THE BEST BOOKS OF 2023

SPECIAL ISSUE
The Best 100 Indie Books of the Year + Our Full December 15 Issue
IN MEMORIAM

At year’s end, as we celebrate the bounty of good books that came our way in 2022, we also pause to remember the authors, illustrators, and other literary figures we lost over the course of the year.

One loss deeply felt in the world of children’s literature was that of Ashley Bryan. Bryan was 98 when he died in February, leaving behind a rich legacy of more than 50 books that he wrote or illustrated or both; he won numerous honors, including eight Coretta Scott King Illustrator Awards and a Laura Ingalls Wilder Award (now called the Children’s Literature Legacy Award). He was still practicing the craft well into his 90s, publishing his last book, *Infinite Hope*, in 2019. He’ll be deeply missed.

In the world of adult literature, few deaths stung like that of Hilary Mantel, who suffered a stroke in September; she was just 70. A two-time winner of the Booker Prize (for *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*), she was widely perceived as one of the greatest living English writers, and those novels (along with *The Mirror & the Light*, the final installment of her trilogy about Thomas Cromwell and the court of Henry VIII) brought a renewed prestige to historical fiction. Mantel had just appeared on the cover of our July 1 issue and spoke with us about a new story collection, *Learning To Talk*. She surely had many more exceptional books to write.

Here are just a few of the other figures that we lost in 2022:

- Steve Jenkins, 69. Jenkins wrote and/or illustrated dozens of books introducing young readers to the worlds of nature and science, including *What Do You Do When Something Wants To Eat You?* and *Flying Frogs and Walking Fish*.
- Patricia MacLachlan, 84. The author of *Sarah Plain and Tall*—which won a Newbery Medal and remains a staple of children’s literature—wrote more than 60 books for young readers.
- Albert Woodfox, 75. Woodfox’s memoir, *Solitary*, written with Leslie George, recounted four decades in solitary confinement at the Louisiana State Penitentiary; the book was a finalist for the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.
- David McCullough, 89. One of America’s best-known—and most readable—historians, McCullough twice won the Pulitzer and the National Book Award. His biographies of Theodore Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, and John Adams are classics.
- Barbara Ehrenreich, 81. A journalist and champion of social justice, Ehrenreich was best known for *Nickel and Dimed*, a profoundly revealing and influential account of the working poor in 1990s America.
- Javier Marias, 70. The Spanish writer whose stylistic novels were translated and read around the world was the author of *A Heart So White, Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me*, and *The Infatuations*.

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

In Orlando Ortega-Medina’s queer thriller, a happily partnered San Francisco lawyer, working hard to stay sober, represents a sexy client who is pure trouble and temptation. Read the starred review on p. 188.
Revisiting 11 of the oddest book stories to generate headlines this year

BY MICHAEL SCHAUB

After two of the weirdest years in recent history, many of us were hoping that 2022 would offer a reprieve—a return to normalcy, or something like it. No such luck. The world continues to be an increasingly bizarre place, and that's definitely been reflected in the world of literature, which remains exceedingly extra. From Margaret Atwood with a flamethrower to Bob Dylan's love for doughnuts, here are just 11 of the oddest book stories to make the news this year.

Jan. 7: There are three things Joyce Carol Oates loves: boxing, publishing a new book every two weeks, and setting fire to Twitter. This year, it didn't take her long to cause one of her trademark social media firestorms, weighing in on the late Norman Mailer after Penguin Random House decided not to move forward with an anthology of the author’s political writings. Retweeting a user who called Mailer a “bad husband,” Oates wrote, “‘bad husband’ to whom? like many oft-married men Norman Mailer wound up finally with a much younger, adoring, [and] altogether quite wonderful wife (Norris Church) whom everyone liked. wom-anizers all eventually wear out, it just takes time [and] if you’re lucky, you are the last wife.” Other Twitter users pointed out that Mailer stabbed his second wife, the artist Adele Morales, in 1960, which—not to be judgmental—would seem to qualify him for “bad husband” status.

Jan. 17: Bucket hats? Those are so 2021. Jeni’s Splendid Ice Creams came up with a hot (well, cold) new way to promote Dolly Parton’s novel, Run, Rose, Run, co-written with James Patterson: a pint of strawberry pretzel pie ice cream, which the company called “a throwback to the triple decker pie from the potlucks of our youths.” Unfortunately, Dolly’s frozen dessert was a limited release, but we can hope it’s not the last literary collaboration Jeni’s takes on. The world needs nothing more than the launch of Stephen King’s Pet Sem-a-berry.

April 21: It’s a reliable parenting trick: When you need some time to yourself, just sit the kids in front of a Darren Aronofsky movie, like Requiem for a Dream or mother! (Note: This is a joke. Do not do this. You will be arrested.) Film buffs were shocked when Aronofsky, known for his extremely unsettling and often violent movies, announced he would publish a book...for middle-grade readers. Aronofsky’s Monster Club was published in September, and a critic for Kirkus praised it as “action packed and wildly creative.” Just like Aronofsky’s upcoming gritty adaptation of PAW Patrol, in which Chase, Marshall, and the gang bring down a ring of heroin dealers. But at what cost to their sanity?

June 8: Back in the day, if you wanted to see Margaret Atwood wielding a flamethrower, you had to get an invitation to one of the author’s Christmas parties. (They do holidays a bit differently up in Canada.) This year, the author made an appearance on YouTube to promote a special, unburnable edition of The Handmaid’s Tale, which has been the target of frequent book bans since it was published in 1985. The one-of-a-kind version of Atwood’s novel featured heat shield foil pages, an aluminum foil dust jacket, nickel wire thread, and high-temperature adhesive—and Atwood was indeed unable to set it alight even with heavy-duty weaponry. The video must have impressed somebody: The book sold at auction for $130,000, with the proceeds benefiting literary nonprofit PEN America.

