suggestions are different from or complementary to those in companion title *This Book Will (Help) Cool the Climate*, published in 2020 in the U.K. but simultaneously with this title in this country. Both are useful.

Another rich resource for young eco-warriors. (index)  
(Nonfiction. 9-14)

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**THE LAST RABBIT**  
*Thomas, Shelley Moore  
Illus. by Mellan, Julie*  
Wendy Lamb/Rand McNally (288 pp.)  
$16.99 | $19.99 PLB | Feb. 9, 2021  
978-0-593-17533-4  
978-0-593-17544-1 PLB

Four young Irish sisters, orphaned during World War II, are sent to a magical island where they are turned into rabbits—and now, the island is sinking.

“I wasn’t always a rabbit—that much I can tell you.” So begins the epic adventure of a fluffy white rabbit named Albie. She is one of four sisters sent by their dying mother to the magical island of Hybrasil. Albie, being the wildest of the four, tries to conjure her mother back to life. Instead, she turns the four girls into rabbits. At first, the story is as light and lively as a bunny, but there are hints of the dangers to come as the mysterious Boy and his boat arrive. One at a time, he takes Albie’s sisters away—until only Albie is left. The pacing intensifies when the ferryman Barinthus appears, followed by a sluagh, a spirit who takes souls, both figures from Celtic mythology. Albie jumps through time and space, visiting each of her sisters, yet Thomas never loses the thread of the story, keeping Albie and her destiny at the dizzying eye of the hurricane. This is a spellbinding and heart-racing fairy tale about family, loss, and redemption wrapped up in magic and mythology. Final art not seen.

An enchanting and imaginative adventure. (map, author’s note)  
(Fantasy. 8-12)
The pictures in this story are just as funny and mysterious as Banksy’s street art, but they’re more jokey and less obviously political. The anonymous mouse who gives the book its title was reviewed digitally with 11.5-inch double-page spreads viewed at 75% of actual size. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11.5-by-17-inch double-page spreads viewed at 76.6% of actual size.)

A deeply satisfying allegorical tale. (Picture book. 4-10)

THE KING’S GOLDEN BEARD
Verplancke, Klaus
Illus. by the author
Maria Russo/Minedition (48 pp.)
$18.99  |  Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-66265-039-0

An arrogant king with a long, golden beard meets his demise thanks to his own vanity.

Set “a long long time ago, when most people still believed the earth was flat as a pancake,” this biting political commentary from Belgium features a megalomaniacal king so in love with his flowing beard that he establishes certain laws: It must never be trimmed, and others’ facial hair is forbidden—even the goats must be shaved daily. Growing so long, his beard makes its way around the world and back to the king, where no one recognizes it as the king’s. Ordering his guards to cut to pieces the owner of the beard (“After all, the law was the law”), the king perishes with the snip of “a pinchy pair of nail scissors,” one of the story’s moments of delightful alliteration. (Clearly, Verplancke isn’t afraid of a little implied gore.) The serpentine line of the king’s beard, on a palette of teal and mustard hues, propels this story, and the beard is so finely detailed that one can see nearly every hair. Readers never see the king’s face in its entirety; it’s his blond beard that looms large. Verplancke, who also designed the book, gets playful with font and weight of type (often to accentuate the king’s ego and his demands) and perspectives; more than once, readers turn the book sideways or upside down to follow the king’s beard across the planet. Townsfolk and guards are depicted in varying shades, many not natural. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11.5-by-19-inch double-page spreads viewed at 76% of actual size.)

A deeply satisfying allegorical tale. (Picture book. 4-10)

ANONYMOUSE
VanSickle, Vikki
Illus. by Pirolli, Anna
Tundra (40 pp.)
$18.99  |  Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-7352-6394-9

If Banksy drew a picture book, it probably wouldn’t look like this tale of a mouse graffiti artist. The pictures in this story are just as funny and mysterious as Banksy’s street art, but they’re more jokey and less obviously political. The anonymous mouse who gives the book its title will paint a bullseye on a lamppost, so dogs can aim at it, or an image of Batman in his boxer shorts. Some of the murals are sweet or wistful, like a field of flowers painted on an array of satellite dishes. They have a huge influence on the other animals in the story. Suddenly, a spider is weaving a web in rainbow colors, and a bird is leaving a path of green footprints across the park. Pirolli’s illustrations of the animals are as funny and mysterious as the works of art. The spider’s eight eyes are so frightening they’re sort of lovable. The humans who appear in the background, in muted colors, come from a variety of races and cultures. The end of the story is both sweet and wistful: Anonymouse leaves the city and its animals on their own, with no explanation, except for one line of text from the author: “The world is his canvas.” Readers may also be left feeling a bit melancholy, but they’ll want to make the world their canvas. (This book was reviewed digitally with 11-by-17-inch double-page spreads viewed at 86.9% of actual size.)

Banksy might be flattered by this book, but he probably wouldn’t admit it in public. (Picture book. 4-9)

PEPPER PAGE SAVES THE UNIVERSE!
Walker, Landry Q.
Illus. by Jones, Eric
First Second (208 pp.)
978-1-250-21691-5
978-1-250-21692-2 paper
Series: Infinite Adventures of Supernova

Evoking a golden-age sensibility, this pulpy origin story is short on dialogue, rife with onomatopoeic sound effects, and rendered in Technicolor hues. Within, 15-year-old orphan Pepper Page is a 25th-century fangirl: introverted, out of place, and obsessed with superheroine Supernova. Pepper’s only power—an encyclopedic recall of vintage comics—proves of little value in school. Though she dreams of fighting for what’s right, best friends Zola and Tally always handle her bullies. Everything changes when Pepper stumbles on an experiment conducted by Professor Killian,
Walker and Jones lean in to their metafictive adventure, deftly According to these omnipotent, omniscient, oversized disem-bodied babies’ heads with a proclivity for end rhyme, Pepper’s precious comics were actually training manuals: She is Supernova, and the time has come to beat back the forces of chaos in the 21st century. Aided by Mister McKittens (the energies that transformed Pepper into Supernova also affected the cat), Pepper must prevent the pretentious, power-hungry Killian from assuming unimaginable power. There’s just one problem: Mired in trepidation, unsure of herself, and too familiar with Supernova’s arc, Pepper has no interest in saving the universe. Walker and Jones lean in to their metafictive adventure, deftly admixing superhero tropes into Pepper’s down-to-earth emo-tional journey. Pepper, Zola, and Killian present White; Tally has brown skin. A fast-paced, feel-good romp. (gallery) (Graphic science fiction. 11-16)

**NATURE OUT OF BALANCE**

_How Invasive Species Are Changing the Planet_  
Wilcox, Merrie-Ellen  
Orca (48 pp.)  
$19.95 | Feb. 16, 2021  
978-1-4598-2395-2  
Series: Orca Footprints

Young readers are introduced to non-native invasive species: what they are and how they are affecting ecosystems around the world. This nonfiction science title contains four chapters, leading readers from an understanding of what an invasive species is and how it overtakes new areas, through how systems work and are affected by newcomers, then the complications involved in efforts to control the spread of invasive species, and finally to a look at how humans can work with the reality of environmental change. Each chapter is divided into short sections that provide bursts of useful information, and spreads are enhanced with small “eco-facts,” well-captioned photographs, and frequent half-page featurettes on “invasive all-stars”: specific species, such as domestic cats, that have changed regions with their rapid spread and notable environmental effects. Making sure to include humans as one of the Earth’s most dramatic invasive species and greatest vectors of spreading others, Wilcox places the topic in historical context, including the spread of diseases such as smallpox during settler colonialism and mentioning the roles of the Industrial Revolution and capitalism on the human population and use of natural resources. The choice to include a photo of a White woman with a “build the wall” sign to illustrate xenophobia rather than, for instance, those who rally for immigrants’ rights, may have the effect of distressing young targets of xenophobia. The elderly White man drops his phone in the lake. When he orders a replacement, he accidentally orders 100 instead of one. The animals are excited; they each get their own, but this leads to chaos. All of the animals are too distracted to do their farm jobs. “The sheep ignored the rams. / The sheepdog lost the lambs”; and “The hens wouldn’t lay. / On their phones all day.” Old Mac’s solution is to confiscate all the phones, which sets the beasts to sulking. Young Macdonald has a solution: sensible use of phones for all! So they make some rules, and the farm returns to productivity. Willis’ recasting of the familiar song maintains characters and cadence, though some of its most familiar elements are missing (very few moos and baas and nary an E-I-E-I-O). Readers ready for such a drastic divergence will find the tutorial in judicious phone use both on point and funny (with a hint of a British accent). As always, frequent collaborator Ross’ sprightly, scribbly, and oh-so-expressive cartoon illustrations are a perfect match for Willis’ humor. The lesson goes down easy in this silly earworm. (Picture book. 3-7)

**ELEPHANTS DO NOT BELONG IN TREES**  
Willms, Russ  
Illus. by the author  
Orca (32 pp.)  
$19.95 | Feb. 16, 2021  
978-1-4598-2599-4

An elephant lives in a tree. Wait… what? Bird, Squirrel, and Monkey raise objections. Bird wants to nest there, Squirrel wants to store nuts in it, and Monkey wants to swing in its branches. They know elephants don’t belong in trees. But Larry the pachyderm remains unperturbed. In fact, Larry enjoys the neighbors’ attempts at eviction. Bird’s head-peeking is soothing; Squirrel’s throwing nuts is treated as sport; and
Monkey’s tail-swinging is encouraged. Then, a shattering noise pierces the landscape: A giant bulldozer rumbles up, threatening to topple the tree. Individually and collectively, Bird, Squirrel, and Monkey work mightily to thwart the machine, to no avail. Meanwhile, Larry slurps up a prodigious amount of water and squirts it out with such force that it pushes the bulldozer. In saving the tree, Larry wins the others’ respect and appreciation and proves that elephants definitely belong in trees. A cute surprise twist at the end raises the specter of a new, unexpected neighbor moving in. This is a giggle-inducing story about acceptance and turning the tables on expectations, and it works equally well as a laptime or group read-aloud. Enhancing the aural fun is the liberal use throughout of emphatic display type that cues readers to emphasize some words for comic dramatic effect, as well as abundant onomatopoeia. Illustrations are quirky and energetic; the expressive animal characters have lively personalities.

Wry humor with a bouncy beat: a treat for storytimes. (Picture book: 3-6)

**GOODNIGHT, LITTLE BUNNY**

Wood, Amanda
Illus. by Chu, Vikki
Photos by Winnel, Bec
Magic Cat (24 pp.)
$12.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-4197-4840-0
Series: Baby Animal Tales

A young bunny finds a whole new world waiting outside her cozy burrow in this first book from the Baby Animal Tales series.

Worried she doesn’t have what it takes to be a “big bunny in the big outdoors,” young Bunny is afraid to leave the security of her burrow and see the world outside. Her friend, Mouse, points out her special strengths: a nose that sniffs, whiskers that twitch, and ears that listen. “You have everything you need to be a bunny,” Mouse says. With encouragement from her friend, Bunny wanders away from her comfortable burrow to explore new surroundings. As Bunny learns more about her world and her many capabilities, her confidence grows. When she comes nose to nose with a fox in the woods, she discovers just how well her running, bouncing, and jumping feet can also be used for thumping the ground and warning other bunnies of danger. “You see,” said Mouse, proudly, “you are very good at being a bunny, after all.” It’s a calming story, although a few word choices (burrow, tunnel) might need to be explained to the very young members of the audience. Chu’s watercolor-style illustrations of plants, bugs, and the friendly mouse appear throughout the story, with Winnel’s photographic images of the young protagonist collaged in. As a whole, the illustrations give the book a charming, vintage feel. Both the look and the quiet, encouraging storyline also appear in series companion Goodnight, Little Llama, which publishes simultaneously. (This book was reviewed digitally with 8.2-by-15-inch double-page spreads viewed at 75% of actual size.)

This quiet book is ideal for bedtime reading. (Picture book: 2-5) (Goodnight, Little Llama: 978-1-4197-4841-7)

**TRYING**

Yamada, Kobi
Illus. by Hurst, Elise
Compendium (48 pp.)
$16.95 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-970147-28-5

A young visitor to a sculptor’s studio is amazed and impressed as he views the artist at work, asking, “How do you do that?”

The visitor, an older elementary-age kid or maybe a young teen, acknowledges wishing to create something like the art on view, but self-doubt at ever being able to produce such beauty prevents the kid from beginning. What follows is an ongoing, almost Socratic discussion between the visitor and the sculptor. The sculptor exhorts the visitor to try, to make an attempt, and encourages, advises, and pushes his interlocutor to learn from failures and disappointments. As the sculptor...
does so, he is not loath to shares his own vulnerabilities and haunting thoughts of his mortality. Gradually the visitor becomes a protégé, trying and trying again. As in previous works such as What Do You Do With a Problem? (illustrated by Mae Besom, 2016), Yamada deals with both philosophical and practical questions, maintaining a grounded, direct tone without ever becoming preachy or too highly esoteric. The aspiring artist narrates in the first person from a distance of several years, treasuring the memory of the sculptor’s words, only to be interrupted at the end of the book by a new voice from a new visitor, echoing that first question. Hurst’s black, gray, and white drawings are heavily shaded, imparting a mysterious and ethereal quality. There are fleeting bits of color in the form of an orange studio cat and the sculptor’s green-tinged failures. The characters present White. Young readers and their grown-ups will find much to absorb and discuss.

A gentle, mind-expanding, and thoroughly lovely experience. (Picture book 7-12)
The concertina binding reinforces thematic flow, both facilitating fluid page turns and inviting interactions with the narrative.

**VESSEL OF PROMISES**

For active toddlers ready for a reading game. (Board book; 2-4)

**KEEP AN EYE ON IVY**

Barroux
Illus. by the author
Thames & Hudson (32 pp.)
$18.95 | Nov. 10, 2020
978-0-500-65253-4

Little Shop of Horrors for the Oshkosh set.

The delighted young narrator of this French import understands that they need to care for the small potted plant they receive as a birthday gift. But being a busy kid, they ask sister Susie to watch it on Monday while they’re off to judo class. On Tuesday they ask Grandpa to tend to the somewhat larger plant for a bit, since Susie is nowhere around. On Wednesday, it’s Grandma’s turn, since Grandpa’s evidently out…and so it goes, as families members vanish one by one while Ivy grows in successive scenes into a vine-y green tangle sporting a gape-mouthed, Pac-Man–style pod. (Sharp-eyed viewers will spot Susie’s saxophone and other clues to what’s going on in the background.) When at last the kid wonders aloud where everyone is, the pod lunges out with a startling page-turn pop-up, and (with another turn) everything goes black. Happily, no one’s actually been digested, and in the next picture they are merged landscapes, while sporadic raindrops simultaneously outline the eyes of creatures large and small, evoking Noah’s Ark. Thanks to its keeper, this sturdy houseboat-cum-temple holds its own amid turbulence and uncertainty, sheltering the bookish promises cradled within.

Conveying communal wisdom and collective hope, this volume honors reading and knowledge as staples for a proverbial lifeboat. (author’s note, illustrator’s note) (Picture book/novely; 5-8)

**MY BIG TOUCH-AND-FEEL CONCEPTS BOOK**

Illus. by Deneux, Xavier
Twirl/Chronicle (22 pp.)
$21.99 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-2-40801-968-6
Series: Touch-and-Feel, 2

Four concepts in one busy board book imported from France.

Using a guessing-game format, Deneux introduces colors, shapes, numbers and opposites, following those introductions with increasingly complex iterations of each topic. Toddlers depicted throughout have varied skin tones but the same rosy cheeks. The “160 words” and “60 Touch-and-Feel Elements”
announced on the front cover are scattered across sometimes-cluttered spreads. Many objects are not labeled. Most spreads have just one or two tactile features. What to do with this hodgepodge of information is not always clear, leaving it to caregivers to guide children through, for instance, the riot of colors at an amusement park or to puzzle out how a toy crane next to a numeral 9 may represent that number. After a single spread defines basic shapes, the next spread introduces a spiral, a diamond, a star, and an oval, along with objects that represent those shapes, followed by two pages cluttered with 50 objects (four with labels and just three with tactile elements) and the hint: “SO MANY COLORS AND SHAPES TO NAME.” The success of the reading experience depends on the skill of the adult sharing the book. Its touch-and-feel features demand one-on-one sharing, yet some of the tactile elements may not survive toddler fingers. Older toddlers may be confused; younger babies will be distracted.

Sometimes simpler is better. Pass on this hurried jumble. (Board book: 6 mos.­2)

**A BEDTIME HUG**
Hegarty, Patricia
Illus. by Higgins, Megan
Tiger Tales (10 pp.)
$9.99 | Nov. 3, 2020
978-1-68010-641-1

Animal pairs get ready to sleep with flaps that show them snuggling in for the night. This cozy board book is definitely bedtime-ready, ideal for lap reading and cuddling. Each baby animal is tucked in for the night with the turn of a sturdy, shaped flap. The par-squirrel’s tail wraps around Little Squirrel; the hen’s wing folds over the chicks. Perhaps the sweetest and most satisfying are the double flaps that fold in hugging wings around Little Penguin. The flaps themselves are very thick, not papery, with large trenches around each and a notched space for easy lifting. This makes them strong enough to withstand turning from less-dexterous toddler fingers. The rhyming text is equally sturdy, the pacing appropriate for little listeners. The book begins at sunset, and the illustrations show the progression into darkness with every page turn. Each double-page spread has its own palette, from the greens and the golds of the tigers’ sunset to the icy blues, whites, and grays of the penguins’ night sky. There are nice touches in texture and detail: for example, the spiky hairs on a tiny woolly bear and sunset shadows behind the flowers on the field. One odd detail is the long, furred tail on each field mouse.