July 27: Everybody loves a cruise, except the seasick, claustrophobic, and people afraid of contracting a disease while waiting in a buffet line for suspicious-looking chicken piccata. So it makes sense—OK, fine, no it doesn’t—that Gillian Flynn invited fans of her 2012 novel Gone Girl on a Danube Flynn invited fans of her 2012 novel Gone Girl on a Danube River cruise to celebrate the book’s 10th anniversary. Slate writer Imogen West-Knights actually embarked upon the cruise, which featured, among other things, a retired Austrian detective showing the passengers a slideshow with pictures of decomposing corpses. Honestly, though? Still probably more fun than a cruise inspired by, say, A Little Life.

Aug. 9: Getting a book deal based on a tweet is the stuff of dreams for aspiring authors. (Including this reporter, who has still not managed to find a publisher for Tried the New Olive Garden on Williams Drive Last Night. Was Good!) Actor Vincent D’Onofrio had better luck, announcing on Twitter (of course) that he’s written a children’s book inspired by one of his tweets from 2019 that read, “Pigs can’t look up. But I could pick a pig...for middle-grade readers. Aronofsky’s Monster Club was published in September, and a critic for Kirkus praised it as “action packed and wildly creative.” Just like Aronofsky’s upcoming gritty adaptation of PAW Patrol, in which Chase, Marshall, and the gang bring down a ring of heroin dealers. But at what cost to their sanity?
up one night and raise it into the sky and tilt this pig ever so gentle. I can make sure this pigs eyes line up with the stars. Imagine seeing the stars for the first time. Look for D’Onofrio’s Pig Can’t Look Up, illustrated by Shelly Cunningham, next May in bookstores or wherever pork products aren’t sold.

Oct. 3: Many writers don’t share their works in progress with anyone, even their spouses. Suspense author Kaira Rouda, though, didn’t have any problem discussing her latest novel, The Widow, with husband Harley Rouda. Harley didn’t have a problem with the book, even though (a) it’s about a woman who kills her congressman husband, and (b) Harley happens to be a former congressman. “Kaira is vibrant, outgoing, and the last person you would ever think to figure out ways to kill people,” Harley told a newspaper. “I haven’t bought any life insurance.” (We’re guessing he probably did invest in a whole bunch of flowers, though, just to be on the safe side.)

Oct. 14: When it comes to real-life sex symbols whose faces adorn popcorn boxes, there’s probably one name you think of first: that stone-cold hottie Orville Redenbacher. But Paul Newman of Newman’s Own wasn’t too bad looking either, and according to his posthumous autobiography, The Extraordinary Life of An Ordinary Man, Cool Hand Luke was a regular towering inferno in the bedroom. “We left a trail of lust all over the place,” the actor reminisced about wife Joanne Woodward. “Hotels and public parks and Hertz Rent-A-Cars.” Newman also revealed that Woodward had redesigned a room in their house just for sexual escapades, which she called the “Fuck Hut.” So hey, now you have something to think about next time you’re staring at that bottle of salad dressing. You’re welcome!

Oct. 27: Could Matthew Perry be any more tone-deaf? The Friends star raised eyebrows after it was revealed that he slammed Keanu Reeves in his new memoir, Friends, Lovers, and the Big Terrible Thing. Perry wrote in the book, “Why is it that the original thinkers like River Phoenix and Heath Ledger die, but Keanu Reeves still walks among us?” (Making matters worse: Reeves was close friends with the late Phoenix.) Perry issued a comically unconvincing apology, saying, “I’m actually a big fan of Keanu. I just chose a random name, my mistake. I apologize. I should have used my own name instead.” At any rate, if there’s ever a Friends reboot, be on the lookout for an episode called “The One With the Inexplicable Miscalculation.”

Nov. 1: So here’s another side of Bob Dylan: The folk music legend and winner of the Nobel Prize in literature apparently has a soft spot for some of the sweeter things in life. A Twitter user posted a picture of the dedication page of Dylan’s latest book, The Philosophy of Modern Song, which contains a shoutout to “all the crew at Dunkin’ Donuts.” (Dylan, old soul that he is, doesn’t seem to realize the chain is just called “Dunkin’” now.) Dylan’s dedication raises some fascinating questions: Wouldn’t it be hilarious to watch him just devour a whole box of Munchkins? And will Starbucks try to get him to switch allegiances by rolling out Blonde on Blonde Roast Coffee, served with Like a Rolling Scone?

Nov. 4: Traveling can be stressful, so it’s important to practice self-care whenever you’re on the road or in a plane. Just ask King Charles III, who apparently insists on a special companion whenever he’s away from home: his childhood teddy bear. That’s according to author Christopher Andersen, who makes the claim in his new biography of Charles, The King. There’s no word on what the stuffed animal’s name might be, though we’re guessing it’s “Nigel P. Wilberforce” or “Sir Percival Shufflebottom” or something like that. Apparently, Charles also travels with his own chef, ice cube trays, and toilet seat as well as a trumpeter who is expected to play “Rule, Britannia!” every time he enters a room. (OK, we made that last part up. But you believed it for a second, right?)

Michael Schaub, a journalist and regular contributor to NPR, lives near Austin, Texas.
We look back at some of the low points in a year full of unprecedented censorship attempts

BY MICHAEL SCHAUB

This year has seen a wave of book bans and challenges that shows no signs of subsiding. In the first six months of 2022, the country experienced hundreds of attempts to remove books—many featuring LGBTQ+ characters or themes—from libraries and schools. (See the June 15 Pride Issue for a timeline.) The summer and fall saw this trend continue, with right-wing activists raising challenges to a wide variety of books. Here are some notable incidents from the second half of 2022:

Aug. 2: The largest school district in Utah pulled 52 books from library shelves after a new law that prohibited “sensitive materials” in schools, HB 374, went into effect in May. The literary nonprofit PEN America noted that 42% of the removed books “feature LGBTQ+ characters and/or themes.” The list of removed books included several that have been frequently challenged in schools and libraries, including Judy Blume’s Forever…, Juno Dawson’s This Book Is Gay, Jonathan Evison’s Lawn Boy, and David Levithan’s Two Boys Kissing. The school board later backed away from the decision, saying the books would be restricted but not removed. In October, the Salt Lake Tribune reported that since the law was enacted, parents in Utah have filed at least 280—though likely many more—complaints about books.

Aug. 5: Voters in Jamestown Township, Michigan, declined to renew millage—property tax revenue—for the town’s Patmos Library after staff refused to remove three LGBTQ+ books from its shelves: Gender Queer by Maia Kobabe, Kiss Number 8 by Colleen AF Venable (illustrated by Ellen T. Crenshaw), and Spinning by Tillie Walden. After the vote, romance author Nora Roberts donated $50,000 to the library in a bid to keep its doors open, saying she’d give more if needed. In November, another millage vote was held and failed again, threatening the library’s continued existence.

Aug. 9: Josh Kimbrell, a Republican state senator in South Carolina, demanded that a Spartanburg County public library ban LGBTQ+ themed books, including Michael Joosten and Wednesday Holmes’ Pride 1 2 3, Joana Estrela and Jay Hulme’s My Own Way: Celebrating Gender Freedom for Kids, and Cassandrea Jules Corrigan and Jem Milton’s The Pronoun Book: She, He, They, and Me!. Book Riot reports that Kimbrell denied charges of censorship, saying, “I’m not trying to ban any books. I’m trying to stop an indoctrination campaign against kids. Any person in this county that has children knows full well what I’m talking about.”

Aug. 10: A school board in the western Maine town of Dixfield banned Maia Kobabe’s Gender Queer from its high school library, the Rumford Falls Times reported, with a state senator saying the graphic memoir is an example of “classrooms…being used not to educate but to indoctrinate our children with radical ideologies, racially divisive theories and distorted views on human sexuality.” The Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance later announced it was raising money to give away copies of the book to students in the town.

Aug. 19: A Texas school district removed more than 40 books from its libraries, the Texas Tribune reported, including the Bible and a graphic adaptation of Anne Frank’s diary. Other books pulled from shelves included Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, Jazz Jennings’ I Am Jazz, Maia Kobabe’s Gender Queer, Rupi Kaur’s milk and honey, and George M. Johnson’s All Boys Aren’t Blue. Less than two weeks later, the Bible and Anne Frank’s diary were reinstated, but some of the books, Keller’s school board president said, would never return. The following month, the city of Keller ordered its public library to delete a social media post promoting Banned Books Week.

Aug. 23: A high school English teacher in Norman, Oklahoma, was placed on leave after posting in her classroom signs reading “books the state doesn’t want you to
read," accompanied by a QR code that pointed students to the website for Books Unbanned, a Brooklyn Public Library anti-censorship resource. The teacher, Summer Boismier, later resigned.

**Aug. 23:** Conservative activists in Bonners Ferry, Idaho, made headlines when they asked the town library to ban more than 400 books—none of which the library actually had on its shelves, NBC News reported. The list of books that the activists wanted preemptively banned was from a conservative group called Growing Freedom for Idaho and contained numerous titles from LGBTQ+ authors and authors of color, including Alex Gino, Jason Reynolds, Jazz Jennings, Tim Federle, and Malinda Lo. One library trustee noted, “What they are looking for us to do is say we will never get a book that offends them personally, which is pretty hard to define, and not really the point of the library.”

**Aug. 23:** A woman in Katy, Texas, filed a criminal complaint over the book *Flamer*, Mike Curato’s graphic novel about a queer boy coming to terms with his identity, claiming that a high school library that stocked it was violating a Texas law that prohibits “harmful material” in the state’s schools. The criminal complaint didn’t go anywhere, but the woman said that she’d be reporting the book to the Texas Rangers.

**Sept. 13:** Author John Green took to TikTok to object to a school board candidate in his hometown of Orlando who wanted to ban Green’s novel *Looking for Alaska*, calling it “filth.” “You know what’s weird? When one of the candidates for school board in the school district where you were once a student wants to ban your first novel from all schools and libraries in that district,” Green said in the video. In November, Alicia Farrant, the candidate in question, won election to the school board with 53% of the vote.

**Sept. 16:** The school board in Dearborn, Michigan, removed six books from circulation, including George M. Johnson’s *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*, Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor & Park*, and Casey McQuiston’s *Red, White & Royal Blue*. The decision led to a raucous school board meeting attended by a large group of protesters who supported removing the books, some carrying signs reading “Keep your dirty books in the closet” and “Homosexuality big sin.”

**Sept. 19:** The American Library Association and PEN America both released reports finding that book bans and challenges have spiked dramatically in 2022. ALA President Lessa Kanani’opua Pelayo-Lozada said that the book bans reflect “coordinated, national efforts to silence marginalized or historically underrepresented voices and deprive all of us—young people, in particular—of the chance to explore a world beyond the confines of personal experience.”

**Oct. 25:** School administrators in Beaufort County, South Carolina, pulled 97 books from shelves, the *Island Packet* reported, after complaints from parents. The removed books included Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Mike Curato’s *Flamer*, Becky Albertalli’s *Leah on the Offbeat*, and John Green’s *Looking for Alaska*. In an editorial in the newspaper *The State*, David Travis Bland slammed the school district for caving in to demands from parents, writing, “Since the 97 titles were pulled for review, the district is still receiving threats targeted at employees....Of course the district is still receiving threats. That’s what bullies do when you don’t stand up to them. They keep bullying. Stand up for yourself Beaufort County School District. Stand up for your faculty and staff. Stand up for your students. Put the books back out.”
A YEAR OF THE
FULLY BOOKED PODCAST

The host of Kirkus’ podcast reflects on a year of conversations with authors—now on video as well as audio

BY MEGAN LABRISE

Every book is a conversation between an author and a reader. The ability to extend that conversation beyond the page, to talk in real time with the person who poured their best effort into communicating something—beautiful, true, significant—is the very best part of my job at Kirkus. As Fully Booked prepares to celebrate its 300th episode on Dec. 27, I look back on another incredible year in podcasting with deep gratitude: to the authors who told the stories behind their stories; to my colleagues, Kirkus’ editors, who shared their expertise; and to recording engineer extraordinaire Cabel Adkins, who always ensures we sound our best.