The cute animals and inviting flaps hold high appeal for lap-sitting kiddos and caregivers eager for snuggles. (Board book: 6 mos.-2)

**BEE MINE**
A Springtime Book of Love!
Hegarty, Patricia
Illus. by Clarkson, Bryony
Tiger Tales (14 pp.)
$8.99 | Nov. 3, 2020
978-1-68010-639-8

A board book that buzzes with assurances of love.

Each rhyming four-line stanza reads like a sentimental valentine but manages to include the name of the featured critter while describing some of its salient characteristics. The smiling bees on the first spread show through a shaped cutout on the cover. The next six spreads each present one bas-relief bug on the left and a die cut that incorporates the other on the right. Turn the page, and the cutout allows the pair to be seen with noses touching, with a “kiss kiss” caption to make sure readers understand what’s going on. The sunny shades of yellow on the bee’s page shift to red for the ladybugs, purple for fireflies, blue-green for snails, green for caterpillars, and orange for their cocoons. Unfortunately, the black background against which the purple butterflies emerge surrounded by a rainbow of flowers dilutes the intensity of the colors on what could have been the brightest page. This book can be shared at many levels—to talk about colors or to celebrate spring and love, with a value-added lesson on metamorphosis for older preschoolers. The colors are not named but young children will recognize them even as they quickly grab each shaped die cut to turn the pages. Thankfully, the pages are extra thick and quite sturdy.

The subtitle says it all. (Board book: 1-4)

**BABY RACCOON**
Finger Puppet Book
Illus. by Huang, Yu-bowan
Chronicle Books (12 pp.)
$7.99 | Aug. 25, 2020
978-1-4521-7080-0

A finger-puppet book depicts the nocturnal activities of a baby raccoon.

This very small (4.25 inches square) board book with extra-thick pages features a sewn fabric raccoon finger puppet that sticks through a circular die cut in the center of each page. This makes the raccoon’s head and neck somewhat movable on each page as the face fits into the illustrations. The puppet itself is surprisingly detailed and quite charming, with black-and-white detailing against the gray body and embroidered eyes and a nose. Readers meet Baby Raccoon at sunset and follow along on his nighttime prowl as he forages, plays, and climbs a tree. Most of the details in the book appear to be factually correct about raccoons, with the exception of its promulgation of the whimsical and widely misunderstood notion that raccoons “wash their food in the stream” before eating it. The text itself is very simple and descriptive of the action on each page, making for appropriate but not particularly exciting pacing. The progression from sunset to sunrise is clearly represented in the backgrounds. The puppet
is fun, but its wide-eyed expression cannot change. That said, older infants and toddlers will enjoy engaging with the little critter as a caregiver’s finger animates it. Companion titles Baby Fox and Little Love Bug follow in a similar style, though with even less adherence to fact. The nocturnal fox is shown eating and playing during the day, and the love bug is mostly a parent-child love story. The novelty of the finger puppet is the slight story’s highlight. (Board book/novelty. 6 mos.-2) (Baby Fox: 978-1521-8173-8; Little Love Bug: 978-1521-8174-5)

MUSIC IS . . .

Johnson, Stephen T.
Illus. by the author
Paula Wiseman/Simon & Schuster
(52 pp.)
$24.99 | Oct. 27, 2020
978-1-4169-9950-8

From classical to pop, an exploration of 10 Western musical genres with poetic words, images, and short essays.

Classical, Latin, jazz, country, heavy metal, hip-hop, rock ‘n’ roll, rhythm and blues, and electronic are the genres amateur musician and award-winning illustrator Johnson has chosen to present. This unusually formatted book has a concertina binding, with one long piece of cardstock folded accordion style. It reads from the front like a picture book. Each spread presents a single genre in both words and pictures. Improvisation is a feature of many musical styles, the writer tells us. It’s also a good word for the poetic text, the scatlike syllables that convey the sounds, and the colors, shapes, and images on the pages. Even the simple text has a sonic verve, with its varied typography. Johnson’s descriptions work: Country is “poignant stories”; heavy metal is “roughened steel blazing a trail of light”; electronica is “liquid sound cascading over an endless sea.” Reading on the reverse side, each spread includes a couple of paragraphs offering extended description and history, a list of the usual instruments, six examples of pieces with their composers or performers, and a quote from someone in that musical world. Adult readers knowledgeable about one genre or another might argue about the choices, but the child audience of readers, listeners, and players will find this a rich resource to explore.

Appealing and informative for a broad range. (author’s note, acknowledgments, bibliography) (informational picture book/novelty. 7-14)

PATIENCE

A Pull-the-Tab Book

Le Hénand, Alice
Illus. by Bedouet, Thierry
Trans. by Hardenberg, Wendeline A.
Twirl/Chronicle (14 pp.)
$12.99 | Aug. 4, 2020
978-2-40801-994-5
Series: Pull and Play

Young animals learn life lessons in patience.
A young crocodile learns to wait while his sister plays with a toy airplane; a little bunny learns self-control on a long train ride; and a bear cub is hangry for dinner. Resolving the mini-dramas in six lines of text, caring parents help the children deal with their restlessness with Mr. Rogers–esque techniques, such as empathy, redirection, positive distraction, time management, and positive reinforcement. On the verso of each double-page spread, a child expresses their dissatisfaction solely through dialogue. On the recto, the grown-up suggests a coping strategy and, underneath, an image appears of the pair in the throes of the emotion. This illustration is split down the middle, and a panel slides out via pull-tab to reveal the resolution, with the denouement described below. While the tabs are sturdy, they are a bit stiff, and caregivers sharing this offering with their youngsters may need to assist with the reveal. The final spread appears to be a preschool or a day care, and little critters are being picked up by their corresponding grown-ups after their teacher praises them for their patience. The graphically close to simple art presents simplified scenes with boldly colored, big-eyed characters set against muted backgrounds. The pairs presented here represent solely parental relationships; there is no depiction of other types of family configurations. While some of these situations seem a bit too perfect, the lessons here are direct, and the playful pull-tabs will make them easy to digest.

This French import is both compassionate and useful. (Board book. 2-4)

A CHRISTMAS COLLECTION
Stories, Songs, and Reflections for the Advent Season

Lloyd-Jones, Sally
Illus. by Jago
Zonderkidz (24 pp.)
$22.49 | Nov. 10, 2020
978-0-310-76990-3
Series: Jesus Storybook Bible

A version of the Nativity story with 10 narrative or musical sound clips followed by abbreviated Bible stories and devotional thoughts for each day of Advent.

Drawn from Lloyd-Jones’ The Jesus Storybook Bible (2007) with some anonymous interstitial text, the stories begin with a young girl “minding her own business” until Gabriel drops in to give her the heads-up: “He’s the One! He’s the Rescuer!” In
Jago’s harmonious, cleanly drawn cartoon illustrations, most of the human characters have brown skin in a variety of shades, including (eventually) a brown-skinned baby Jesus, whose head is topped with tight, black curls. The familiar tale continues up to the appearance of “three clever men” from the East (one cued as East Asian with stereotypical Fu Manchu facial hair) in Bethlehem. It is punctuated with pressure-sensitive spots that each activate 15 to 20 seconds of either a well-known Christmas hymn or a reading by David Suchet in a plummy British accent. Twenty-four shorter daily episodes, mostly Old Testament passages with the gory bits left out, follow to offer (purported) prefigurations of God’s “Secret Rescue Plan” as revealed in the New. These range from a massacre-free version of Joshua’s entry into Jericho and (wait for it) “Daniel and the Scary Sleepover” to the parting of the Red Sea, which is incorrectly identified as the origin of Passover.

Tidings of comfort and joy laid on with a trowel but not much regard for texts or traditions. (Novelty/religion. 6-8)
bent in various ways effectively convey the blowing wind, and because there is always something just about to happen with the turn of the page, the pacing keeps up. Cat is never referred to with gendered pronouns and generally appears androgynous.

Cat delights in this toddler page-turner. (Board book. 1-3)

1, 2, 3, DO THE DINOSAUR
Robinson, Michelle
Illus. by Beardshaw, Rosalind
Kane Miller (32 pp.)
$12.99 | Dec. 1, 2020
978-1-68464-044-7

A child clad in a dinosaur costume dances with dino pals all the way to bedtime.

In this somewhat oversized board book, Tom swishes, stomps, and roars through the jungle with his fellow dinos. Even an encounter with *Tyrannosaurus rex* doesn’t slow them down; the toothy dinosaur simply joins in the fun. It’s a refreshing change to see the oft-feared T. rex given the opportunity to belong to the group. Brown-skinned Tom looks adorable in his yellow costume, his curly dark hair peeking out from underneath the top. One sweet element of the story is that Tom is always assumed to be a dinosaur; there is no discussion of his playing dress-up or using his imagination, the same way that during play, a child simply becomes what they imagine themselves to be. Beardshaw’s illustrations are charming, full of friendly-faced creatures set against a backdrop of softly erupting volcanoes and waterfalls. Robinson’s rhyming text is mostly paced well, with the refrain of “Let’s do the dinosaur!” appearing several times throughout. It also acts as a nice call to readers to imitate the story’s movements, chomping, swishing, stomping, and roaring along the way. It even plays with the concepts of quiet and loud. Given the book’s larger size and the potential for participation, this would make a nice read-aloud for a toddler group as well as sharing in a lap.

Dino fans or not, little readers will dig this one. (Board book. 2-4)

FAMILIES BELONG
Saks, Dan
Illus. by Smart, Brooke
Rise x Penguin Workshop (24 pp.)
$7.99 | Sep. 1, 2020
978-0-399-22276-8

Families in a variety of configurations play, dance, and celebrate together.

The rhymed verse, based on a song from the *Noodle Loaf* children’s podcast, declares that “Families belong / Together like a puzzle / Different-sized people / One big snuggle.” The accompanying image shows an interracial couple of caregivers (one with brown skin and one pale) cuddling with a pajama-clad toddler with light brown skin and surrounded by two cats and a dog. Subsequent pages show a wide array of families with members of many different racial presentations engaging in bike and bus rides, indoor dance parties, and more. In some, readers see only one caregiver: a father or a grandparent, perhaps. One same-sex couple with two children in tow are expecting another child. Smart’s illustrations are playful and expressive, curating the most joyful moments of family life. The verse, punctuated by the word together, frequently set in oversized font, is gently inclusive at its best but may trip up readers with its irregular rhythms. The song that inspired the book can be found on the Noodle Loaf website.

A joyful celebration. (Board book. 1-3)

MARVELOUS MACHINES
A Magic Lens Book
Wilsher, Jane
Illus. by Lozano, Andrés
What on Earth Books (48 pp.)
$19.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-912920-20-4

A detachable acetate eyepiece lets budding engineers peek into buildings, the inner workings of vehicles from bicycles to submarines, and even a human torso.

Peering through the colored spyglass embedded in the front cover at Lozano’s cartoon scenes makes large areas of red stippling or crosshatching disappear, revealing electrical wiring and other infrastructure in or under buildings, robots at work on an assembly line, the insides of a jet and a container ship, and other hidden areas or facilities. Though younger viewers will get general pictures of how, for instance, internal-combustion (but not electric) cars are propelled, what MRIs and ultrasound scans reveal, and the main steps in printing and binding books, overall the visual detail is radically simplified in Lozano’s assemblages of cartoon images. Likewise, the sheaves of descriptive captions are light on specifics—noting that airplane wings create lift but neglecting to explain just how, say, or why maglev train magnets are supercooled. Still, Wilsher introduces simple machines at the outset (five of the six, anyway), and the ensuing selection of complex ones is current enough to include a spy drone and Space X’s Falcon 9 rocket. Along with displaying a range of skin tones, the human cast of machine users visible in most scenes includes an astronomer wearing a hijab. All in all, it’s a revealing, if sketchy, roll toward David Macaulay’s *The Way Things Work Now* (2016).

Just the ticket for mechanically curious kids. (Informational novelty. 7-9)
CONTINUING SERIES

I LIKE THE OUTDOORS...What Jobs Are There?
Brown, Carron
Illus. by Blefari, Roberto
Kane Miller (48 pp.)
$15.99 | Dec. 1, 2020
978-1-68464-089-8
Series: That's a Job?
(Informational picture book. 7-10)

SAMANTHA SPINNER AND THE PERPLEXING PANTS
Ginns, Russell
Illus. by Fisinger, Barbara
Delacorte (320 pp.)
978-1-9848-4923-6
978-1-9848-4924-3 PLB
Series: Samantha Spinner, 4
(Adventure. 9-12)

STARS OF THE SHOW
Calmenson, Stephanie & Cole, Joanna
Illus. by Burks, James
Aladdin/QUIX (96 pp.)
$17.99 | $5.99 paper | Jan. 5, 2021
978-1-5344-5257-2
978-1-5344-5256-5 paper
Series: The Adventures of Allie and Amy, 3
(Fiction. 5-8)

THE YEAR OF THE OX
In English and Simplified Chinese
Chin, Oliver
Illus. by Alcorn, Miah
Immedium (40 pp.)
$15.95 | Jan. 1, 2021
978-1-59702-152-4
Series: Tales From the Chinese Zodiac
(Bilingual picture book. 4-8)

MIX AND MEASURE
Derting, Kimberly & Johnnies, Shelli R.
Illus. by Murray, Joelle
Greenwillow (32 pp.)
978-0-06-294612-6
978-0-06-294611-9 paper
Series: Libby Loves Science
(Early reader. 5-8)

I WANT TO BE A TEACHER
Driscoll, Laura
Illus. by Echeverri, Catalina
Harper/HarperCollins (32 pp.)
978-0-06-298055-0
978-0-06-298054-3 paper
Series: I Want To Be A...
(Informational early reader. 4-8)

TBH, NO ONE CAN EVER KNOW
Greenwald, Lisa
Katherine Tegen/HarperCollins (208 pp.)
$12.99 | Jan. 12, 2021
978-0-06-299181-2
Series: TBH, 7
(Fiction. 8-12)

STAR POWER
Hapka, Cathy & Vandenbarg, Ellen
Illus. by Read, Gillian
Penguin Workshop (96 pp.)
$15.99 | $6.99 paper | Jan. 12, 2021
978-0-593-09975-1
978-0-593-09974-4 paper
Series: Astronaut Girl, 2
(Science fiction. 5-8)

SILVER AND GOLD
Hapka, Cathy & Vandenbarg, Ellen
Illus. by Read, Gillian
Penguin Workshop (96 pp.)
$15.99 | $6.99 paper | Jan. 12, 2021
978-0-593-09978-2
978-0-593-09977-5 paper
Series: Astronaut Girl, 3
(Science fiction. 5-8)

THE ZOO SWITCHEROO
Katz, Alan
Illus. by Lopez, Alex
Harper/HarperCollins (96 pp.)
$15.99 | $5.99 paper | Jan. 5, 2021
978-0-06-290934-3
978-0-06-290935-0 paper
Series: S.O.S: Society of Substitutes, 2
(Adventure. 7-8)

LOST AND FOUND
Lerner, Jarrett
Illus. by Seidlitz, Serge
Aladdin/QUIX (96 pp.)
$17.99 | $5.99 paper | Jan. 5, 2021
978-1-5344-5220-6
974-1-5344-5219-0 paper
Series: Greger the Robot, 2
(Science fiction. 5-8)

SENTINELS IN THE DEEP OCEAN
StacyPlays
Illus. by the author
Harper/HarperCollins (224 pp.)
$17.99 | Jan. 26, 2021
978-0-06-290977-1
Series: Wild Rescuers, 4
(Animal fantasy. 8-12)

CROSSING THE CURRENT
Yolen, Jane
Illus. by Moran, Mike
Simon Spotlight (32 pp.)
$17.99 | $4.99 paper | Dec. 8, 2020
978-1-5344-6629-6
978-1-5344-6628-9 paper
Series: School of Fish
(Early reader. 4-6)
**LOVE IN ENGLISH**
Andreu, Maria E.
Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins (336 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-0-06-299651-0

A story about immigration, language, and finding one’s voice.

Sixteen-year-old Ana and her mom have recently emigrated from Argentina to New Jersey to reunite with Ana’s father after three long years apart. As she starts her junior year of high school, Ana grapples with new, fraught relationship dynamics with her dad and his insistence that they speak only English at home as well as with the heartbreaking move away from family and friends to a new country while possessing only a basic level of English. But as she settles in and meets new people at school, including Spanish-speaking Altagracia, a fabulous Instagram influencer; cute all-American Harrison; and Neo from ESL class, a friendly Greek Cypriot, Ana starts to believe that everything may well turn out fine. Ana is a writer of poetry and lover of words, and the book features some of her quirky, thought-provoking poems about learning the ins and outs of the English language. The novel, focusing on Ana’s experience as a documented immigrant, effectively explores the character’s struggle to navigate unlike cultures and languages while she learns to communicate in English, discovers different facets of herself, falls a bit in love, and ultimately finds her footing—and her voice—in the U.S. Ana is White and Argentinian, and Altagracia is a Latinx lesbian.

A wholesome immigration story with a healthy dose of romance on the side. (Fiction. 14-18)

**THE ELECTRIC KINGDOM**
Arnold, David
Viking (432 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-593-20222-7

In a world where humanity has almost been wiped out, a teenage girl and her dog set out on a mysterious and potentially foolhardy journey.

Nico and her parents survived the flu spread by ravenous Flu-flies by retreating to an isolated farmhouse, where they lived on supplies brought by the Deliverer. Then Nico’s mother fell ill and died. When it seems that her father will succumb as well, he
Diversity in publishing is not as simple as it looks at first glance: Numbers of titles alone don’t tell the whole story. October 2020 saw the first Desi KidLit Summit, a stimulating and inspiring event featuring South Asian diaspora voices from the world of literature for young people. It was organized by author and educator Gayatri Sethi and co-hosted by Sethi, author Saadia Faruqi, and publisher Sailaja N. Joshi of Mango and Marigold Press.