While we always hope to bring you the best in author interviews and reading recommendations, 2022 brought one big change in the way we’re able to do it: As of May, in addition to listening via iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you regularly get your podcasts, you can find the video version of Fully Booked on Kirkus’ YouTube channel. It’s been great fun to offer a glimpse from my side of the microphone of what goes into making these episodes each week.

Whether you join us by sight or by sound, thanks for listening to Fully Booked—and cheers to another year of unforgettable conversations! The following episodes are a few of my favorites from 2022:

Jessamine Chan (Episode 253): In February, Chan, author of The School for Good Mothers (Simon & Schuster, Feb. 1)—and a former Publishers Weekly reviews editor—dished on her deliciously dark debut, a social satire centering on a Philadelphia mother who undergoes a yearlong incarceration at an experimental reeducation facility in an attempt to win back her parental rights. She described what it was like to be on the receiving end of reviewers’ pens and her felicitous promotional tour.

Anton Hur (Episode 257): Stellar South Korea–based translator Anton Hur joined us ahead of the publication of his English translation of Violets, by Man Asian Literary Prize–winning novelist Kyung-sook Shin (Feminist Press, April 12), for our first International Episode of the podcast. I loved listening to his insights on Shin’s genius, the Korean literature translation community, and why it’s important to see translators’ names on covers.

Mecca Jamilah Sullivan (Episode 276): I had blast talking with Sullivan about Big Girl (Liveright, July 12), one of my favorite debut novels of the summer—especially about her unforgettable protagonist, Malaya Clondon, a young Black girl who dreams big and comes into her own in 1990s Harlem. We covered everything from writing about place to limited third-person narration to Sullivan’s joyful experience working with high schoolers as part of Lambda Literary’s LGBTQ Writers in Schools program.

Chrysta Bilton (Episode 277): Bilton’s memoir of an unconventional California childhood truly blew me away: Normal Family: On Truth, Love, and How I Met My 35 Siblings (Little, Brown, July 12) begins with a scene at Bilton’s home, where she’s invited a large group of her half siblings, whose existence she discovered after her father came out in the New York Times as perhaps the most prolific sperm donor in American history. Where she takes the narrative from there is a great surprise, and I was eager to hear how she decided to structure the story.

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Oscar Hokeah (Episode 278): The following week, Hokeah shared some of the ideas behind the novel *Calling for a Blanket Dance* (Algonquin, July 26), a masterwork of peripheral narration in which the life story of a young Oklahoma man named Ever Geimausaddle is told by 11 members of his Kiowa, Cherokee, and Mexican American family. I loved learning about Hokeah’s polyvocal approach to the novel and discussing how to broaden access to literary theory.

Beth Macy (Episode 281): For this year’s Fall Preview episode, I had the great joy of interviewing Macy, one of my journalism heroes, for the first time on the podcast (we spoke previously about *Truevine* and *Dopesick* for the magazine). Picking up where *Dopesick* left off, *Raising Lazarus: Hope, Justice, and the Future of America’s Overdose Crisis* (Little, Brown, Aug. 16) evolves Macy’s top-notch journalism on the opioid crisis, highlighting actions everyone can take to aid the people in our communities with substance use disorders and help decrease deaths of despair.

Carmen Rita Wong (Episode 282): Sometimes a kind of magic happens right off the bat when you hit record, and this was one of those days: I loved discussing Wong’s big-hearted and sharp memoir—a true New York combination—called *Why Didn’t You Tell Me?: A Memoir* (Crown, July 12). Wong, who was raised Dominican Chinese in New York City and New Hampshire, contends with family secrets and identity issues in a fresh and fearless way, and it was a pleasure to discuss the importance of telling your own truth and freedom of expression with her.

Sidik Fofana (Episode 283): For our last podcast of August, I had the distinct privilege of discussing *Stories From the Tenants Downstairs* (Scribner, Aug. 16) with debut author Fofana. His is a story collection comprised of eight surprising stories set in Banneker Terrace, a fictional high-rise on the corner of 129th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard in Central Harlem. We talked about everything from the rap that begins the book to how damn hard it is to write a good short story (very), with a satisfying segue into several of the distinctive voices that narrate the book.

Ling Ma (Episode 285): Part of the fun of talking to Kirkus Prize winner Ma in September—before we got to the fun of discussing her excellent story collection, *Bliss Montage* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Sept. 13)—was hearing about her experience receiving the award for *Severance* at our in-person ceremony in Austin, Texas, in 2018. A discussion of the surrealism of that day segued to discussing the surrealism of the stories, some of which were formed from dreams.

Namwali Serpell (Episode 288): In October, Serpell returned to the podcast to discuss *The Furores* (Hogarth, Sept. 27), in which a character named Cassandra relives and revises the day her brother disappeared while swimming off the shore of Delaware. The book’s opening lines, “I don’t want to tell you what happened. I want to tell you how it felt,” are unforgettable; so, too, is Serpell’s brilliant introduction to the book at our conversation’s start.

*Editor at large Megan Labrise hosts the Fully Booked podcast.*
Fiction

The Candy House by Jennifer Egan, (Simon and Schuster Audio, 11 hours, 11 minutes): Building on the Pulitzer-winning *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, in episodes stretching from the 1960s to the 2030s, Egan’s novel revolves around an invention that allows an individual’s memories to be uploaded and shared publicly. Told in a sparkling array of voices, including one chapter that’s all texts and emails and another that delivers instructions to an intelligence agent from a robotic device implanted in her brain, this award-winning audio includes 20 narrators, among them actors Michael Boatman and Lucy Liu.—Marion Winik

Demon Copperhead by Barbara Kingsolver (HarperAudio, 21 hours, 2 minutes): Kingsolver’s superstar collaboration with Charles Dickens reimagines *David Copperfield* in opioid-poisoned Appalachia. Young Demon’s life had not been easy up until his mother’s overdose on his 11th birthday, but as an orphan, his fortunes take a nose dive. Only his ferocious resilience can save him as he faces hunger, cruelty, addiction, and bigotry in the narrow world of Lee County, Virginia, his home sweet home. Narrator Charlie Thurston’s gentle Southern accent and boyish brio perfectly evoke the title character of this coming-of-age saga.—M.W.

The Swimmers by Julie Otsuka (Random House Audio, 4 hours, 6 minutes): Otsuka uses a public pool as a universal stage to reflect the stages of loss. Narrator Traci Kato-Kiriyama captures each nuance of the changing narrative voice with precision, starting with a satirical tone to describe the swimmers visiting an underground community pool to escape aboveground problems. When the pool closes, Kato-Kiriyama shifts to a cold, officious tone, and in the emotional final segment, her subtle vocal fluctuations resonate with rueful observation, grief, and hard-won compassion. It’s an outstanding performance.—Connie Ogle

Carrie Soto Is Back by Taylor Jenkins Reid (Penguin Random House Audio, 10 hours, 29 minutes): When Carrie Soto retired from tennis, she held the record for Grand Slam singles titles. Fifteen years later, a British player is about to surpass her. So, like the title says: She’s back. Stacy Gonzalez’s emotional performance as Carrie, including Spanish-sprinkled conversations with her Argentine father/coach, is excellent. The large supporting cast includes former tennis pros Patrick McEnroe and Mary Carillo, and all the news shows and pundit debates are cleverly produced with theme music.—M.W.

Thank You for Listening by Julia Whelan (HarperAudio, 11 hours, 16 minutes): Whelan is one of the best audiobook narrators around, and it feels like she wrote her second novel with her own vocal talents in mind. A romance between two audiobook narrators who fall in love with each other’s words long before they meet in person, it features male and female voices, various sexy accents, steamy love scenes, and plenty of fun with romance-novel tropes. A great introduction to audiobooks for people who’ve never tried them before.—Laurie Muchnick

Nonfiction

In Love: A Memoir of Love and Loss by Amy Bloom (Random House Audio, 4 hours, 49 minutes): “In love” describes the way Bloom feels about life with her husband, Brian, but it also describes the way she accompanied him to Switzerland for an assisted suicide when he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s at age 65. Listening to Bloom read her memoir is almost unbearably intimate—you’re with her during every step of this painful yet profound journey. An unforgettable listening experience.—L.M.

The Palace Papers: Inside the House of Windsor—the Truth and the Turmoil by Tina Brown (Random House Audio, 17 hours, 56 minutes): As she reads her own book, Brown is the gossipy friend you wish you had, the one who likes to say, “If you have nothing nice to say…come sit by me!” Let her whisper in your ear everything she knows about the Queen Mother’s love of excess, the Middleton family’s normality, and the culture clash between Meghan Markle’s Hollywood celebrity and the royal family’s very long game. The way she occasionally inserts herself into the story—having lunch with Princess Diana, assigning articles about Prince Andrew’s entanglement with Jeffrey Epstein—only makes it more fun.—L.M.

Finding Me by Viola Davis (HarperAudio, 9 hours, 15 minutes): This memoir by the Oscar winner is unforgettable thanks to the author’s fiery narration. She summons a simmering rage, often
speaking in clipped tones as though with barely controlled fury as she describes a childhood of grinding poverty, bullying and abuse, and the racism and colorism that blocked her path to success for so long. But like any great performer, Davis can access other emotions, too: pride in her accomplishments, love for her family, deep gratitude for those who encouraged her.—C.O.

Ten Steps to Nanette: A Memoir Situation by Hannah Gadsby (Random House Audio, 13 hours, 47 minutes): Gadsby’s Netflix show Nanette was an unexpected tragicomic gut punch, and the comedian’s memoir explains how a “financially insecure, autistic Australian genderqueer vagina-wielding situation” reshaped personal and universal trauma into a stunning work of art. She excels at pulling stories together to form a cohesive and funny whole, and her pitch-perfect comic delivery and sly, quirky vocals serve her well as a narrator. The performance shows great humor—and real heart.—C.O.

This Body I Wore by Diana Groetsch (Tantor Media, 10 hours, 50 minutes): Groetsch’s memoir describes the decades she spent coming to terms with being transgender before the language had even evolved to clearly describe it, an experience that was literally unspeakable and unbearably isolating. After a difficult childhood, she became a teacher, a poet, a Buddhist, a club-hopping cross-dresser, and, ultimately, the woman she was meant to be. The intense candor, anger, and wit of this memoir are best appreciated by hearing Groetsch read it in the voice she went through so much to claim.—M.W.

YOUNG READERS
Caprice by Coe Booth (OrangeSky Audio, 7 hours, 17 minutes): Addressing family sexual abuse in a sensitive, developmentally appropriate way for middle-grade readers is no small feat. And narrator Bahni Turpin is a legend in audiobook circles for good reason: Her warm, reassuring voice captures the essence of this story that gently presents important but harrowing truths and will linger in listeners’ hearts and minds. Turpin successfully expresses protagonist Caprice’s seesawing feelings—from her excitement over her new school and fondness for her old friends and beloved community to trepidation, dawning fear, and resolve as she begins to understand the meaning of her childhood memories.—Laura Simeon

That’s Debatable by Jen Doll (Recorded Books, 9 hours, 11 minutes): The narrators of this YA novel, Justis Bolding and Nick Mills, do a fantastic job drawing listeners into a tale set on the high school debate circuit in Alabama. Along the path to falling in love, Millie and Tag face down parental and societal expectations and failings. Bolding’s wryly self-aware performance accentuates Millie’s intelligence, humor, and passion. Mills’ earnest, deadpan delivery is just right for Tag, a naïve boy with the best of intentions. The duo’s coming-of-age journeys cover a range of emotions, from flirtatious to deeply serious, all of which come alive in this audio production.—L.S.