During two weekend sessions, the participants—inhabiting roles from author, agent, and editor to publisher—discussed a range of topics. But one that arose frequently was the tremendous diversity of South Asians yet—despite recent growth in the number of #ownvoices titles published in the U.S.—the narrow range of experiences that are represented.

This is harmful: Non–South Asian readers often come away with the mistaken belief that the glimpse they were shown represents a universal truth while readers from within the community, who are thirsting for mirrors of their own experiences, are left wanting. Also, outside readers often expect definitive answers about whether a particular book is “authentic” or not, a great oversimplification. Of course, all of this applies to books about other marginalized groups as well.

At the event, authors spoke about writing serious, issue-driven books to help young people who are experiencing struggles similar to their own. Others deliberately avoid writing about racism, assimilation, and other painful topics as a way of bringing diverse perspectives to the lighter stories in young readers’ literature. Both types of books are valuable and necessary, but mainstream publishing has long privileged the latter, leading to an imbalance and distortion in representation.

I was struck by the words of author Syed M. Masood, who said, in part, “None of my work actually ever addresses bullying, Islamophobia, or racism directly. I don’t give it any space on the page; my characters just assume they’re equal. I realize that’s a luxury and that’s not always accurate, but I do it that way because of what [Kokila publisher] Namrata [Tripathi] said: You can destroy something just by not acknowledging it. Karuna [Riazi] said, ‘Speak your truth,’ and what I want to emphasize is that it is going to be your truth. It’s not necessarily going to speak to everyone in the community. Remember that it’s #ownvoices and not #ownvoice. As readers we should have respect for that, and as writers we can just do the best we can and tell the truth as we understand it.”

Here are a few #ownvoices South Asian books for young adults that celebrate the diverse stories the community has to tell:

*Mad, Bad & Dangerous To Know* by Samira Ahmed (Soho Teen, April 7): A French and Indian American girl goes to Paris, meets a cute boy, and solves a fascinating mystery.


*Symptoms of a Heartbreak* by Sona Charaipotra (Imprint, July 2): An intellectually precocious 16-year-old Punjabi American doctor finds love in a sweet story filled with family and great food.

*The Henna Wars* by Adiba Jaigirdar (Page Street, May 12): Two Irish teen girls, one of whom is Bangladeshi and Muslim, fall out and make up in this charming queer romance.


*More Than Just a Pretty Face* by Syed M. Masood (Little, Brown, Aug. 4): A Pakistani American boy who dreams of becoming a chef is surprised by both history and love.

*96 Words for Love* by Rachel Roy and Ava Dash (Jimmy Patterson/Little, Brown, 2019): A Hindu story retold, centering a Black and Indian American girl summering at an ashram.

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
Will drive readers to challenge toxic ideologies that leave girls of color open to harm.

MUTED

Charles, Tami
Scholastic (416 pp.)
$14.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-338-67352-4

Denver Lafleur, along with friends Shak and Dali, is out to achieve her dreams while being pulled into the dark side of the music industry by a conniving, exploitative, male R&B superstar. Readers are introduced to the wondrous harmonies of these three girls of color as they win $50 at a Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania, corn festival. They hold on to each other, their love for music a refuge from the racial tensions of their mostly White home, far away from Denver's Brooklyn roots. They know all too well that they are bigger than this place and, after sneaking off to Newark, manage a chance meeting with king of R&B Sean “Mercury” Ellis. Merc notices their talent and provides a platform for them to reach an audience, but red flags appear pointing to his controlling behaviors. Something more sinister is at play, and with the teenage girls away from familial support in Merc’s world, who will protect them? Charles, herself a former young R&B artist, draws upon themes from the still-unfolding criminal investigation of R. Kelly. Merc's world, who will protect them? Charles, herself a former young R&B artist, draws upon themes from the still-unfolding criminal investigation of R. Kelly. Merc notices their talent and provides a platform for them to reach an audience, but red flags appear pointing to his controlling behaviors. Something more sinister is at play, and with the teenage girls away from familial support in Merc’s world, who will protect them? Charles, herself a former young R&B artist, draws upon themes from the still-unfolding criminal investigation of R. Kelly. Merc notices their talent and provides a platform for them to reach an audience, but red flags appear pointing to his controlling behaviors. Something more sinister is at play, and with the teenage girls away from familial support in Merc’s world, who will protect them? Charles, herself a former young R&B artist, draws upon themes from the still-unfolding criminal investigation of R. Kelly.

Real talk about sexual abuse and harassment that neither sugarcoats nor catastrophizes. (resources, index) (Nonfiction. 12-18)

A guide for recognizing, reporting, and combating sexual abuse and sexual harassment for those who have experienced it and those who wish to offer support.

After an introduction that provides the history of the #MeToo movement, the first chapter covers the basics of relationships, power, consent, and boundaries. It is a good starting point for readers who are unsure if they are ready for the explicit content contained in subsequent chapters; each chapter with difficult material opens with a warning about potential triggers. Chapter 2 provides definitions and examples of sexual abuse and harassment; a minor quibble is that the information is not presented in alphabetical or any other discernible order. Chapter 3 explores myths about sexual abuse. Chapter 4 focuses on how to ask for help, noting that it is not easy nor is justice always served. In Chapter 5, allies learn how to help individuals while Chapter 6 offers ideas for advocacy. The book includes stories that bring the topics to life; each is clearly marked as an anecdote, based on an actual story, or true. The tone of the book is serious, empowering, and reassuring, with accessible, easy-to-read prose. The colorful design that includes non-genre illustrations featuring artists’ mannequins adds visual appeal to a somber subject. Bondy is gender-inclusive in her language and information.

Parallel narratives chart the careers of Wernher von Braun, the former Nazi famous for helping the U.S. reach the moon, and Sergei Korolev, the Soviet Union’s top rocket designer, who developed the first of the Soyuz spacecraft that are still in use today. A portrait emerges of two men ruthless in their pursuit of spaceflight and two countries similarly remorseless in their fight for dominance. Von Braun knowingly supervised forced prison labor in horrific conditions to build the V-2 rocket, which then

#METOO AND YOU Everything You Need To Know About Consent, Boundaries, and More
Bondy, Halley
Illus. by Corbett, Timothy
Zest Books (200 pp.)
$14.99 paper | $57.32 PLB | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-4455-8159-3
978-1-4455-8155-5 PLB

A well-researched, detailed account of two leading engineers in the space race that raises questions about the human costs of war and propaganda.

Parallel narratives chart the careers of Wernher von Braun, the former Nazi famous for helping the U.S. reach the moon, and Sergei Korolev, the Soviet Union’s top rocket designer, who developed the first of the Soyuz spacecraft that are still in use today. A portrait emerges of two men ruthless in their pursuit of spaceflight and two countries similarly remorseless in their fight for dominance. Von Braun knowingly supervised forced prison labor in horrific conditions to build the V-2 rocket, which then

IN THE SHADOW OF THE MOON America, Russia, and the Hidden History of the Space Race
Cherrix, Amy
Balzer + Bray/HarperCollins (336 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-06-288875-4

A well-researched, detailed account of two leading engineers in the space race that raises questions about the human costs of war and propaganda.

Parallel narratives chart the careers of Wernher von Braun, the former Nazi famous for helping the U.S. reach the moon, and Sergei Korolev, the Soviet Union’s top rocket designer, who developed the first of the Soyuz spacecraft that are still in use today. A portrait emerges of two men ruthless in their pursuit of spaceflight and two countries similarly remorseless in their fight for dominance. Von Braun knowingly supervised forced prison labor in horrific conditions to build the V-2 rocket, which then
A dream for musical theater fans. Deserves a standing ovation.

Mazie

FREIHEIT!
The White Rose Graphic Novel
Ciponte, Andrea Grosso
Illus. by the author
Plough (112 pp.)
$24.00 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-87486-344-4

A graphic account of the lives and tragic ends of the young anti-Nazi White Rose martyrs.

Aside from dates, glimpses of documents, and a few invented lines of dialogue, Ciponte’s sketchy narrative text is largely a mix of quotations from classic German writers, Nazi propaganda, and snippets of rhetoric drawn directly from the six exhortatory leaflets (all of which are provided in full as back-matter in an English translation by Arthur R. Schultz) that the White Rose printed and distributed before its abrupt end. This leaves it to the art to create a storyline, and it’s not up to the task, being arranged in loosely sequenced panels, marked by confusingly abrupt changes in time and locale, in which watery figures with hard-to-distinguish features are either posed in static groups or portrayed in head shots. Reproductions of official reports serve in place of explicit depictions of the executions. Russell Freedman’s We Will Not Be Silent (2016) and Kip Wilson’s White Rose (2019) offer a more coherent picture of the short careers of Sophie Scholl and her fellow protesters, but readers will come away appreciating the courage it took for these young collegians to stand up as they did. Though the leaflets are almost unreadably cerebral, they do serve as primary sources for the White Rose’s message.

A heartfelt, well-deserved tribute but a muddle for readers not already familiar with the story. (Graphic nonfiction. 12-18)

MAZIE
Crowder, Melanie
Philomel (352 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-0-525-51074-3

In 1959, the star soloist of her small Nebraska farm town leaves everything behind for a chance at musical-theater stardom in New York City.

Triple-threat high school senior Mazie Butterfield dreams of getting out of Fairbury and breaking into Broadway even if it means bidding farewell to her loving family and serious boyfriend, Jesse. When an unexpected graduation gift offers enough money for a train ticket and six weeks in the city, Mazie hurriedly takes off for a bed in a “boardinghouse for theatrical young ladies” run by Mrs. Cooper, a Black former Broadway dancer. Mazie quickly falls into a repetitive cycle of auditions and rejections, and although she’s disheartened to be deemed too stumpy, Midwestern, and plain for most parts, she eventually scores an understudy gig for an “industrial” (a corporate-sponsored, limited-run musical) touring the Corn Belt to promote a new tractor model. Throughout the story, White, sheltered Mazie uncovers some truths about life in the arts, such as that several male counterparts are gay, that married women with children have trouble returning to the business, and that certain producers and directors sexually harass and intimidate the women in their shows. Filled with Broadway trivia, the book is a dream for musical theater fans, and the love story between Mazie and Jesse is heartfelt. The characters, including secondary ones, are well developed and fully realized, and the book features noteworthy queer representation.

Deserves a standing ovation. (author’s note) (Historical fiction. 12-18)

THE GIRL FROM SHADOW SPRINGS
Cypher, Ellie
Simon & Schuster (320 pp.)
$19.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-1-5344-6569-5

A girl battles dangers both natural and supernatural to save her sister.

Jorie’s a scavenger, looting corpses of unwise treasure hunters who die on the deadly Ice Flats. A dangerous Rover shows up looking for a possession on the latest body—and when it isn’t there, he takes Jorie’s sister, Brenna, instead. To retrieve Brenna, Jorie must bring what the Rover’s after to Nocna Mora, a former mining colony now rumored to host outlaws and monsters. Accompanying Jorie (whether she likes it or not) is Cody, a privileged, University-raised Southerner who came north with his now-missing uncle on a quest to find a long-lost, mythical city. Academic, dreamy Cody has romanticized notions of the
North and its magical legends while practical Jorie tries to be as cold and relentless as the everlasting winter where she lives. The well-crafted settings use a variety of frozen landscapes, providing dangers and keeping the story grounded while giving it a strong sense of forward motion and progress. Jorie’s first-person voice is distinctive without being distracting and well utilized in showing her emotional arc. The physical story—pitting the duo against threats from nature, animals, and humans as they uncover the truths behind the legends—is straightforward (and a tad predictable) but has enough varied beats to keep reader interest up to a stand-alone–worthy conclusion. The characters default to White.

Inventive worldbuilding and a distinctive protagonist make for a solid debut. (Fantasy. 12-18)

**WINGS OF EBONY**

*Elle, J.*  
Denene Millner Books/Simon & Schuster (368 pp.)  
$19.99 | Jan. 26, 2021  
978-1-5344-7067-5

A teenage girl is whisked away from the only home and family she knows to a hidden land of magic and secrets. The last year has been a jarring sequence of events for 17-year-old African American Rue. After their mother dies in a senseless shooting, Rue and her 12-year-old sister, Tasha, are separated. Tasha is living with her father back in Houston while Rue finds herself off the coast of Madagascar on the hidden island of Ghizon with her previously absent father, Aasim. Rue struggles to assimilate to a magic-filled world, but her new friend Bri accepts her and gives her an understanding of Ghizoni culture. Despite being immersed in this world of wonder, nothing can replace a sister: Rue breaks the rules and travels back to Houston to see Tasha. Everything seems to be going well until a man with a snake tattoo on his neck offers Tasha a ride to school and a series of events unfolds that threatens Rue’s world and may change Ghizon forever. Debut author Elle’s characters shine with determination and heart. The tough realities of living in an underserved community fortify Rue against great odds but also influence her reluctance to accept kindness and support. Rue grapples with her sense of community, family, and duty; despite the size of her foes and fears, she never stops fighting for justice.

Heart-stopping action and intrigue from cover to cover. (Fantasy. 14-18)

**SOME OTHER NOW**

*Everett, Sarah*  
HMH Books (368 pp.)  
$17.99 | Feb. 23, 2021  
978-0-358-25186-6

In the process of seeking a family, a teen may be breaking up somebody else’s. Jessi Rumfield has always felt closer to Mel Cohen than to her own mom, who spent most of Jessi’s childhood so deep in depression that she was unable to be present for her daughter. Mel and her sons, Rowan and Luke, have been Jessi’s constants in life. But after Mel was diagnosed with an illness they called the Big Bad, Ro asked Jessi to leave the house, and nothing was ever the same again. Now it’s the summer after high school graduation, and Luke has turned up after months of silence, asking Jessi to do him a favor: pretend to be his girlfriend to make Mel, who is nearing the end of her life, happy. Except the last time they were girlfriend and boyfriend, Jessi and Luke’s relationship ruined things with Ro, and everything fell apart from there. Despite the intriguing premise, big reveals and hidden secrets are so obvious that they lose their emotional impact. Sections labeled “now” and “then” give structure and context to the narrative, but readers may nevertheless have trouble keeping track of what’s happening. The main characters are biracial in a predominantly White area, which sets them apart from the community and draws them together. Jessi is Black and White; Luke and Rowan’s maternal grandparents emigrated from the Philippines, and their father was presumably White.

A predictable heartstring puller. (Fiction. 14-18)

**MORTAL REMAINS**

*Fraser, Mary Ann*  
Sterling Teen (368 pp.)  
$18.95 | Feb. 2, 2021  
978-1-4549-3948-1

Lily knows how to care for the dead, but what about the living? In her greater Bay Area town, scarred and scared 18-year-old Lily—long teased for being the daughter of a mortician, nearly killed and still limping after a serious fall from a tree years earlier—finds it easier to relate to the dead people she prepares for burial than to her (centrally cast) best friend or recent high school–graduate stepbrother. Lily, who avoids social situations, dropped out of school after 11th grade and now has her GED diploma. Her genuine compassion for the dead (she spends her hard-earned money buying a deceased homeless woman a nice thrift store outfit for a viewing no one attends) and her anxiety around the living create an unusual and compelling portrait. When a nearby home explodes and the lone survivor is a mysterious boy who may be the same person who saved her when she nearly died, Lily
THE POETRY OF SECRETS

In Trujillo, in the Spanish Kingdom of Castile in 1481, Isabel is a Crypto-Jew; she and her family maintain their Jewish faith in secret.

The Inquisition is gaining control, but 16-year-old Isabel, who has a passion for writing poetry, thinks that as New Christians her family is safe. The family converted to Christianity and were baptized in the hope of making their lives easier and more secure. However, like many other Jews in Spain at the time, they privately practice Judaism—attending church on Sundays but conducting Shabbat dinners every Friday night. They think their secret is safe, but the head Inquisitor, Fray Tomás Torquemada, is now targeting conversos for their private Judaizing. When Isabel is betrothed against her will to the powerful and ruthless alguacil, or sheriff, Don Sancho, Isabel’s parents believe that the upcoming marriage will save them from persecution. But when handsome aristocrat Diego warns Isabel that she is in grave danger from the Inquisition and especially from her husband-to-be, Isabel is determined to save her family, herself, and the man she loves—and live an openly Jewish life filled with poetry.

A touching end to a tale about cursed bloodlines, politics, and love. (Fantasy. 14-adult)

OF SILVER AND SHADOW

Young rebels set out to change their world and discover themselves along the way.

In the dreary city of Denfell, part of the kingdom of Erdis, which is ruled by King Matthaeus Lyandor, a ruthless, power-crazed monarch, live silver wielder Ren, brothers Darek and Markus, rebel-hunter Adley, and young Prince Kellen. Each is on their own journey in search of freedom from an oppressive rule before their stories become intertwined. Caustic Ren is kidnapped by Markus and Darek—who are leading the rebellion to overthrow the Lyandor dynasty. They hope to convince her, as the last surviving silver wielder following the infamous Silver Purge, to be the face of their cause. Adley belongs to the lethal King’s Children—a group consisting of kidnapped and abandoned youths trained in deadly service to the king. In love...
Incant the Names, Burning Bright, Blades of Power, Lend Your Might.

“A search for magic swords jump-starts all manner of temporal and spiritual quests in this YA fantasy.”

“An entertaining sword-and-sorcery epic with food for thought about ethics and responsibility.”