Even When Your Voice Shakes by Ruby Yayra Goka (Recorded Books, 5 hours, 13 minutes): This YA novel set in contemporary Ghana deals with painful topics including parental abandonment, depression, poverty, housing insecurity, socio-economic inequality, and sexual assault as experienced by 16-year-old Amerley. Adoja Andoh’s rich voice as she narrates in a grave and deliberate manner is a perfect match for the subject matter. Her pacing is spot-on, matching the story’s beats in a complementary way that allows listeners to reflect on the serious moments and become swept up by the suspenseful ones. Characters of different ages and genders are fleshed out through differentiated but completely natural voices.—L.S.

The Bluest Sky by Christina Diaz Gonzalez (Listening Library, 7 hours, 47 minutes): Against the backdrop of the 1980 Mariel boatlift, during which thousands of Cubans fled to the U.S., this story about sixth grader Héctor juxtaposes the delightfully ordinary—an upcoming math competition, a friend who is like a brother—with violence, death, and desperation. Giordan Diaz’s sincere tone and nimble, fluid narration bring to life this moving middle-grade text and its multigenerational cast. His voice vividly conveys, in English interspersed with Cuban Spanish phrases, childhood innocence as well as the inner life of a young boy who is forced to grow up too quickly.—L.S.

Marion Winik is the host of NPR’s Weekly Reader podcast. Connie Ogle is a writer in Florida. Laurie Muchnick is the fiction editor. Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
Each year, Kirkus publishes monthly roundups and in-depth reviews of notable book-based movies and shows. They’ve included such spectacular productions as Showtime’s 2020 miniseries of James McBride’s National Book Award winner, *The Good Lord Bird*, and Prime Video’s 2021 miniseries of Colson Whitehead’s Kirkus-starred alternate-history novel, *The Underground Railroad*. Here are eight highlights from this year, all available on streaming services:

*El Deafo* (streaming on Apple TV+): Cece Bell’s 2014 graphic memoir for children was a Newbery Honor book and a Kirkus Prize finalist, and it tells the affecting story of how the author, as a child in 1970s Virginia, tackled the challenges of living with deafness and using hearing aids. The original book features art that charmingly portrays the young Bell, her family, and friends as anthropomorphic bunnies, and the mini-series version—co-written and executive-produced by Bell—matched the original’s art style with aplomb. What made it truly remarkable, though, was the brilliant sound design—approximating Cece’s sometimes-frustrating experiences with a ‘70s hearing aid, with all the tinniness, static, and distortion that entails.

*Reacher* (streaming on Prime Video): Former military policeman and drifter Jack Reacher has investigated numerous crimes and beat up more than his fair share of bad guys in Lee Child’s popular thriller series over two decades, and Tom Cruise played Reacher in two films. This year’s streaming series, developed by *Punisher: War Zone* co-writer Nick Santora, starred Titans’ Alan Ritchson and adapted the first book in the series, 1997’s *Killing Floor*. It was a fast-paced delight over eight episodes, with lively plot turns and brutal brawls to satisfy even the most jaded action fans. A second season is currently in the works, based on 2007’s *Bad Luck and Trouble*, which received a Kirkus star.

*The Last Days of Ptolemy Grey* (streaming on Apple TV+): Samuel L. Jackson offered some of the best work of his career in this six-part limited series based on Walter Mosley’s SF-tinged 2010 novel with mystery elements. Jackson played elderly Ptolemy Grey, who struggles with progressive, severe dementia. After his great-grandnephew, Reggie, is killed in a drive-by shooting, a teenage girl named Robyn helps him out with day-to-day chores and becomes his companion and confidant. When an experimental drug therapy allows him access to memories he’d lost long ago, he’s able to find a hidden treasure from his past and also investigate Reggie’s unsolved murder. The series’ nuanced performances by Jackson, who poignantly highlighted Ptolemy’s inner strength, and *Judas and the Black Messiah*’s Dominique Fishback, who effectively embodied Robyn’s tough kindness, made this worth a watch.

*Pachinko* (streaming on Apple TV+): This streaming-series adaptation brought Min Jin Lee’s Kirkus-starred 2017 historical novel to vivid life on the small screen. The book tells the story of multiple generations of a Korean family from the 1910s to the 1980s. In one of the major storylines presented in the series, Oscar winner Yuh-jung Youn (*Minari*) and newcomer Minha Kim—both stunningly good—played older and younger Sunja, the daughter of a Busan fisherman who becomes pregnant as the result of an affair with Hansu, a wealthy married man (played by charismatic Lee Minho of *Boys Over Flowers* fame). Sunja later weds a Korean Christian pastor and moves to Japan, where she and her family face constant bigotry. The first season of the show only scratched the surface of the novel’s sprawling plot; we’re looking forward to a second season, currently in the works.

*The Black Phone* (streaming on Peacock): Ethan Hawke delivered an undeniably terrifying performance in this horror film based on the short story of the same name.
from Joe Hill's 2007 collection, *20th Century Ghosts*. Director Scott Derrickson (*Doctor Strange*) and co-screenwriter C. Robert Cargill skillfully expanded on the brief but chilling tale about a 13-year-old boy plotting to escape a basement where his abductor, known as the Galesburg Grabber, has imprisoned him. The dank room also contains a disconnected phone, and one day, the boy receives a call from the spirit of one of the Grabber’s past victims. The filmmakers beefed up the brief tale by expanding on characters’ backstories, adding subplots, and even giving one character clear-cut supernatural powers. All of it deepened the narrative and ratcheted up the tension—a case study in effectively adapting short fiction.