—Kirkus Reviews

FOR ALL INQUIRIES, PLEASE EMAIL
startale.bomber@gmail.com • www.twitter.com/fillbeforeshill
Here the Whole Time by Vitor Martins, translated by Larissa Helena (Scholastic, Nov. 10), is both witty and poignant. Brazilian teenager Felipe spends his winter break hosting Caio, the dishy neighbor he’s secretly in love with. Felipe’s single mother is a warm, unconditionally loving parent, supportive of her lonely, anxious son who is bullied for his weight. Meanwhile, Caio’s controlling, homophobic parents make his home life less welcoming. This is a delightful romp as well as an uplifting and affirming read. Martins spoke with me from his home in São Paulo, Brazil; the conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

How did you end up writing YA?
I decided to go to journalism college because I like to write—but writing news was so boring. When I left school, I started to illustrate picture books, and it was great to meet authors. Writing a book was always a dream, and I had this idea for short stories based on classic fairy tales. Here the Whole Time was my attempt to do a “Beauty and the Beast” retelling: We have this character who thinks he’s ugly and doesn’t deserve love, and we have this other character who’s beautiful, and they are brought together by destiny. I knew one [publishing] intern who today is my main Brazilian editor. She told me, pick one [story] and turn it into a novel.

What kind of responses have you had from readers?
I feel so lucky to have such passionate readers. It’s the old story: I’m writing this book because I wanted to see the younger version of me in a book. When the book was published [in Brazil in 2017], I got to meet people who could relate to [it] for so many different reasons. There was this young reader [at] one book signing, and she told me about this side character, [Caio’s best friend] Becky’s girlfriend. Melissa has a scar on her chest, due to heart surgery, and the reader also had a scar, and she was also bisexual [like Melissa], and for her that meant so much. Melissa is such a small character, she talks so little, and I felt so guilty! I was like, “Oh my God, I want to write a whole book about Melissa just for you because you make this character so special!” It was beautiful to see people that are struggling with body issues and people that are not fat, but through Felipe they could empathize.

It’s rare for books to actually make me laugh out loud like yours did.
As Felipe says, when you grow up fat, you feel like you always have to compensate. I always thought if I make everybody laugh, they will not laugh at me, they’ll always be laughing with me. So, when I decided that Felipe would be this shy and very awkward kid, it was hard because all the jokes are inside his head. I felt like this could be good—for the reader to see how Felipe is a funny guy
and an adorable kid, but he’s not able to show that. For me, it’s easier to deal with hard topics when you’re being funny. We don’t have to take ourselves so seriously when we’re talking about serious issues. The book deals with some very difficult and personal topics, but dealing with them with jokes was my way to get through it. We never actually get over anything; we just learn how to control our demons.

Felipe’s size is woven throughout as a central part of his character.

We don’t discuss enough how body image affects teenage boys. As boys, we grow up learning that caring about your body is “girly,” and this resonates in a man’s life on so many levels: These kinds of boys become men that don’t care about their health. [However] gay culture is so focused on hot bodies; growing up fat and gay you think that you are never going to be loved. Even though in the past few years we have had cute rom-coms about gay boys, it’s always [about] twinks. Growing up fat, it’s like a message that love stories are not for you; you were born to be the best friend, the comic relief. Deciding to write about a fat gay boy seemed like, who’s going to read this, who’s going to care? But I discovered that it wasn’t only me. It took me a while to learn that I deserve love, and I hope that teenage boys can learn quicker than I did.

Consent plays such an important role in the story.

Growing up fat, you feel that your body doesn’t deserve to be touched, you don’t want anyone to touch your body, and you don’t know how good this can feel. For Felipe, being gay around his mom? It’s so easy. For Caio, being shirtless is so easy. Not everything that’s easy for us is going to be easy for our loved ones. About Caio not being ready to come out, that’s something tricky to write about, because when you start writing for a young adult audience—and I think this is something every queer author can relate to—you start to receive messages from teenagers asking for tips on how to come out. This is terrible because it’s not like a YouTube tutorial. It’s different for everyone. What I wanted to tell [readers] is that it’s OK if you’re not ready to come out yet, because you have your whole life to come out and live proudly; your safety always has to come first. This has everything to do with consent: Felipe had to feel comfortable being touched the same way Caio needed to feel comfortable in his own home.

What is the world of YA like in Brazil?

The YA community is growing so fast—we read a lot of translated books, [but] we’re starting to see ourselves as a community that can write stories that talk to our young adults about our issues that sometimes can be universal but sometimes can be very specific, because Brazil is a giant country; you can experience so many different cultures [here]. I cannot represent Brazil, because it’s huge. Brazilian readers are craving diversity and more resonant stories. Even though the world is a mess, we are very excited because we are able to use all the anger, the hunger for change, to create something good, to create beautiful stories.

You translated Abdi Nazemian’s American YA novel Like a Love Story into Portuguese, and now you are on the other side of the process. For me, it was a huge honor to translate it because it’s a beautiful story, a universal story for queer people. [Being on] the other side is so interesting. Translation is not just knowing the language; many things can get lost in translation if you don’t know the context. [Larissa] is also Brazilian, and she’s been living in New York for such a long time. I knew she would know [my] meaning in Portuguese, and she would translate that into English that felt natural. She did such an amazing job.

Here the Whole Time was reviewed in the Sept. 15, 2020, issue.
with another girl but prohibited from having relationships by her position, she longs to be free by crushing the rebellion and being made the King’s Fang. Kellen just wants to learn where he fits in as the second-born heir to the throne. Through blunt, third-person–omniscient narration, their stories unfold, blending political intrigue, romance, and gruesome violence. Readers looking for a fast-paced fantasy with light worldbuilding and social-class commentary will enjoy this novel. The cast has varying skin tones.

An engrossing story about the overthrow of a tyrannical kingdom. (Fantasy. 14-18)

Rival nations Emberfall and Syhl Shallow process the revelation that former royal guardsman Grey is not only the long-lost heir of Emberfall, but also the first known magesmith in years. Prince Rhen and Princess Harper prepare for a clash with Syhl, where Lia Mara, now queen, faces criticism for her controversial alliance with Grey. Even as Grey learns to wield his magic for good, Rhen is cornered by the vengeful enchantress Lilith, whose magesmith family was destroyed by Rhen’s family years prior. The memory of the brutal physical and psychological abuse Rhen and Grey endured while under Lilith’s curse prevents Rhen from believing that any magic user, even his half brother and former confidant, can be trusted. Meanwhile, the brothers’ charismatic, loyal, and headstrong partners experience their own internal conflicts: Lia Mara questions her commitment to peace, and Harper draws uncomfortable connections between her parents’ marriage and her own relationship with Rhen. The political and romantic stakes are at an all-time high as the young rulers and their allies must navigate relationships, responsibilities, and existential questions about trust, legacy, and power before it’s too late. Kemmerer blends contemporary American speech and progressive values with medieval European–inspired cultural elements to successfully construct a dynamic, boundary-pushing exploration of familiar fairy tales, although the systems of magic themselves could be more highly developed. Major characters appear to be White; Harper has cerebral palsy. Offers one satisfying twist after another. (map) (Fantasy. 13-18)

An amnesiac high school senior embarks on a Valentine-themed quest to recover her past. Ella Fitzpatrick is a planner who had her life under perfect control until a terrible accident took away her memories of the previous 11 weeks. A year later, she’s still agonizing over why, exactly, she broke up with her boyfriend and became estranged from her lifelong friends; but an anonymous note in the shape of a heart begins a scavenger hunt she hopes will return everything she had forgotten. Anyone who has seen a Hallmark movie will recognize every trope and narrative beat, although they fit awkwardly into this novel. Even readers who suspend disbelief to embrace the premise will likely tire of the brand-name-dropping, and Ella, who is a stereotypical, self-centered Type A protagonist, feels likable mostly for being less awful than her mean-girl friends—and for her self-awareness in recognizing how easily she could be much worse. She’s a pretty girl from a wealthy family who seems entirely unaware of her privileges; her love interest is neither quirky nor charming enough to save things, and their bickerflirting becomes tedious. The paper hearts gimmick is cute, but once everyone’s secrets are revealed, the superficial romance is overshadowed by many characters’ creepy, manipulative behavior. A few surnames hint at ethnic diversity; Ella and her love interest are cued as White. A fluffy enough diversion for voracious rom-com fans. (Romance. 12-18)

A teen’s sense of justice leads her into dark and unexpected places. Mary Elizabeth lives in the Scar with her Aunt Gia, living life to the fullest with her boyfriend, James; his Neverland boys; and her best friend, Ursula. While Mary balances attending school at Monarch High; partying at Wonderland, a local club for minors; and her internship with the police department that solved her parents’ murders, tensions rise between Legacy, the Scar’s original inhabitants who have a magical lineage, and Narrows, privileged inomers without magic. When
McCullough has created an absorbing firecracker of a young woman who bleeds rage and grief.

**WE ARE THE ASHES, WE ARE THE FIRE**

Joy McCullough
Illus. by Kobabe, Maia
Dutton (400 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 9, 2021
978-0-525-55605-3

The brazen younger daughter in a family scorched by tragedy examines the ashes of the aftermath.

Em Morales is closely bonded to her older sister, Nor. When Nor is violently raped at a frat party, Em goes hard for #JusticeforNor—most significantly by convincing Nor to take her case to trial rather than accept a plea deal. A jury finds the defendant guilty on multiple counts, but a judge releases him based on time served, leaving the entire Morales family devastated. After Em makes friends with witty theater teacher and medieval history nerd Jess (who uses they/them pronouns), she begins writing a fictionalized verse account of the life of Marguerite de Bressieux, a 15th-century noblewoman-turned-knight who avenged the horrific deaths and rapes of her family, adorned by Jess’ illustrations inspired by illuminated manuscripts. McCullough has created an absorbing firecracker of a young woman who bleeds rage and grief as she wrestles with transcending not only her sister’s trauma, but society’s general malevolence toward women. The effect is engrossing, especially as Marguerite’s and Em’s stories become intertwined. With a focus on those who surround victims, McCullough underscores the importance of collective healing. Kobabe’s illustrations elicit the medieval era, but the delicate, rounded lines do not match the grit of Em’s words. Em and Nor are biracial, with a presumably White mom and Guatemalan immigrant dad.

Intense, unrelenting, and inspiring. (author’s note) (Fiction. 14+-18)

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PREPPED

Bethany Mangle
McElderry (320 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-1-5344-7750-6

A teen raised in a doomsday community prepares to leave.

While other kids were hanging out, going on field trips, and thinking about prom, Becca Aldaine was being taught to live in a bunker and receiving training in survival skills such as fly-fishing, lock-picking, firefighting, and handling medical emergencies—along with the occasional, all-too-realistic disaster drill. Becca comes from one of the original families in a community of doomsday preppers waiting and training for the end of the world. With college just months away, the high school senior has to hold out only a little bit longer before she can cut ties with the small-town Ohio group. When an accident occurs and Becca’s plans for leaving start to seem out of reach, she finds an unexpected ally in Roy Kang, the boy whom she’s been pretending to date for the last 5 years to appease her father. It turns out Roy is not in fact a mindless follower, and the two like-minded teens might just have found answers and justice. The Scar is a complex and realistic setting where Legacy struggle with collective trauma, social unrest, and inequity while rich Narrows families are buying up and building on Legacy land that holds spiritual significance and reshaping the high school to be less inclusive. Themes discussed include politics after the Death of Magic and the co-opting of Legacy culture by Narrows as well as the importance of chosen family. The appearance of familiar characters will draw readers into this story that delves into society’s darkness. Mary is pale-skinned with red hair; ethnic diversity in the cast does not correspond with Legacy versus Narrows status.

A twisty and entertaining magic-filled mystery that mirrors real-life issues. (Fantasy. 12+-16)

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THIRTY TALKS WEIRD LOVE

Alessandra Narváez Varela
Cinco Puntos Press (208 pp.)
$18.95 | Jan. 1, 2021
978-1-947627-48-2

Thirteen-year-old Anamaria grapples with conflicting demands and desires in this novel in verse.

In the ‘90s, Anamaria’s hometown of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, just across the border from El Paso, Texas, is rampant with missing girls and women. A cloud of fear looms over Anamaria’s daily movements and is reflected in the worried eyes of the adults who love her. Amid all this she is an honor roll student at Instituto Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, one of the top private schools in the city. Into all this drops Thirty, a 17-year-old Anamaria who arrives as a mentor-cum-fairy godmother to help young Anamaria avoid some of the mistakes she feels she made in her youth. Writing predominantly in short lines of
free verse, Narváez Varela weaves a story of a girl on the edge: on the edge of womanhood, on the edge due to fear, on the edge with her friends, and on the edge of deciding what she wants from life. With shape poems and blackout poetry adding variety, the author tackles classism and colorism in Mexican culture, the community’s collective anxiety around the missing girls, and internal fears brought about by social and academic stress. From the loss of a dear friend to suicidality, many heavy issues are addressed through Anamaria’s humanizing teenage eyes in this novel loosely inspired by Narváez Varela’s own experiences growing up in Ciudad Juárez.

A gritty and absorbing tale of learning to love oneself and one’s roots, warts and all. (Verse novel. 12-18)

LIKE HOME
Onomé, Louisa
Delacorte (416 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 23, 2021
978-0-593-17259-9
978-0-593-17261-2 PLB

Chinelo is happy the way things are; she just has to convince everyone else to stop seeking change. Nigerian Canadian high schooler Chinelo has accepted the fact that some of her childhood neighborhood crew have left for what their families perceived as better neighborhoods. At least Kate Tran, her Vietnamese Canadian best friend, still lives in Ginger East. The Trans, who are like a second family to Chinelo, still run their store, a neighborhood institution. But things are changing: Rents are going up, and upscale shops are appearing along with a new crosswalk. But when the Trans’ store is vandalized and Kate starts pulling away from Chinelo, the changes become too much. As Chinelo tries to prove it was an outsider to the neighborhood who threw the brick through the store window, her outspokenness lands her in a viral video and on the TV news, and a neighborhood protest she helps organize ends badly. Chinelo’s youthful, down-to-earth voice is humorous and utterly believable. The serious topics of gentrification, stereotyping, and inequality are ruthlessly examined without getting in the way of an engaging story of a young woman trying to find her place in a changing world. The effortless diversity of the cast—supporting characters are Black, Trinidadian, and Colombian—is a model for fiction.

Light and serious, playful and real, this is a debut not to be missed. (Fiction. 14-18)

It’s All Love
Reflections for Your Heart & Soul
Ortega, Jenna
Illus. by Mac, Ali
Random House (240 pp.)
$16.99 | Jan. 5, 2021
978-0-593-17456-2

A collection of life lessons for teens from a 17-year-old actor. Ortega’s debut compilation of motivational quotes and stories from her life includes themes of family, self-love, faith, and owning one’s story. The writing style is conversational and addresses readers as peers. Some of the life lessons communicate beliefs about love and light in a manner that may not appeal to all, but Ortega uses her personal stories to connect this philosophy to her lived experiences with sincerity. Some of the stories end fairly abruptly, leaving readers wanting to hear more about what happened next, and some feel repetitive. However, overall, the book speaks directly to Ortega’s teenage fan base, addressing topics that they may struggle with such as depression, jealousy, social media use, difficulties in school, and friendship conflict. The author also talks about the value of role models and the pride she feels in being a Latina in the public eye who can, in turn, inspire others. The book’s structure, with aphorisms in decorative frames separated by single pages of text, allows readers to work their way straight through or skip to random pages and still gain value from the tiny nuggets of wisdom. In Ortega’s words, “You are in charge of your story. Don’t let anybody else write it for you.” Earnest and vulnerable. (Nonfiction. 12-17)

A SHOT AT NORMAL
Reichardt, Marisa
Farrar, Straus and Giroux (352 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 16, 2021
978-0-374-38095-3

A 16-year-old with anti-vaxxer parents fights back. Juniper Jade’s parents follow a hippie, New Age lifestyle: home schooling, following an all-organic lifestyle, using homemade deodorant, forbidding cell-phones—and, especially, no vaccinations. While her siblings, Poppy and Sequoia, are too young to know any better, Juniper wishes she could have a more mainstream life, pleading in vain to attend public school. But when she catches measles and spreads it at the farmers market to Katherine St. Pierre, a 6-week-old baby who then dies, Juniper comes to understand how her parents’ decisions affect more lives than hers and she vows to get vaccinated. Unfortunately, no medical professional will allow a minor to get any shots without their parents’ permission, so she searches for a lawyer who will help her make her case. A sweet romance with Nico, a boy she meets at the library,
keeps the tone breezy and the story moving along at a good pace. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic and news stories about the rise in anti-vaccination movements, this novel presents a timely and important examination of the role of personal responsibility in public health in addition to including a thoughtful discussion about bodily autonomy. However, the one-note characters and predictable plot prevent this from rising above the issues at hand. Main characters default to White.

A well-researched, compelling concept that suffers from heavy-handed treatment. (author’s note) (Fiction. 12-18)

**BLOODSWORN**  
Reintgen, Scott  
Crown (400 pp.)  
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Feb. 16, 2021  
978-0-593-11921-1  
978-0-593-11922-8 PLB  
Series: Ashlords, 2

The action moves from phoenix races to all-out war in this sequel to *Ashlords* (2020). The novel opens with victorious Ashlord Pippa leading an army against her previous foes in the Races: Imelda, a Dividian, and Adrian, a Longhand. The narrative shifts from one character to another as all three discover links to the underworld where the seven Ashlord gods live with their slaves, and they begin to see the gods, not each other, as the enemy. The pace here is frenetic, the writing smooth and exciting. The worldbuilding continues to feel illogical and inconsistent in terms of technological development, and most of the time it’s hard, if not impossible, to follow the plot. The phoenix horses around which the first novel centered are incidental to this book, but readers who haven’t read the first entry will feel lost and have difficulty understanding the characters or setup. Halfway through, the confusion begins to matter less as the characters become more fully developed. If readers don’t worry about understanding it all, the action will be interesting enough to carry things along as the story rockets to a somewhat comprehensible happy ending. Although in the first book the Ashlords were described as dark-skinned and the Dividians and Longhands as light, that difference is downplayed in this entry.

A mess, but at least it’s a hot one. (dramatis personae) (Fantasy. 12-18)

**ERIK THE RED**  
A Viking’s Quest for a New World  
Roehrig, Tilman  
Trans. by Latsch, Oliver  
Arctis Books (412 pp.)  
$18.95 | Feb. 23, 2021  
978-1-64690-003-9

This German import traces the adventures of the Viking Erik the Red. Following his banishment from Norway, Erik’s father relocated the family to Iceland. When he dies, his red-haired, 20-year-old son, Erik, finds himself the last of his clan. With 17-year-old Tyrkir, his family’s German-born slave, in tow, Erik sets out to find a wife. His quick marriage to 18-year-old Thjodhild, founded on exaggerated claims of his wealth, sets in motion a life of cinematic adventures. As one would expect from Viking tales, Erik’s early escapades are quick-paced, violent, and often involve avenging honor. When a fight leads to his banishment, Erik’s time away results in his founding of Greenland. Later the narration focuses on his son, Leif, who encounters a Hebridean sorceress and makes a history-changing voyage of his own. The emphasis on Leif’s conversion to Christianity and resulting clash with his father slows down the story. Lying together each episode are fascinating details of everyday Viking life and culture, including sexual mores, the treatment of slaves, and the legal and social status of women (although it unfortunately does not include an author’s note or references). A mysterious death and a fantastical curse add light intrigue while mature sexual situations make this a great crossover novel for adult readers. Originally published in 1999, the book presents the wholly ethnically Scandinavian Vikings of popular imagination.

Very Viking, indeed. (index of names) (Historical fiction. 15-adult)

**THE GIRLS I’VE BEEN**  
Sharpe, Tess  
Putnam (368 pp.)  
$18.99 | Jan. 26, 2021  
978-0-593-35380-6

When three friends find themselves in a hostage situation, they must share their biggest secrets in order to survive. Beginning at age 7, Nora (not her real name) molded herself into the perfect daughter personas her mother created for each of her high-stakes sweetheart cons. Each false identity taught her something new: creativity, deceit, fear, sacrifice, cunning. It’s been 5 years (and many therapy sessions) since her half sister, Lee (not her real name, either), helped her escape their mom’s toxic clutches, but at 17, Nora still can’t quite settle into normal civilian life. So when she’s taken hostage in an attempted bank robbery alongside her girlfriend, Iris, and her ex-boyfriend,
Wes, who is also friends with Iris, she instinctively conjures
Ash's world are small: Stop signs are blue, not red, for example.
A captivating, explosive, and satisfyingly queer thriller.
A timely, speculative thought experiment in perspective, privilege, and identity.
A well-intentioned project whose earnest messages of empathy and equality fall short in execution.
A gripping flight into fantasy that is heavy-handed in its presentation of conventional beauty standards.
mysteries with profound consequences. The story features an engaging narrative full of surprising plot twists and with a generous measure of anguished romance on the side as Celia and Griffin are often at odds with each other in their pursuit of revenge and freedom. Main characters are White; there is racial and gender diversity in this world.

A fitting conclusion to a duology that is well worth reading.

THE OBSESSION
Satantou, Jesse Q.
Sourcebooks Fire (320 pp.)
$10.99 paper | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-72821-516-7

A paranoia-driven debut novel about a relationship twisted by obsession.

Logan struggles to move on after the death of his great love, Sophie. All he can do is go through the motions until he meets Delilah, a new senior who strongly resembles Sophie. Revived, Logan's obsession grows as he stalks Delilah online and in real life. Meanwhile, Delilah—whose father died in a tragic accident—feels crushed as she thinks about her mother's previous relationship and her own, Delilah's web search about stalkers leads her to a description of erotomania. Set against a Northern California private school backdrop, the sensational plot is riddled with twists that come at a furious pace. Chapters alternate between Logan's and Delilah's perspectives, providing insight into their motives as well as shifting feelings of revulsion and admiration for each. The drama builds to a shocking, albeit abrupt, ending. Delilah's perspectives, providing insight into their motives as well as shifting feelings of revulsion and admiration for each. The pacing remains tightly controlled, staying mostly steady with quick bursts of action and labyrinthine plot twists. Victoria creates an engaging narrative with enough fantasy and science fiction elements to satisfy fans of both genres. Karis is an asexual asexual, and her relationship with Alix remains strictly platonic. The main cast is left racially ambiguous, and the world contains diversity in race, sexuality, and gender; Matthias has a visual impairment.

A colorful fantasy with ancient Greek influences that is a delight to read.

LOVE IS A REVOLUTION
Watson, Renée
Bloomsbury (400 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 2, 2021
978-1-5476-0060-1

A summer of lessons on love of all kinds, particularly self-love.

It's the summer before senior year for Harlem resident Nala Robertson, a 17-year-old Black girl of Jamaican descent. Nala's list of things she wants to accomplish over the summer includes hanging out with her best friends, Imani and Sadie, and falling in love. Nala soon discovers that life does not always go according to plan. While some surprises may turn out better than she imagined—like the entrance of her new crush, Tye—some of life's twists have chafing under the control of the Scriptorium. At one point, as she thinks about her mother's previous relationship and her own, Delilah's web search about stalkers leads her to a description of erotomania. Set against a Northern California private school backdrop, the sensational plot is riddled with twists that come at a furious pace. Chapters alternate between Logan's and Delilah's perspectives, providing insight into their motives as well as shifting feelings of revulsion and admiration for each. The drama builds to a shocking, albeit abrupt, ending. Delilah's perspectives, providing insight into their motives as well as shifting feelings of revulsion and admiration for each. The pacing remains tightly controlled, staying mostly steady with quick bursts of action and labyrinthine plot twists. Victoria creates an engaging narrative with enough fantasy and science fiction elements to satisfy fans of both genres. Karis is an asexual asexual, and her relationship with Alix remains strictly platonic. The main cast is left racially ambiguous, and the world contains diversity in race, sexuality, and gender; Matthias has a visual impairment.

A colorful fantasy with ancient Greek influences that is a delight to read.

A suspenseful page-turner.

A beautiful love story about finding one's way back to one's self.

BETRAYED THE Scriptorium OVER 200 YEARS AGO BY INITIATING THE GREAT LAPSE THAT BROUGHT AN END TO THE Scriptorium'S SUPREMACY. CHAFING UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE Scriptorium, Karis MAKES A DEAL WITH ALIX: THEY WILL ESCAPE TOGETHER AND KARIS WILL FIND HER MIRROR BROTHHER, MATTHIAS, WHO WAS SENT AWAY YEARS AGO FOR TRYING TO PROTECT HER. THERE'S ONLY ONE SNAG—THEODIS CREATED ALIX, BUT ALIX REMEMBERS NOTHING OF THE MASTER'S BETRAYAL. THE NARRATIVE EXAMINES WHAT IT IS LIKE TO HAVE YOUR PERSONHOOD DENIED, BOTH THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF ALIX AS AN AUTOMATON AND THROUGH THOSE OF THE SLAVES OF THE Scriptorium. BONDS OF FRIENDSHIP ARE TESTED AGAIN AND AGAIN, AND QUESTIONS OF BETRAYAL AND EMOTIONAL DISTANCE ARE ASKED. THE PACING REMAINS TIGHTLY CONTROLLED, STAYING MOSTLY STEADY WITH QUICK BURSTS OF ACTION AND LABYRINTHINE PLOT TWISTS. VICTORIA CREATES AN ENGAGING NARRATIVE WITH ENOUGH FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION ELEMENTS TO SATISFY FANS OF BOTH GENRES.

A summer of lessons on love of all kinds, particularly self-love.

It's the summer before senior year for Harlem resident Nala Robertson, a 17-year-old Black girl of Jamaican descent. Nala's list of things she wants to accomplish over the summer includes hanging out with her best friends, Imani and Sadie, and falling in love. Nala soon discovers that life does not always go according to plan. While some surprises may turn out better than she imagined—like the entrance of her new crush, Tye—some of life's twists have her questioning her dreams and herself, forcing her to face new and uncomfortable realities. Nala's world is made up of family and friends who are mainly strong, inspirational Black girls and women of varying sizes, complexions, and complexities. Nala's journey of self-love and acceptance comes with emotional bums and bruises, and Watson's well-paced writing puts readers in Nala's shoes with a delivery that consistently feels like a warm hug, supported by a throughline of love. Touching on social issues like racism, environmentalism, and body positivity, this story will resonate with readers who have questioned who they are, tried to change themselves to fit in, or are seeking their own voices.

A beautiful love story about finding one's way back to one's self.
RAISING GLOBAL TEENS
A Practical Handbook for Parenting in the 21st Century
Abraham, Anisha
Summertime Publishing (424 pp.)
Oct. 1, 2020
978-1-9998808-4-2

A pediatrician offers advice on raising teens in the 21st century.

In this debut parenting book, Abraham focuses on the experiences of children with varied cultural experiences. She addresses the particular needs of expatriates, immigrants, and those with blended cultural backgrounds while also covering the fundamentals of stress, puberty, brain development, and education that apply to all teens. The author—an American born to South Asian parents, married to a German, and based in the Netherlands—draws on a combination of personal experiences, stories of her patients, the results of a survey she conducted, and existing research on child development.

The manual is organized thematically, and each chapter opens with representative questions from parents and teens that are answered at the end. Abraham's topics include devising communication strategies, establishing self-esteem and resilience, dealing with substance abuse and risky behavior, and managing learning disabilities and other neurological conditions.

The author is a strong and fluent writer and does an excellent job of using anecdotes to personalize the big-picture subjects explored in the text. The chapter on brain development is particularly well done, combining scientific information about the physiological factors that often lead teens to make poor decisions with strategies for mitigating the effects of impulsiveness and immaturity in real-world situations (“Provide information on issues before they occur. Consider role play to help young people address peer pressure and make smart choices”). An appendix contains the results of Abraham’s survey of parents and teens, and resources for additional reading are provided in each chapter and in the book’s endnotes. Although the work’s title spotlights teens in cross-cultural contexts, much of the volume is more generally applicable to the age group as a whole. The author occasionally mentions issues that are more particular to children who cross between cultures (different definitions of adulthood in home and local cultures; how to maintain strong connections when moving internationally). Readers who are already well versed in the literature of parenting teens will find little new information here, but those looking for an introduction to the genre will find the book a solid guide.

A valuable primer for helping teens cope with adolescence.
FROM SACRED ASHES
Agee, Lloyd R.
The Wild Rose Press (422 pp.)
978-1-5092-2998-7

In Agee’s debut mystery, one of New York University’s “best and brightest” risks his future to complete his late father’s investigation into a scandalous “family matter.”

Much to the disapproval of his politician mother and the displeasure of the head of the Stern School of Business, top third-year student Benjamin Timmons cannot be dissuaded from declining a plum Wall Street position to go to the Arkansas small town where his uncle was “killed by a prominent, wealthy woman.” His father had investigated the matter, an obsession that possibly cost him his marriage and, Benjamin begins to suspect, his life. His death, over 18 months prior, was ruled a car accident. Readers know better; the novel begins with “the car’s somersault down the steep terrain” at the hands of a killer who is forced out of thrall to drink. He is driven to complete what his father started has little doubt can make good on them. To his credit, Agee’s series launch grabs from the get-go. Timmons is an unconventional protagonist for such sordid goings-on. He is young, not cynical nor a smartass, not gripped by lust for a femme fatale or in thrall to drink. He is driven to complete what his father started and gain closure to a very cold case. Readers know better; the novel begins with “the car’s somersault down the steep terrain” at the hands of a killer who is forced out of retirement by a woman “who knew too much about his history, wouldn’t allow him to avoid her demands, and forced him to agree.” Learning the killer’s and the woman’s identities drive this mystery that will immerse the younger Timmons into a classic noir plot of small-town secrets; a moneved and very well-connected family, among whose members is a former president of the United States; and a “full-blown conspiracy.” Agee’s series launch grabs from the get-go. Timmons is an unconventional protagonist for such sordid goings-on. He is young, not cynical nor a smartass, not gripped by lust for a femme fatale or in thrall to drink. He is driven to complete what his father started and gain closure to a very cold case. This does not sit well with readers and gain closure to a very cold case. This does not sit well with the author lays out his raw emotions in responding to the stories of oppression and injustice that have recently gripped the global media. His verses are often addressed to other Black people, celebrating their tenacity in calling out racism and reminding them to not discount themselves. At the same time, he does not underestimate the powerful, systemic forces they face. Akinyemi also confronts White readers, demanding that they reexamine their own actions: “Don’t counter this with All lives matter” he says to those against the Black Lives Matter movement. “Black Lives Matter isn’t a mantra for your lying lips.” And for those looking to gloss over the issue, he writes: “Don’t adorn me with the shenanigans of diversity...don’t turn my volume down — / this black boy won’t be your poster boy.” The author’s most stirring poems come out of his perspective as a Nigerian, amplifying the global scale of the racism he sees. “They said African Time is killing Africa,” he writes of the stereotype that Africans are lazy. “But Africans have endured more killings than time can count.” The shorter second half of the collection widens the scope of its subject matter but remains both topical and tinged with anguish. Akinyemi writes of the need for better understandings of sexual consent and “a novel virus,” which has “swallowed all in sight.” Despite his fiery anger against injustice, discrimination, and other problems many face, the author’s poems also deftly deliver moments of hope through his faith in God and, most importantly, by returning to the theme that his Black readers must remember their own beauty and strength: “I wish you can see the uniqueness of your black skin, / its glory shining like a dark armour.”

A clever, stylish mystery that continually surprises.

BLACK ≠ INFERIOR
Akinyemi, Tolù A.
The Roaring Lion Newcastle (67 pp.)
$2.99 e-book | Jan. 1, 2021
978-1-913636-06-7

A Nigerian poet reacts to the racism and despair he sees in today’s world.

“Black Voices,” “Black Excellence,” and, of course, “Black Lives Matter” are the titles of some of Akinyemi’s first poems in his collection. Born in Nigeria and currently residing in Britain, the author lays out his raw emotions in responding to the stories of oppression and injustice that have recently gripped the global media. His verses are often addressed to other Black people, celebrating their tenacity in calling out racism and reminding them to not discount themselves. At the same time, he does not underestimate the powerful, systemic forces they face. Akinyemi also confronts White readers, demanding that they reexamine their own actions: “Don’t counter this with All lives matter” he says to those against the Black Lives Matter movement. “Black Lives Matter isn’t a mantra for your lying lips.” And for those looking to gloss over the issue, he writes: “Don’t adorn me with the shenanigans of diversity...don’t turn my volume down — / this black boy won’t be your poster boy.” The author’s most stirring poems come out of his perspective as a Nigerian, amplifying the global scale of the racism he sees. “They said African Time is killing Africa,” he writes of the stereotype that Africans are lazy. “But Africans have endured more killings than time can count.” The shorter second half of the collection widens the scope of its subject matter but remains both topical and tinged with anguish. Akinyemi writes of the need for better understandings of sexual consent and “a novel virus,” which has “swallowed all in sight.” Despite his fiery anger against injustice, discrimination, and other problems many face, the author’s poems also deftly deliver moments of hope through his faith in God and, most importantly, by returning to the theme that his Black readers must remember their own beauty and strength: “I wish you can see the uniqueness of your black skin, / its glory shining like a dark armour.”

A passionate, inspiring collection that will especially speak to Black readers around the world.

THE SAD LADY & THE URCHIN
Belgrave, Laura
Self (557 pp.)
$18.95 paper | $4.99 e-book
Sep. 11, 2020
978-8-62-182230-9

A woman begins to doubt her sanity after a run-in with a stranger in this suspense novel.

Palm Beach County, Florida, 1984. Victoria Winston isn’t a sad lady. She has a great job, a great house, a great daughter, and great friends. She’s enjoying wine and hors d’oeuvres with two of these friends one night when a stranger appears at her door: a young, elfin woman named Jessie who immediately rubs Victoria the wrong way. Jessie’s car has broken down at the bottom of the driveway so Victoria of course allows her to use her phone. After a long wait for a cab, the woman finally leaves. Victoria doesn’t think too much of it. But then things begin to change for Victoria. The “brainteasers” come: little instances of forgetfulness ("You’re going to get hurt in this") made by those who Timmons has little doubt can make good on them. To his credit, Agee’s reveals carry genuine surprise that encourages rereads to discover how clues might have been missed.

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divorce from her husband, Oscar—in part because Victoria has been keeping a secret about him from Christine. Victoria has not seen the last of Jesse, and the myths the protagonist tells herself may no longer be enough to hold back the dark. Belgrave’s prose is smooth and understated, building tension through its accumulation of small details, as in this passage narrated by Victoria: “They started up again. Nothing extraordinary. Nothing particularly bizarre. But what to make of the cracker crumbs on the dining room table? What to think of the fringed throw pillow stiffly wedged between the seat cushion and the back of the recliner? What of the banana peel in the kitchen trash can?” Readers will be quickly sucked into Victoria’s story, unsure of what direction it will take. The novel presents one of those engaging fictional worlds where everything seems slightly off, even if readers (and the protagonists) can’t immediately identify the source of their unease. The author favors delving into her characters’ psychology over flashier plot devices, and the result is a book that manages to be an emotionally compelling page-turner.

A highly readable tale about confronting self-deceptions.

**ACT OF REVENGE**

*Bishop, John*

Mantid Press (256 pp.)