*Interview With the Vampire* (streaming on AMC and AMC+): This new series functioned as a reboot and a sequel to Anne Rice’s legendary 1976 gothic-horror series starter. In the novel, an unnamed young journalist in the 1970s interviews a man named Louis, who claims to be a two-century-old vampire. Louis tells a sprawling tale of how he was transformed into a fanged creature of the night in late-18th-century New Orleans by colorful, amoral, and deeply self-centered vampire Lestat de Lioncourt. In the new series, nearly 50 years have passed since that initial interview, and Louis (sensitively played by *Game of Thrones*’ Jacob Anderson) summons the much older journalist (Eric Bogosian, always great) for another round of interviews to correct the record as he once again recounts his relationship with Lestat (an excellent Sam Reid). This version foregrounded the original story’s gay subtext and touched on the effects of institutional racism in the South, making a familiar tale feel fresh and new.

*The Peripheral* (streaming on Prime Video): This sharp streaming series, created and co-written by novelist Scott B. Smith, smartly adapted cyberpunk pioneer William Gibson's 2014 SF thriller, which offers an offbeat take on time travel. In the book, set in the near future, Flynne Fisher is play-testing a virtual-reality game for a client when she unexpectedly witnesses a particularly gruesome murder; it turns out that the game is not a game at all but an apparatus that allows her to experience events some 70 years in the future—and that killing she saw is one that’s yet to come. The series altered a few plot elements and streamlined some of Gibson’s dense worldbuilding; it also offered lots of slick action scenes, giving the proceedings the glossy sheen of a top-notch spy thriller. Chloë Grace Moretz, as Flynne, did a fine job in a demanding role—one in which she occasionally has to play a digital consciousness in an android’s body. It’s a complicated story, to be sure, but both Gibson acolytes and newcomers could find much to like.

David Rapp is the senior Indie editor.
MANDALAY HAWK’S DILEMMA
The United States of Anthropocene
Aronson, Peter
Double M Books Inc. (238 pp.)
978-1-7320775-3-9

Young teens face climate change head-on in Aronson’s middle-grade novel.

In 2030, when a Category 4 hurricane hits Maine, 13-year-old Mandalay Hawk is home alone; her father, Tom, is away, and the roads are closed. Water and wind batter the house, and Mandalay barely survives a roof collapse. Afterward, she’s fed up with adult complacency about extreme weather; to grab attention, she breaks into her high school, Nagatoon Regional, and steals 50 electronic “dweebs”—tabletlike devices donated by energy company Star Power—and sets them on fire in the parking lot. In lipstick, she writes on a chalkboard, “If we don’t stop global warming now, it will be too late. It will make the pandemic of 2020 look like a picnic in the park!!!” The action gets Mandalay expelled and placed in front of Judge Mary Baxter, who fines her $50,000 and sentences her to a year’s probation. She and Tom move to Manhattan’s Morningside Heights neighborhood, where she befriends classmates Jazmin and Gute, the latter a dedicated reader who shuns personal electronic devices. As the trio grows closer, Mandalay reveals her past, and the teens start missing school to tour the city, which, in this era, is ravaged by floods. When their history teacher, Mr. Harkness, learns that the students are researching climate change and the United States’ past response to crises during their outings, he allows them to continue their jaunts. Eventually, Mandalay decides to hold an event at City Hall, and with her friends’ help, she starts KRAAP (Kids Revolt Against Adult Power) but remains unsure about the future.

Aronson’s impassioned novel could serve as a primer for a generation that sees climate change’s effects up-close in the coming years. The world he envisions is surreal, frightening, and, unfortunately, visible on our horizon today. His Manhattan, for example, is so hot that it can support palm trees, and it has canals to divert the rising Atlantic Ocean; fire has claimed the animals of the Bronx Zoo, and lower Broadway has “two feet of smelly, yucky, greenish water and no people.” Other problems include tent cities of climate refugees from uninhabitable states, such as Florida, and constantly hazy skies filled with wildfire toxins. People also carry “stink towels” because they never stop sweating. The book states its themes bluntly, as when Jazmin says, “As a species, we’re pathetic....We just let this happen. To
satisfy the materialism of our civilization, more and more fossil fuel is still being burned.” Still, Aronson tries to insert humor in scenes involving the twin principals, Homer and Hubert Bushwick, who try to rein in Mandalay’s behavior. The narrative’s final third introduces some far-fetched elements involving U.S. President William “Bucky” Billingham, but they’re less important than the informative exposition for young readers: “Anthropocene is a term used to describe the current scientific—or geological—period in time...in which humans have impacted earth and climate in a negative way.” The finale is pure wish fulfillment, but anything less would be criminal.

A scathing work and an essential blueprint for youth battling climate change.

KELVOO’S TESTIMONIAL
A Kloorman’s Autobiography
Bailey, Phil
Philcora Enterprises (394 pp.)
May 14, 2022
978-1-77810-241-7
978-1-77810-242-4 paper

Aliens find their quiet lives thrown into turmoil when humans explore their planet in Bailey’s SF debut.

Kelvoo is a member of a peaceful, genderless species on the planet Kuw’baal. The kloorman’s intricate bodies—a mushroomlike eye at the top and double-jointed limbs with paddles for hands—make them expert multitaskers. As such, they don’t rely on modern technology and are shocked when humans from planet Terra (aka Earth) send a surveillance drone to their planet. Next, humans come in an even bigger ship, and although Kelvoo and other kloormari find the visitors “hideous,” they aren’t threatening. They teach the kloormari all about the Terran language (of which there seems to be only one), food, culture, and unfamiliar concepts, such as imagination and fictional stories. Sadly, a later group of humans isn’t as amiable; they trick nine kloormari, including Kelvoo, into joining a phony mission, enslave them, and show them some of the worst that humanity has to offer. Kelvoo and the others, pushed to the brink, find a way to escape their plight so they can get home. But will Kuw’baal be the same place they left behind? Aside from the preface, the entire narrative is made up of Kelvoo’s autobiographical account, featuring straightforward observations in simple, unadorned prose. Kelvoo’s willingness to accommodate Terran’s unusual customs makes the protagonist endearing, and there are some lighthearted moments, as when kloormari become fascinated by Terran-provided Infotab tablets. The kloormari, who live up to a few centuries and birth offspring in just weeks, prove fascinating in their own right. Bailey’s message is blunt but affecting, as the humans cheat, rebuke, and subjugate a species that they don’t bother to understand, and readers will find it painful to watch the kloormari suffer such cruelty. However, the author also rounds out his novel with delightful details, including hints of other species who are part of a Planetary Alliance.