Sep. 10, 2020

978-1-73425-114-2

The murder of an insurance company executive puts a plastic surgeon in jeopardy in this mystery series installment. Houston orthopedic surgeon and author Bishop returns with a third adventure with Texas-based orthopedist Jim Bob “Doc” Brady, who has a penchant for detective work. The action starts while the doctor is attending a medical conference at a Colorado ski resort. While on the slopes, he accidentally sideswipes another skier, causing injury to fellow Houston-area plastic surgeon Lou Edwards. Despite this, they become friends, and Brady discovers that Edwards is drowning in malpractice lawsuits, as was his now-deceased partner; his malpractice insurance has been canceled, as well. Edwards’ wife, Mimi, suffers from severe lupus, allegedly acquired from leaking silicone breast implants, and across Houston, physicians are scrambling to keep their practices afloat amid scores of implant-related lawsuits. Then shady Texas Mutual Life and Casualty Insurance Company magnate Paul Thompson, who’s been canceling policies, winds up dead—shot in the head. Brady immediately begins investigating the crime alongside Houston police and becomes more involved after Edwards becomes a prime suspect. Employing his talent for investigation and persuasiveness as a “silver-tongued devil,” Brady and his wife, Mary Louise, attempt to lift suspicion from his friend, who quickly goes missing. The narrative’s exploration of breast augmentation’s problematic history adds a sense of authenticity, as do realistic forensic details, as in Thompson’s autopsy scene. Bishop sifts through suspects speedily and satisfyingly, and Brady ties up the murder after dodging a gunshot and encountering a last-minute twist. Fans of medical thrillers will enjoy the work, although it tends some familiar territory; and seasoned devotees of the Doc Brady series may find it just a bit repetitive. Still, the author’s patented mixture of homespun humor, mouthwatering culinary descriptions, and charming characterization is on full display here in a novel full of mischief and mayhem.

Another rewarding Doc Brady adventure.

**CALIFORNIA INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS**

*Brown, Ernest*

iUniverse (478 pp.)


Feb. 21, 2020

978-1-5320-9004-2

Looking to build a public works project in California? This soup-to-nuts primer offers an overview of how to proceed.

In this fourth edition of his widely read guide, Brown, a lawyer, engineer, and former legal counsel to California’s John Wayne Airport, updates his in-depth advice to architects, engineers, construction companies, subcontractors, and their attorneys. The author tells them how to navigate the thickets of laws and rules that govern California’s 7,000-odd public entities as they procure train stations, toll roads, water treatment plants, airport additions, solar farms, and other infrastructure elements. The wide-ranging treatise covers every stage of developing and building a project, including conceiving it with public input; planning the architecture and design; calculating costs and obtaining financing; preparing and submitting a general-contracting bid; foreseeing and mitigating common risks, from acts of God and on-site archaeological finds that halt construction to mold and building collapse; and managing and documenting the process and details like overtime pay and workers’ comp insurance. Brown provides some information on the hard-hat side of things, such as tips on green building design; suggestions on using drones, ground-penetrating radar, and interviews with locals to spot hidden pitfalls on a project site; and a glossary of technical terms, from anchor bolts to wood fiber plaster. But his focus is on the law, and the text is dense with analyses of legal principles, statutes, building codes, environmental regulations—some 15 federal and state environmental agencies have jurisdiction over California projects—and court precedents. Much of the book is about lawsuits and how to document them, file them, and, hopefully, settle them without litigation through various mediation mechanisms. Brown presents this material in prose that’s lucid and readable but dry as cement material in prose that’s lucid and readable but dry as cement
The questions Clure poses are incisive, and the counsel he delivers is practical.

**TRUE WEALTH**

**SPLENDOUR OF BUDDHISM IN BURMA**
*A Journey to the Golden Land*
Christel, Pascal
Partridge Publishing (468 pp.)
$156.52 paper | Oct. 18, 2020
978-1-5437-5818-4

An illustrated book offers a wide-ranging overview of Buddhism in Myanmar.

Having been struck by the wonder and visual magnificence of Myanmar (Burma) during his travels there in 2015, Christel was inspired to write this work exploring the intricacies of the land, which, as he points out, has yet to be completely overrun with tourists. Visitors may find the place difficult to understand in any case, the author explains: “This is not a simple issue of democracy versus military junta. The practice of Theravada Buddhism for almost 90 per cent of the population includes some fatalism in order to reach nirvana.” Although Christel’s volume looks at a broad spectrum of the country’s life and art, the main focus here is on the many sects and flavors of Buddhism and the various ways the religion intertwines itself with all levels of society. Buddhism, the author writes, “is all over, sovereign in the behavior of people, their way of life, their kindness, and their beliefs, but also in the art and architecture.” That architecture in all its variety forms the heart of his book and is brought alive in a profusion of prints, ancient illustrations, and hundreds of original images by assorted photographers. Christel explores dozens of the nation’s art forms, from pottery and lacquer work to ancient manuscripts and various architectural styles. He explains everything with an assured combination of enthusiasm and knowledge, whether he’s writing about a tiny, obscure shrine perched on stilts off some little-visited watery or an elaborate temple complex. The energy in tackling all of these details never flags; the author is always excited about the next discovery. “Burma is a treasure and a delight,” he writes. “One’s eyes are never at rest, and one must have the camera always ready for a shot.” Readers, whether they’ve been to Myanmar or not, will feel as if they’ve trekked all over the country with a friendly, knowledgeable guide.

A comprehensive, engrossing, and splendidly illustrated guide to the Buddhist art and architecture of Myanmar.

**TRUE WEALTH**
*The GUIDE Process for Finding and Financing Your Ideal Life*
Clure, Mark
Lioncrest Publishing (104 pp.)
Aug. 28, 2020
978-1-5445-1456-7

This debut manual proposes a process for developing personal and financial wealth.

Financial adviser Clure uses the acronym GUIDE to represent a five-step process for first discovering one’s purpose and then following a financial plan to live a purpose-driven life. Part I of the book concentrates on nonfinancial (or “True”) wealth, which the author writes is “your unique purpose in life and unlocking your potential so you can live a life that you love, have the means to support it, and positively affect the lives of others.” Here, Clure discusses the process, which may seem obvious to some but still presents a challenge: gathering information, unlocking one’s potential, identifying one’s own passions, determining a purpose, and evaluating and evolving. To assist readers, the author offers an exhaustive list of questions divided into such areas as early childhood, adolescence, college, and work life that he says should be answered with the aid of “a trusted helper” who is not emotionally close and can be objective. He urges readers to discover “Themes in Your Life’s Stories” in order to help determine a purpose that can best be defined by using a “purpose statement.” This methodology is not unique; it will look familiar to readers of self-help motivational books, but Clure neatly defines the steps and explains them in uncluttered prose. Part II employs a parallel structure but focuses on finances. In this part, the author makes solid use of specific examples and provides useful spreadsheets to make a case for developing a financial plan. A chapter on investing relates one’s “core beliefs” to various strategies and includes a helpful nine-item “Rules for Successful Investing.” The concluding chapter suggests that, in order to move from one’s “current life” to an “ideal life,” there are three “principles that drive change”—“Social Incentives,” “Progress Monitoring,” and “Immediate Rewards.” Pertinent examples are used to help explain these principles. Clure’s writing is lucid and jargon-free throughout. The questions he poses are incisive, and the counsel he delivers is practical. What the book lacks in depth (a mere 85 pages, exclusive of two appendices), it makes up for in clarity.

A succinct guide that refreshingly redefines the concept of wealth.

information here—unlicensed contractors beware: Without that license, the project owner can refuse to pay you for your work even if it’s perfectly good—that development, design, and construction professionals will want to bone up on.

An indispensable industry guide to the legal niceties of building big in the Golden State.
An M16 operative finds himself suspected of treason in this latest installment of an espionage series. M16 looks to Michael Vaux, a seasoned agency veteran and retired journalist, for a freelance assignment. Operation Mascara puts Vaux in Marseille, France, where a terrorist cell is reputedly plotting to bomb a mosque that’s under construction in Algiers. He is awaiting contact from a mole within the cell. But unknown to Vaux, Department B3, an M16 subgroup, has him under “a dark cloud of suspicion.” According to a source known as Tarboosh, Vaux is responsible for copious treasonous acts over a roughly 20-year period with MI6. B3 monitors him in Marseille with the hope that agents will uncover evidence of Vaux’s supposed alliance with the Syrian government. Complicating matters is B3’s deputy director, Alan Craw, who has a personal vendetta against Vaux and would be all too happy to see him imprisoned as a traitor. But Vaux has allies who are aware of what’s happening and feel obliged to warn him of a potential setup. He may have to decide between facing his accusers and simply disappearing.

Croft wisely retains a straightforward plot as myriad characters and their mysterious or dubious allegiances propel the absorbing story. The recurring spy is appealing even if he’s oblivious to much of what’s going on. This does nevertheless amp up the tension, as readers know people are unquestionably gunning for Vaux. Chiseled prose engenders a consistent narrative momentum while occasionally lingering on quieter moments: “All regrets...dissipated into a benign cloud of well-being and, yes, optimism,” as Syria’s longtime honorary consul in Marseille “gazed through the large picture windows at the indigo blue of the becalmed Mediterranean.” The novel ends smashingly with a sharp, unexpected turn.

A taut, engaging tale about spies and their dangerous webs of duplicity.

THE ALGERIAN HOAX
Croft, Roger
Archway Publishing (206 pp.)
Jul. 16, 2020
978-1-4808-9190-6
978-1-4808-9189-0 paper

A refined, contrarian argument about oil, both well researched and engaging.

THE FUTURE OF BUILDINGS, TRANSPORTATION AND POWER
Duncan, Roger & Webber, Michael E.
Roger Duncan Consulting (290 pp.)
$29.95 | $19.95 paper | $9.99 e-book
Jul. 23, 2020
978-1-73442-902-2
978-1-73442-900-8 paper

An engineer and a municipal administrator analyze the future of sustainable building and transportation.

In this science and policy book, debut author Duncan and Webber look at trends in transportation and construction, with a focus on sustainability and efficiency. They offer predictions as to how the industries will evolve and become more entwined in the near future. The volume opens with an overview of what the authors call “megatrends”—the developments in efficiency, automation, and convergence that have driven and continue to propel the transportation and building sectors. Subsequent sections apply those megatrends to the future of building...
Ford uploads a heady borscht of fairy tale/folklore storytelling, cybershock, mad science, and kinky future sex.

**AUTOZLAV**

and transportation in greater detail, covering recent innovations, those currently in experimental stages, and potentially groundbreaking changes that still exist only in conceptual form. Each chapter opens with a short vignette (“The bedside alarm sounded its usual aggressive tone and Bob stumbled out of bed and made his way to the bathroom”) that becomes more technologically advanced over the course of the section (“Still hungover from the night before, he hoped the toilet wouldn’t tell the refrigerator not to order any more beer”). As the work gets further into the futures of both building and transportation, the book posits that the two sectors will become increasingly entangled, powered by a rising interconnectedness and their relationships to the system of energy production and distribution, which will undergo its own related evolution. Though the authors wryly acknowledge that the events of the past year suggest the limits of their predictive capacity, the volume concludes that advancements in building and transportation will be major drivers of decreased carbon emissions and will have a net positive impact on the world.

Duncan and Webber do a particularly good job of concisely summing up complex developments (“We can postulate that the purpose of technology is conversion efficiency: the efficient conversion of any form of energy from Form A to Form B”). They also deftly ground the book in engineering history, with frequent references to such thinkers as R. Buckminster Fuller and concepts like Moore’s Law, explaining how familiar ideas will shape future developments. Although the volume focuses primarily on a descriptive approach to technological change, the authors do touch on the policy implications of the world they describe, particularly the need to accommodate workers displaced by automation and shifts in energy demand. The book presents an astute, realistic perspective on likely technological innovations—without treating the changes the authors anticipate as complete panaceas—acknowledging the complex web of tradeoffs that makes planning for the future a challenge. For instance, electric cars decrease gasoline consumption but add to demands on a power grid that relies on other fossil fuels. Readers will not walk away from the work with an absolute certainty about what will happen in the building and transportation industries in coming years, but they will feel well informed and prepared to discuss the implications of widespread technological change.

A solid and clear-eyed look at developments in building, transportation, and energy technology.

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At the North Pole, Grandpa Norris Figgyworth launches the first Festival of the Elves. Every year in December, Grandpa Figgyworth leaves notes and trinkets for special elves in his life. Inspired by the festival, which helps spread magic, Grandpa Figgyworth’s grandchildren, Holly and Noel, decide to take the new tradition to a human home. The trip depletes all of their magic. But soon, as they share their kindness with a human family and the family shares the tradition with others, the elves’ magic grows! For 24 days, Holly and Noel leave different types of notes, based on the day of the week, to help the happy family celebrate. The conflict here isn’t about saving Christmas (which is never directly mentioned) but about building enough magic from kindness to get the elves home—a refreshing change from other holiday books. Kemble, who previously illustrated *Enchanted Reindeer Treats* (2012), offers detailed, Mary Engelbreit-like illustrations, with intricate backgrounds and a multi-hued cast of elves. The elves’ Victorian garb contrasts with the modern clothing of the human family. Holly Figgyworth’s voice as narrator is determinedly cheerful, with an accessible vocabulary for strong independent readers. Several notes left by the elves feature rhyming poetry, which scans well.

Families looking for additional holiday traditions may enjoy sharing this—and re-creating the activity—together.

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**AUTOZLAV**

Ford, Garret
Self (283 pp.)
$18.88 paper | $3.23 e-book
Aug. 27, 2020
979-8-67-973910-9

On an anarchic, ruined Earth, biologically mutated young men pilot hulking, armored exoskeletons and fight global and extraterrestrial enemies.

In the devastated future conjured by Ford in this SF/fantasy novel, a “coda,” or apocalypse, happened on Earth on April 1, 2096, a collision of a nuclear world war, a polar shift, mutant uprisings, robot revolts, a mass extinction, a cosmic cataclysm, and the sudden appearance of “exids,” inscrutable aliens. The exids besiege the planet’s wretched survivors in ships, using weapons programmed to simply evaporate rather than get captured. With a Communist Party-style apparatus called Möbius in control, often remotely from the safety of space, humanity’s main defense against this array of enemies is “iron gods,” giant cybernetic battle armor suits (in fact, some degraded “cargo cult” survivor settlements worship the fighting machines as deities). Now, a formerly teeming military base holds a skeleton crew of ace pilots of these cybernetic giants—predominantly hypersexualized teenage girls, specialists in the advanced iron god called the “Matryoshka.” But the base has a quantity of an earlier model, the “autozlav,” whose neural linkages invariably killed those who tried to pilot them. Thus, Matryoshka combat specialists Kumi, Contessa, Iris, and Joy are either sent on military sorties or tasked with capturing young men among the ruins. The male captives—considered
expendable because they can’t give birth to new generations of soldiers—go through sadistic boot-camp rituals and sexual humiliations, destined to become lab rats in mad science experiments that either end in fatal fusion with an autozav or genetic transformation into a fertile woman. Or worse.

From the start, with a salute to the Strugatsky brothers’ Roadside Picnic (1972), readers should note this is a dizzying mashup of Russian-Japanese SF/fantasy tropes, especially those seemingly endless Nippon anime cartoon sagas (Gundam Wing is perhaps the best-known title). Those sagas contrived to place nubile high school students in the cockpits of titanic mecha, human-shaped war droids that were somehow more than machines yet less than artificial intelligence fighters. But Ford turns up the knob—practically breaks it off—to upload a heady borscht of fairy tale/folklore storytelling, cybershock, mad science, and kinky future sex (readers who aren’t acquainted with Japanese hentai genre pornography, be warned). He gives the dazed audience a hellish future whose timeline and geography are at the root of the evil here). Characterizations are broad but are laid out succinctly in chapter subheads throughout (sure enough, energy-greedy humans meddling with the environment are at the root of the evil here). Characterizations are broad but well drawn—though the author has had generations of big-eyed, big-breasted comics girls to mine for inspiration—and, to echo the praise of trash-culture critic Joe Bob Briggs, anybody can die at any time. Best of all, Ford proves to be just as adept at scripting kinetic action scenes as writing perverted bedroom prose (it just takes a while to get there). Is this SF literature for all tastes? No, but if one has ever cast an appraising eye at both a Battle Angel Alita figurine and an H.R. Giger “biomechanical” painting of demonically seductive females morphing with the help of technology, it’s an amazing ride.

Slavic folklore, Soviet SF, and Japanese fantasy kitsch mutate amazingly well into a surreal extravaganza.

PARENTING IN A PANDEMIC
How To Help Your Family Through Covid-19
Fradin, Kelly
Self (181 pp.)
Aug. 20, 2020
978-1-73559-270-1

A pediatrician offers parents a practical framework for caregiving during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Fradin, a doctor and a mother, survived a serious childhood illness and wrote an undergraduate psychology thesis on stress, and these experiences allow her to bring a unique perspective to this Covid-19 child care guide. Early on, she reviews coronavirus basics and recommends strategies for mitigating the impact of the pandemic crisis on kids’ lives. The first section summarizes current science regarding the virus, its symptoms, testing, and risk assessment, offering readers helpful, if somewhat technical, background. The remaining three sections discuss numerous specific scenarios in more detail, such as how to help protect newborns, pregnant women, and elderly people from infection. The prose occasionally dips into medical formality; using terms such as nidus and fomites, but it still provides a great deal of value for the layperson. Indeed, parents may feel less alone after reading Fradin’s calm, matter-of-fact assessment of pandemic-related challenges. For example, the author candidly shares her own personal experiences and feelings (“When I hear of coronavirus parties and the ‘let’s get it over with’ idea, I want to cry”) as well as professional medical recommendations. The section that focuses on children presents best practices for physical and mental health for various age ranges, from infants to teens, while emphasizing the importance of routine health care. “Coronavirus & Parents” strongly encourages caregivers not to neglect their own well-being while preparing for unexpected problems. The book also addresses how to deal with differences of opinion between co-parents. The last section effectively acknowledges the ongoing stress many families are feeling and gives down-to-earth tips for dealing with such challenges. Finally, a useful appendix provides a list of resources and more than 50 references.

A reassuring and practical health guide.

CHRIST AND COVID-19
Meditations for Peace in Times of Turmoil
Gram, Robert L.
Epigraph Publishing (192 pp.)
$14.95 paper | $1.99 e-book | Jul. 6, 2020
978-1-951937-44-7

A pastor compiles his daily writings to his Brooklyn parishioners during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic in this work.

Though retired from full-time ministry, Gram agreed to serve as the interim pastor of St. John’s Reformed Church in Red Hook. The church’s full-time minister had suffered a medical emergency. Soon, what was supposed to be a brief stint in a waterfront neighborhood turned into a complicated endeavor, as the author dealt with the most tumultuous moments in the church’s history. The New York region was one of the first places in America seriously affected by a wave of Covid-19 infections. As church doors closed and home and hospital visits became impossible, the author shifted to daily meditations written for his parishioners. This timely book features minimally edited versions of those daily devotions written during the pandemic. In nearly 50 pieces, ranging from short paragraphs to lengthy essays, Gram provides readers with inspirational notes. Some of them address the holy season’s transition from a somber Lent to the hope promised by Jesus’ resurrection at Easter. There are also Covid-19 specific messages; for example, the author delivers a reminder that loving one’s neighbor includes staying indoors to limit the spread of the virus. Written just prior to George Floyd’s death, which Gram laments in his introduction, his daily musings sometimes discuss racism, particularly anti-Asian violence and rhetoric. A final essay concludes with
Written in Missy’s voice, the prose is sassy and humorous, building up the cat at the expense of her owner.

THE ONLY TRUE BIOGRAPHY OF BEN FRANKLIN BY HIS CAT, MISSY HOOPER

The author’s vivid story of overcoming a genetic blood-clotting disorder. After the diagnosis, he became a prolific mountain climber and rode his bicycle from California to New Hampshire at the age of 68. Each devotion follows a predictable pattern of a relevant Scripture reference, a reflective vignette, and a prayer. Gram’s lucid writing style is that of a seasoned and intellectual yet nurturing pastor. Though the author is a mainline Protestant, he intentionally includes other faith traditions in his remarks, from Roman Catholicism to Buddhism. While the heartfelt book ends abruptly without a satisfying narrative conclusion, it will nevertheless be of great use to Christians struggling to make spiritual sense of the Covid-19 pandemic.

An uplifting, relevant devotional for finding hope in darkness.

THE ONLY TRUE BIOGRAPHY OF BEN FRANKLIN BY HIS CAT, MISSY HOOPER

In this children’s novel, Benjamin Franklin’s cat tells the real stories behind the man’s greatest accomplishments.

No one knows a man like his cat. That’s the premise behind this portrait of America’s most colorful Founding Father, as related by his black-and-white cat, Missy Hooper. “Dr. Franklin and I worked together for a great many decades later (Missy’s breed of cat can live for nearly a century) dates Papa and Eddie’s history, which involves that enigmatic commodity Commodora (pronounced “Kha Yen”), whose simple trip to the carnival finds him embroiled with the Marivicoses. Since Dr. Chain wants children (which he and his wife are unable to have), he essentially becomes a surrogate parent to Eddie, whose father is relentlessly vicious and cruel. As the tale progresses, it elucidates Papa and Eddie’s history, which involves that enigmatic book and strained familial ties. The narrative also turns increasingly violent, and later scenes entail viscera, severed limbs, and accompanying deaths. Throughout the tale, Grass’ prose displays a sharp, confident voice flavored with indelible metaphors. Eddie, experiencing a new power, “felt as though fingers ran along the backs of his eyes, fingers laced with gunpowder—igniting and burning the insides of his orbits, flaring in excruciating bursts.” Despite illuminating moments, the narrative retains a fair amount of ambiguity, allowing for an ending that, while definitive, is open to interpretation.

A bleak family story that’s both unnerving and enthralling.
have been originally written). The jokes largely fit in with the humor one associates with cat owners (for example, felines are adorable divas with an inflated sense of their own importance), but Greenburg manages to blend this perspective effectively with Franklin’s unusual life story. Young readers who come for the cat material will learn a lot about this famous figure, and if what Missy has to say about the Feline Historical Society is true, there may be more cat-authored biographies in the future.

A well-crafted, feline-centric Franklin tale for young readers.

**SALES FIRST!**
Growing Our Company the Old-Fashioned Way: The ColorMatrix Story
Haugh, John & Shaughnessy, Michael
Braun Collection (198 pp.)
$15.99 paper | $8.99 e-book
Sep. 30, 2020
978-1-73559-990-8

Two entrepreneurs chronicle the challenges of their joint enterprise and their winning formula in this memoir.

When Haugh and Shaughnessy first decided to start their own business together, selling liquid colorants, the odds were stacked against them. They were inexperienced and underfinanced, operating out of a garage. Their lackluster emblem of the Rust Belt’s economic doldrums. But they did have the “scrappy desire to be our own bosses” and the benefit of an “enduring, colorful plastic boom.” They chart the gradual rise of their company—originally Rosemar of Ohio and finally ColorMatrix—from a startup with a makeshift laboratory in a garage to a major company that expanded into Europe, Asia, and South America and was bought for nearly a half-billion dollars. They cleared some extraordinary hurdles—at one point, a disgruntled employee falsely accused them of using a chemical to physical training and finding late-in-life romance. They chart the gradual rise of their company—originally Rosemar of Ohio and finally ColorMatrix—from a startup with a makeshift laboratory in a garage to a major company that expanded into Europe, Asia, and South America and was bought for nearly a half-billion dollars. They cleared some extraordinary hurdles—at one point, a disgruntled employee falsely accused them of using a chemical to physical training and finding late-in-life romance.

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Jensen opens her delightfully optimistic book, ironically enough, on a gloomy note: Many elements of 21st-century society genuinely seem geared to taking advantage of older people, even preying on them. These include judges, doctors, attorneys, pharmaceutical companies, and, of course, nursing homes, which “can imprison us against our will and drug us when we object.” But the author assures her readers that these factors need not be the only aspects of the admittedly daunting prospect of growing older. It’s possible, she maintains, for older people to reinvent themselves in their later years. In the course of her book, she examines many features of aging, from retirement and employment opportunities (including starting a business) to physical training and finding late-in-life romance. Jensen proposes dozens of alternatives for her readers about things to do with their time, often working in notes of personal humor that run throughout the book. “Volunteer work, chats with friends, book reading are all good for afternoons,” she writes. “Nights in the summer are for Mets games—I actually got tears in my eyes when MLB started its precarious short 2020 season.” She straightforwardly addresses practical matters like money (noting that more people are afraid of running out of funds than they are of actually dying), dispensing practical advice about maintaining a budget in retirement and supplementing social safety net payments with personal savings. The tone the author uses is a perfectly chosen combination of tough empiricism (there are no cuddly euphemisms here) and uplifting enthusiasm that allows her to warn against things like Social Security thieves and provide upbeat tips on such activities as volunteering and adopting an aging dog. Older readers worried about some facets of the stage of life they’re entering will find Jensen’s manual consistently helpful and invigorating.

A straightforward and utterly engaging one-stop guide to growing older.

**EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT AGING...BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK!**
Jensen, Marlene
JGF Press (286 pp.)
$12.75 paper | $9.75 e-book
Nov. 16, 2020
978-1-7355815-1-4

A wide-ranging manual focuses on the pleasures and pitfalls of aging in the 21st century.

Jensen opens her delightfully optimistic book, ironically enough, on a gloomy note: Many elements of 21st-century society genuinely seem geared to taking advantage of older people, even preying on them. These include judges, doctors, attorneys, pharmaceutical companies, and, of course, nursing homes, which “can imprison us against our will and drug us when we object.” But the author assures her readers that these factors need not be the only aspects of the admittedly daunting prospect of growing older. It’s possible, she maintains, for older people to reinvent themselves in their later years. In the course of her book, she examines many features of aging, from retirement and employment opportunities (including starting a business) to physical training and finding late-in-life romance. Jensen proposes dozens of alternatives for her readers about things to do with their time, often working in notes of personal humor that run throughout the book. “Volunteer work, chats with friends, book reading are all good for afternoons,” she writes. “Nights in the summer are for Mets games—I actually got tears in my eyes when MLB started its precarious short 2020 season.” She straightforwardly addresses practical matters like money (noting that more people are afraid of running out of funds than they are of actually dying), dispensing practical advice about maintaining a budget in retirement and supplementing social safety net payments with personal savings. The tone the author uses is a perfectly chosen combination of tough empiricism (there are no cuddly euphemisms here) and uplifting enthusiasm that allows her to warn against things like Social Security thieves and provide upbeat tips on such activities as volunteering and adopting an aging dog. Older readers worried about some facets of the stage of life they’re entering will find Jensen’s manual consistently helpful and invigorating.

A straightforward and utterly engaging one-stop guide to growing older.
Though the novel includes a great deal of lore, the author handles its exposition gracefully.

**A Story of Witchkind**

*Don Jones*

Self (238 pp.)


978-1-935645-00-5

A teenage boy learns how to wield a powerful magical force in this fantasy novel, the first in Jones' YA series.

Since he was 10, after his parents' deaths, Daniel Scratch has lived alone in the once-grand old family house, looked after by brownie servants with occasional attention from his great-great-grandmother, who “declined to leave the house simply because she’d died.” Now, on Daniel’s 13th birthday, Grandmother summons him to her attic abode, where she informs the boy that he will be tested and take his place among other witchkind. He passes, but it turns out that he’s no ordinary witch. If he were, he’d attend a witchkind school for his education, but Daniel’s special abilities mean he must be apprenticed for personal instruction. The boy travels to a remote rock-bound islet and the Tower of Endings, where he meets Kirmim, an ebony-skinned woman of uncertain age to whom he gives his true name, Daniel Drake Teisejas. (The book seems to assume a White default since only Kirmim’s skin color is described.) His new mentor begins teaching Daniel about the history, philosophy, and practice of witchkind in eight Lessons over five years. He learns, for example, of the six Axes of Power, which correspond to the world’s wild energies, such as the sea, fire, and earth, and the seven Forms each axis possesses (Communication, Travel, Mind, Defense, Attack, Essence, and Calling). The Sixth Axis—Daniel’s—connects with “the power of Endings and Conclusions.” Unlike the other Axes, the Sixth Axis has only one adherent at a time. Between lessons, Daniel practices runes and spells while exploring the tower with its books, maps, and other amenities. By the end of his training, Daniel must use his powers to face a potentially world-destroying crisis that could break down the Veil between humans and witchkind.

Jones has written several SF novels; this is his first work of fiction. This story may bear some resemblance to other novels about young people trained in magic powers. But Jones has created something new, compelling, beautifully written, and original story; readers will be eager for the next installment.

**A Wizard of Earthsea**

*Ursula K. Le Guin*

HarperCollins (196 pp.)


978-0-06293967-5

Daniel’s appeal steadily increases thanks to his intelligence, thoughtfulness, and self-direction, as when he gives himself an exercise routine, growing stronger physically as well as magically. Though the novel includes a great deal of lore, the author handles its exposition gracefully, introducing new information naturally. Runes, a chief component in working magic, are also well integrated; their forms aren’t just arbitrary symbols, as with the communication rune that resembles an ear. Another nice touch is using Lithuanian for the language of witchkind—communication is šnabždësys, for example—which to English speakers sounds and looks appropriately exotic.

An engrossing, well-written, and original story; readers will be eager for the next installment.
An advocate for bilingualism notes the many advantages of learning other languages.

In this nonfiction book, Leveen, the author of Holding Dear (2013), uses his own experience learning a second language in adulthood as a starting point for exploring the value of multilingual living. He also draws on dozens of interviews with linguistic experts and others—many of which were collected for his America the Bilingual podcast—to explore how and why people speak multiple languages and how it shapes their everyday lives. Some interviewees learned a second language for professional advancement; others did so as children to engage with their immigrant parents; and still others are expatriates who've picked up enough words and phrases to get by. One of the book's main objectives is encouraging English-speaking American readers to expand their horizons. It also gets into the phenomenon of English-only advocacy. Leveen's writing is solid, and he does an excellent job of weaving his many discussions into an overarching narrative; the compelling stories keep the pages turning despite the book's considerable length. He's realistic about the challenges of learning a new language but still encouraging ("I've never heard anyone say to me, 'I took four years of high school band' and then complain that they can't sit in with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra"), and he urges readers to understand bilingualism as a continuum, not a binary status. Appendices provide additional references for those interested in bilingualism advocacy, and a substantial collection of endnotes provides additional discussion.

A well-written, attention-grabbing journey into polyglot life.

FADE TO GRAY
Surviving Alzheimer’s
Masinton, Richard
Dorrance Publishing Co. (190 pp.)
$23.00 | $16.00 paper | Sep. 24, 2018
978-1-4809-8690-9 paper
978-1-4809-8691-6 e-book

A husband documents his wife’s battle with Alzheimer’s disease and offers help to other caregivers in this debut memoir.

Masinton’s wife, Dana, was about 56 years old when she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. The author first began to suspect that something was wrong when Dana, a realtor, began to struggle with reconciling her bank account and following recipes. The couple sought multiple medical opinions over a two-year period before Alzheimer’s was formally diagnosed. During this time, Masinton also observed a significant personality change, with Dana becoming “increasingly irascible.” The memoir charts Dana’s deterioration and the escalating pressures placed on the author as the primary caregiver. Masinton candidly discusses the triumphs and failings of the medical system, the difficulties of finding a suitable part-time helper, and the painful moment when admission to a residential care facility became the only option. With the intention of providing Alzheimer’s caregivers a “roadmap” of what to expect, the author also supplies plenty of worthy, practical advice on topics such as long-term health care insurance and Medicaid. This is a thoughtfully conceived memoir. As the straight-talking narrative unfolds, Masinton includes passages in italics that represent “the voice of reason,” which provide knowledge he has accrued through “painful experience.” The author pulls no punches, as when presenting the realities of home health care agencies: “If they destroy their relationship with you, they simply move to the next name on their waiting list, so don’t expect remedy or remorse in this purely seller’s market.” Readers expecting a more nurturing approach may be deterred by Masinton’s bluntness: “It is a fight to get through every hour of every day, with the only certainty being that tomorrow will be worse.” But others will find solace in recognizing their own struggles in his unflinching account. Delivered with a strong, convincing authorial voice, the counsel presented here will stay with readers, particularly regarding the importance of self-preservation: “You’re not going to be able to do anything, much less help anyone—especially the one you care so much about—if you kill yourself in the process.” Bold in its approach, this book could prove an invaluable lifeline for caregivers seeking guidance.

Forthright, edifying writing about Alzheimer’s caregiving.

LOOSED HEARTS
McKerras, Kelly
Self (336 pp.)
Jul. 16, 2019
978-1-08-100395-1

When a young woman is called to small-town Kentucky to care for her ailing father, she meets a man who challenges everything she’s been striving for in the big city in this novel.

Greta Tremaine has worked hard to get where she is. A copywriter at a Chicago ad agency, she spends enormous energy cultivating a life of understated elegance, renting designer shoes and relying on Pinterest to project a certain image. As the book opens, her boss reveals that a creative director has resigned and Greta is being considered for the position. The meeting is interrupted as Greta receives an emergency call from Kentucky. Her dad, Paul King, has suffered a heart attack, and he’s asking her to come home. Despite her disdain for rural Kentucky and her
The beautifully conceived and executed story both describes and enacts the power of the imagination.

MEGA AWESOME NOTEBOOK

MEGA AWESOME NOTEBOOK

MEGA AWESOME NOTEBOOK

A slow-paced tale that offers well-drawn, multilayered characters and standout, sex-positive romance.

MEGA AWESOME NOTEBOOK

A funny, thoughtful, original, and eye-catching tale about a young artist: terrific all around.
Creatures from mythology break the fourth wall (or page) in this surrealistic guide by author/illustrator Molinet.

A young reader, carrying crumb cake, milk, and the same book readers hold, begins to flip through the pages of the book. On the left page of each spread, a mythological creature, introduced by a rhyming couplet, responds to the actions of the reader, who is shown reading the book and variously spilling crumbs and milk and coloring on or accidentally ripping the pages. The book takes mistreatment from the reader—but also from the very active mythological creatures. The dwarves, for example, dig a hole right through their opposing page. Featuring the book itself in the illustrations creates a delightful fun-house effect. The child, pale-skinned and blond, looks to the cultural origins he cites (rather than saying “specific to one culture”), Molinet’s stated purpose is to give them enough to start their own research.

This gorgeously illustrated, inventive book is sure to entrance young readers.

THE ASHEN PROPHECY
Morea, Michael A.
Self (515 pp.)
Aug. 16, 2020
979-8-66-499824-5

This epic fantasy sequel finds retired peacekeepers drawn into an all-consuming magical war.

King Cato Regulus rules from his capital city of Veriasi. But he’s become frail, and his adult children, Prince Bolus and Princess Seles, prepare for his death. In celebrating Regulus’ 40th ruling year, well-wishers gather in Veriasi. These include Magnus “the Phoenix” of Coventa, a valuable but retired general, along with his wife, Kera. During the festivities, Magnus and Kera halt an assassination attempt by killers dressed as Lyrians. Weeks later, someone succeeds in murdering the Lyrian emissary as his ship returns across the ocean. Bolus sends the Black Lions, a mercenary group, to Elysium, the Lyrian capital, to “assure the consular government that we had no involvement in the attack.” Fearing the worst from the mercenaries, Seles asks Magnus and Kera to follow and keep the peace. She also introduces them to terracite, a crystalline mineral that provides “magic without magic.” The coastal Lyrians mine terracite from mountainous land belonging to the Ashen, tribes whose lives revolve around magic and the worship of Velestra, the Great Seamstress. Con-sul Shirnar has outlawed magic, believing that “terracite is the great equalizer.” Once in Elysium, Magnus and Kera learn that the mineral’s swift transformation of Lyrian life brings a steep cost. Morea deftly layers a remarkable variety of narrative tones in this second epic fantasy to star Magnus. Allusions to conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq feature heavily, from the parallels between terracite and oil to the use of the word insurgent. At other times, the story runs like an engaging procedural thriller, as the hunt for whomever is causing chaos pushes Magnus and Kera to embed with the locals and absorb every detail. The author’s villains don’t step from the shadows so much as from their complex humanity. As Janus, leader of the mercenaries and a potential friend of Magnus, tells him, “We aren’t here to fix all their problems.” Morea’s love of fantasy drives the stirring finale in which two characters chosen by a prophecy, Elam and Lilith, ignite the region in a magical war.

A striking and intricate fantasy that’s skillfully bolstered by echoes of real-world conflicts.

IMAGINING IRAQ
Stories
Mujica, Bárbara
Living Springs Publishers (346 pp.)

A collection of short stories explores the experiences of American soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, the mothers fearing for their safety, and veterans struggling at home.

Mujica’s son, Mauro, served in Iraq in the military, an adventure that she experienced as an emotional ordeal. Even after he safely returned, she continued to obsessively imagine what it was like to serve in combat conditions abroad. She was desirous for war stories since her son persistently avoided discussing his own. She eventually got deeply involved in providing help for veterans facing challenges, a labor of love that became a fount of inspiration for these 18 tales. At the thematic heart of this assemblage is the fearful concern of a mother confronted by the inscrutability of her son’s service. In one tale, a mother greedily consumes the anecdotes of a soldier, an antidote to her own son’s reticence: “I didn’t want him to stop talking. My own son had never told me anything at all about the war, and I was ravenous for information.” Mujica also adopts the perspectives of the soldiers as well as delivering a female viewpoint. In one story, former Army medic Sandra Winifred O’Reilly is humiliated by a dogmatically pacifist professor in medical school. The stories evince a gritty verisimilitude, which is unsurprising since the author explains that they are “all based
Along with the memoir’s immensely readable narrative are passages of poetic reflections on Black life in America.

Murphy's story is a compelling coming-of-age tale of a successful educator and loving father who surmounted obstacles and tragedy. But along with the memoir’s immensely readable narrative are passages of poetic reflections on Black life in America. The book’s descriptions of Detroit, where “every day” the author “lost a little more humanity and compassion,” and his debilitating “white folk fatigue” are particularly poignant. Equally potent is his defense of historically Black colleges and universities, whose value transcends academic rankings. They provided Murphy a curriculum centered on “pride about what my people—African people—had done,” teaching him lessons about the African diaspora that were completely ignored in his public school classes. Though the memoir’s message is one of triumph, Murphy does not shy away from his own mistakes, particularly his failed relationships with women. Indeed, humanity in all its complexity—from complicated relationships with parents to embarrassing sexual escapades—seeps from every page. The book’s title, which harkens to an episode in the author’s life as a 6-year-old boy when he was rebuked by his mother for wanting to be an astronaut, reflects the story’s approach of avoiding romanticizing the past while not wallowing in its unfairness. Despite living a life that could have easily broken him, Murphy constantly reminds readers (as he does his students) of their own agency in choosing “to be a victim or a victor.” Some may consider the volume’s warning not to “blame white people” or “the system” counterproductive to ongoing conversations about systemic racism. But this work is a testimony to both the destructiveness of racism and the strength of Murphy’s resiliency.

A powerful, sometimes poetic account of Black life in America.
a YA fantasy series for older readers ready to enter an engaging, more grounded Harry Potter universe that’s nevertheless filled with magical artifacts and adults who aren’t what they seem. Studying is one of Elle’s most valuable skills; the appealing protagonist explores the memoir of Silas Hammond, Barabas’ servant, for clues about the royals’ vanishing. Liorabella is a curious realm, mimicking the 19th century superficially but being modern in terms of democratic governance and teen slang; the phrases *kicking ass* and *holy crap* are slightly jarring. Vibrant connections among other lands, such as Wisterian and Morosa, are skillfully drawn, creating fan thirst for deeper worldbuilding in future volumes. At the end of the deliberately paced tale, the author delivers a big, disturbing revelation. The hero’s potential for adventure expands yet striking mysteries remain.

**While the magic builds slowly, this fantasy series opener possesses a grand allure.**

**ARCHITECT OF DEATH AT AUSCHWITZ**

*A Biography of Rudolf Höss*

Primomo, John W.

McFarland (251 pp.)

$39.95 paper | $17.99 e-book

Jul. 16, 2020

978-1-4766-8146-7

A biography offers an analysis of the role played by the commandant of Auschwitz in the abuse and murder of its Jewish prisoners.

Not much in Rudolf Franz Ferdinand Höss’ youth presaged his infamous career as a Nazi—he grew up in a strict Roman Catholic household led by a father who wished him to become a priest. Nevertheless, he was the commandant of Auschwitz in southwestern Poland—a concentration camp that was central to Hitler’s plan to rid Europe of Jews—and “superintended the destruction of more than a million human beings,” becoming the “greatest mass murderer in history.” Primomo chronicles Höss’ early life and his ambitiously fast ascendancy up the SS ranks. The author focuses on the Nazi’s command of Auschwitz, which he turned, through ruthless efficiency, into a labor and extermination camp. When the Germans were finally defeated, Höss changed his name and fled, but he was eventually hunted down, captured, and testified in Nuremberg. His testimony, which the author meticulously examines, was invaluable to prosecutors. Höss was later tried for murder and executed in Poland. Primomo also assesses the commandant’s memoirs and his insistent claim that he never intentionally mistreated prisoners and even tried to stop whatever abuse occurred. But Höss relates with chilling impassivity the mass exterminations and refers to “the sight of the dead Jews scientifically as if they were nothing more than experimental lab rats.” The author scrupulously undermines Höss’ moral defense of himself and exposes him for the remorseless killer he was. Höss had intimate knowledge of Auschwitz’s barbaric conditions and how the “tormented life imposed on Auschwitz inmates was destroying their souls.” Primomo’s biography is unflinchingly painstaking and, while often disturbing to read, bears an important journalistic witness to some of the darkest atrocities in human history.

**A marvelously rigorous account of a notorious war criminal, edifying and moving.**

**GOING HOME**

Richardson, Nancy

Kelsay Books (87 pp.)

$18.50 paper | Oct. 25, 2020

978-1-952326-22-6

This volume of poetry thoughtfully considers national and personal upheavals.

In her latest collection, Richardson includes pieces from her two chapbooks and a full-length collection, *An Everyday Thing* (2018), alongside new poems, some previously appearing in literary magazines. In the six sections of the work, the author documents her experiences with the ghosts of memory, beginning with her native steel-mill town of Youngstown, Ohio. The Rust Belt is rich ground for poets responding to the ambiguities of a lost industry: In Youngstown, “the sky was a leaden haze, / where the soot was called ‘pay dirt.’” The book’s sequence then follows a trajectory through political engagement on behalf of justice, the shootings at Kent State University, the teaching of children with speech difficulties, marriage and family, illness and death, and, finally, homecoming. Richardson’s graceful lines have a striking clarity and discipline. In “Fathers,” the speaker remembers her own absent father and a friend’s abusive one, writing that she “thought this must / be what fathers do—Leave your life / or push you from your body.” In the wake of such absence, daughters anticipate a return, “his pale hands reaching out for you,” seven words that create a haunting, indelible sense of the uncanny. In several poems, the author attends to the voiceless, especially those caught in systems or conditions not of their own making. “The photos speak for themselves,” says the judge in “Kent State Trial, 1975.” But they don’t: “The photos held their tongues.” Work, so often the subject here, suggests a way to transform the past, as in the concluding poem, “Lost.” Lost in the woods and at a dead end, the speaker backtracks, discovering “the intersection where I / went wrong”—the only way to choose a different path.

Compassionate, well-crafted poems that look unflinchingly at loss, grief, and the tides of history.
A guide offers advice for readers dealing with hip issues.

Schamberger delivers a soup-to-nuts treatise on the importance of maintaining a proper alignment of the spine and pelvis. He describes the warning signs so readers can recognize when they are in misalignment, unless, as is often the case, pain makes it obvious. While the title may sound whimsical, at more than 500 pages, the book is far from a breezy weekend read. Some treatment methods sound unconventional, but that’s what makes them simple to do at home. One technique involves lying down and placing a level (an inexpensive tool that carpenters use) on the stomach. Unlike the author’s previous volumes on hip-spine alignment and related topics, which were geared toward medical practitioners, this work uses layperson’s terms. Schamberger’s goal is to teach the public what the impact of hip misalignment can be on other parts of the body, a function known as referred pain. He provides an all-inclusive recovery regimen tailored to various injuries and ailments. Readers may choose to delve into only the portions of the manual that apply to their specific maladies. While some sections supply a lot of in-depth information, that doesn’t present a problem because the technical terms are sprinkled throughout the pages and clearly illustrated with graphics. The author includes case studies of patients who had misalignment problems and were able to resume playing sports after treatment. One, a distance runner, followed a recovery plan that Schamberger tailored for him, and he successfully ran a marathon several months later. The sports parts of the book should delight any athlete, whether pro or amateur. They cover specific alignment issues unique to a myriad of popular sports, among them golf, soccer, tennis, martial arts, kayaking, skating, downhill skiing, swimming, and weightlifting, and even niche ones, like equestrian. After examining the impact of hip misalignment on sports performance, the guide offers a comprehensive treatment approach. The author dispels common notions that some popular types of stretching will alleviate the problem. He uses easily understandable diagrams, even amusing stick figures, to illuminate his points. All in all, readers with hip issues should find what they need in these pages.

A productive read for those seeking simple solutions to the hip alignment puzzle.
A man recounts his journey from closeted minister to the leader of a gay chorus in this debut memoir.

Seelig was raised in a large Baptist family in Texas, the younger of two sons. His father was a “bigwig with the Baptist administration in downtown Dallas,” and his mother was a professional singer and voice coach. The author excelled musically and academically—it was almost a foregone conclusion that he would enter the ministry. However, music brought him many things, including ostracization from his religious community, learning to live with HIV, and forging a new path for himself in life’s second act.

His memoir chronicles Seelig’s experience of ostracization from his religious community, learning to live with HIV, and forging a new path for himself in life’s second act.

This is a buoyant, bighearted account of music and self-discovery.
were just enough people around to let us practice not ‘getting clocked,’ that is, being identified as cross-dressers, but not enough to intimidate us into hiding ourselves. We were all learning, building our courage day by day.” It’s an engrossing tale, in part because so much of it is set in decades that now feel quite remote. Shepard introduces readers to a secret world that feels simultaneously familiar and alien, idiosyncratic and Middle American. While the work’s autobiographical arc is predictable in broad terms, the narrative’s turns are often surprising, and readers will be happy to follow wherever the author leads. An inspiring account of self-discovery and self-realization.

A nonbinary soul wrestles with the past and connects with nature in this kaleidoscopic meditation. Sipowicz, a visual and performance artist who identified as a woman for 50 years before adopting plural pronouns and embracing genderfluidity, examines their multidimensionality in poetry, family reminiscences, political advocacy, and art. Among the threads in the tapestry are the author’s identification with their pagan forebears in Lithuania; their shame-ridden childhood and tense relationship with their mother; and their communion with Baba Yaga, the legendary crone of Eastern European folklore, as a model for mature femininity. (Sipowicz “arresting features. These images are mainly manipulated photographic self-portraits with blurry, distorted faces and features washed and streaked with bright colors that shade from pastel to almost neon, set against backgrounds of gnarled branches and root systems, pebbly soil, or crinkled granite. The union of throbbing, ethereal color with tangled, earthy textures aptly conveys the theme of spirituality embedded in organic life. Sipowicz’s vibrant art is one of the volume’s most arresting features.

God woman!”) The author’s style can be heavy going at times, but when they speak plainly about pain and loss (“I didn’t go to my mother when she was dying; I was too angry with her, and frightened that she would try to take me with her. Since, ‘I’ve been haunted by the feeling that she had a lonely death”), their writing is emotionally rich and moving. Murky mysticism and woke soapboxing are redeemed by gripping confessional prose and luminous artworks.

When a doctor loses her family in a horrible accident, she struggles to find purpose in her work and meaning in her life in this novel.

Angela Brennan is a highly regarded cardiac surgeon at her hospital in Barrington, Rhode Island. Her colleagues respect her, and the hospital administrators are grooming her to become CEO. Angela is driven and dedicated to her career, but her commitment to the job comes at a cost: Her husband, Tony, and their two children, son Liam and daughter Emily, miss her. “You’re missing so many of the little things that make a family special,” Tony says. Still, the family is happy; and the four of them enjoy an idyllic Memorial Day weekend on Cape Cod. As they’re driving back to Barrington, a truck smashes into the car in “an explosion of light.” Liam is killed almost instantly; Tony also dies in the accident. Emily is rushed to surgery to repair a shattered leg and a broken arm, but an accidental drug overdose kills her. Angela, reeling and feeling alone, leans on her friend Liz Rumsey, a nurse at the hospital. Soon, Angela returns to work, but without the same passion. She considers taking her own life. One day, a cryptic note shows up on her desk: “I’m not sure that the cause of your daughter’s death is what it seems,” it says. As Angela tries to figure out who left the note and for what purpose, her investigation reveals that her beloved hospital might not be the workplace she thought it was. Splaine’s writing is clean, precise, and explicitly detailed. The author’s knowledge of health care workers and the hospital environment is extensive, informing nearly every page. While Splaine’s prose recalls a surgeon’s attention to detail, the accident is depicted too vividly, with gratuitous descriptions of the horrific car crash. Throughout the novel, the villains are clear: the agents of bureaucracy who value saving face over saving lives. Despite such obstacles, Angela searches for what really matters in this stirring story: kindness, care, and hope.

An uplifting tale of facing personal and professional adversity.
THE U.S. NAVY'S
ON-THE-ROOF GANG
War in the Pacific
Zullo, Matt
ZooHaus Books (442 pp.)
978-1-73515-272-1

This second volume of a historical fiction series focuses on the Navy's "On-the-Roof Gang," a highly trained and dedicated band of radio operators who are Americans' eyes and ears in the Pacific theater during World War II.

This group was called the On-the-Roof Gang because the members were trained in a hut on the roof of the Navy's headquarters in Washington, D.C. The band was the brainchild of a driven man named Harry Kidder, who developed the curriculum. The school began in 1929 and kept turning out graduates right up through the early years of the war. The esprit de corps was almost mystical. The novel takes readers from the infamous Pearl Harbor attack to the end of the war, detailing the gang's victories and losses. One of the most gripping parts of the tale is the capture and subsequent imprisonment of the operators on Guam, which became overrun just days after Pearl Harbor. They wind up in Zentsuji prison camp in Japan, suffering incredible hardships but never cracking, largely through the leadership of Radioman First Class Markle Smith, an extraordinary figure whose exploits are heroic. But readers get a tour of the whole war, from Pearl Harbor through Guam and Corregidor and then, with the tide turning, Midway, Coral Sea, Leyte Gulf, and on and on. Zullo calls his absorbing book fiction for the good and simple reason that he creates scenes and dialogue when he has to. But make no mistake, this is authentic history. All the characters are real people (like Smith) who performed bravely. In fact, when the author is not creating scenes—which he does quite well—he is scrupulously listing all the people involved, all the mind-numbing acronyms, all the minutiae of a vast war machine. So there is good stuff here for military buffs as well as those who just like an engrossing story. And there is ancillary information front and back (for all that initiales) as well as copious illustrations throughout: maps and period photographs. This sequel to Zullo's Prelude To War (2020) shows members of the Greatest Generation at their greatest in a truly stirring account.

A well-written and engaging tale about a remarkable and courageous group of radio operators.
INDIE
Books of the Month

**MAGNOLIA CANOPY OTHERWORLD**
Erin Carlyle
A set of works suffused with wonder, terror, and honesty.

**SAFE AS LIGHTNING**
Scudder H. Parker
Illus. by Adelaide Tyrol
Tenderly observant and rewarding poetry.

**A LITTLE BIT OF DINOSAUR!**
Elleen Hutcheson & Darcy Pattison
Illus. by John Joven
A science-centric winner, especially for young dinosaur lovers.

**WOMEN IN THE WAITING ROOM**
Kirun Kapur
Poems of craft, power, and compassion: a fine collection.

**IMPOSTOR ALERT!**
Uduak Akpabio Umoren
A riveting, dramatic story that effectively repudiates the notion of lawbreakers as immoral or inhuman.

**THE KING’S DRAPES**
Jocelyn Tambascio
Illus. by Jen Born
Though the story is new, the moral and tone, accompanied by artful illustrations, make it feel like a classic.
“A SOMBER, DISTURBING MYSTERY FUSED WITH A SCATHING LOOK AT THE FASHION INDUSTRY... MANGIN WRITES IN A CONFIDENT, RAZOR-EDGED STYLE.” - KIRKUS REVIEWS

“SPLASHY AND OUTRÉ, DISTORTING STEREOTYPES OF GLITTERATI AND THEIR CAREFULLY GUARDED WORLD.” - FOREWORD REVIEWS

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