A simple but profound futuristic story of the painful effects of colonization.

LORDS OF SMASHMOUTH
The Unlikely Rise of an American Phenomenon
Baskin, John with Michael O’Bryant
Illus. by Todd Kale
Orange Frazer Press (395 pp.)
$30.00 | $9.99 e-book | Nov. 25, 2021
978-1-949248-52-4

Baskin, with co-author O’Bryant, offers a history of Ohio State University’s football team and its culture. The chronicle of the famed OSU football franchise begins...
A line from one of this year’s best books reads, “Life was a horror movie, but only if you looked for it.” No one needs to look for horror now; it’s all around us. The U.S. is morphing into Gilead, and we’re coining words like tripledemic and permacrisis. The real monsters walk among us. Fortunately, this year’s Best of Indieland saw a slate of killer made-up horror—involving giant, deadly insects; rotting, grasping limbs; and apocalyptic plots—that’s a solid diversion from the real stuff.

Craig Buchner’s grisly short story collection depicts a world turned even weirder than our own. A young couple’s baby is born a zombie; a family is tormented by evil flies; and a distant relative reappears looking skeletal and dangerous.

Brutal Beasts “crosses boundaries and traverses genres with seamless ease,” says our reviewer, who describes the stories as “transgressive, audacious tales steeped in gritty human struggles and otherworldly oddity.”

In Alan Lastufka’s eerie thriller, Face the Night, the lead tries to stabilize her life, obtain custody of her son, and find the meaning behind a creepy recurring nightmare that involves a lake, a disintegrating arm, and a message for the dreamer. Our reviewer calls the book “an impressive, complex horror tale—two (rotting) thumbs up.”

An “audacious mix of dark fantasy, horror, apocalyptic fiction, and Finnish folklore,” Alex Grass’ A Boy’s Hammer “pits a lost boy against a mythic goddess of death who is trying to remake the world in her dark vision.” Finnish folklore sounds like an ideal escape, however fleeting, from the permacrisis. But wait, there’s more! “Along with the genre elements and bombshell-laden storyline, the richly described worldbuilding helps create a wildly immersive read.”

Karen Schechner is the president of Kirkus Indie.
“A lyrical narrative tapestry that expresses a lifetime of love and lament.”

NIGHTMARES & MIRACLES

Bitting, Michelle

Two Sylvias Press (119 pp.)

$16.00  |  March 8, 2022

978-1-948767-16-3

A diverse selection of existential poems that chronicle ongoing emotional journeys.

One the main themes of this lush tapestry of poetic works is self-examination—peeling back layers of one’s experiences to understand one’s identity and what one can become through that understanding. To that end, the 50 poems in this collection, which won the 2020 Wilder Series Poetry Book Prize, often bare the souls of their speakers. In the powerhouse “Boxing Day,” for example, the speaker remembers finding her alcoholic brother dead in their parents’ house on the day after Christmas, and her regrets are brilliantly symbolized by an image of a “raggedy / home-sewn angel / atop her green and spiky / throne…watching the whole thing unravel.” In “Legacy,” the speaker, who’s now a parent herself, grapples with a painful memory of her mother: “I tried to peel my mother’s words from my head, remove them like tape from the backs of poems I’d pressed to office walls in need of clearing when I left. But another layer of beige paint—striped.”

Other poems in this book address such topics as the era of Donald Trump’s presidency (“Tender Cages”), a son’s post-top surgery (“Through a Window in Winter” and “As He Now Lets Fall”) and the Covid-19 pandemic (“Ghost Campus” and “Sissy Spacek Telekinesis Ain’t Got Nothin’ on a Pandemic,” the latter of which references the bloody 1976 horror film Carrie).

One of the most noteworthy aspects of this collection, as a whole, is how the poems subtly blend together images and ideas to create a powerful, cumulative effect. In ‘Pasiphae,’” for example, the title character contemplates having sex with the Cretan Bull and considers what offspring that union could produce: “What rough beast is born of our coupling / will suckle at my breast / swaddled in unraveled leagues / of my sea-like hair.”

Much later in the collection, the Minotaur returns, as does the labyrinthine imagery, in the poem “Labyrinth,” which begins with “Here we are at the entrance again.” In “No One Told Me About the Death,” the speaker’s parents perch like birds on the couch on Christmas morning: “Mother fed us pie, father, seeds of grief. / Birds on a couch, a wire, they waited / To feel filled up / With more than pie and seeded grief. / We ate ourselves in silence.” That imagery of birds feeding their young is effectively revisited in “Stilled Life,” in which the speaker and her two brothers—both suicides—are likened to baby birds: “We learned to open wide and swallow it all—liquor, pills, the barrel of a gun, when it came to that.” As the collection goes on, these connections contribute to its three-dimensional, immersive quality, which readers may liken to experiencing a sprawling art exhibit. And, like the works of visual art in such exhibits, these poems, and their kaleidoscopic images, will resonate with readers for a long time after they’ve closed the book.

A lyrical narrative tapestry that expresses a lifetime of love and lament.

BLUE LAKE

Boldt, Jeffrey D.

River Grove Books (312 pp.)

$18.95 paper  |  $8.99 e-book  |  March 8, 2022

978-1-63299-516-2

An administrative law judge finds himself both in love and in mortal danger in this debut mystery.

Judge Jason Erickson loves his work enforcing Environmental Protection Agency laws even if it is often a strenuous, uphill battle. Big money has tremendous influence in Wisconsin, and the political power structure is stacked against him. And he is slowly falling in love with Tara Highsmith, a science reporter who often attends his hearings. Tara tries to save her marriage, but her cheating husband wants out, clearing the way for her and Jason to plan a future. Meanwhile, there is a crucial case involving lakefront condominiums (“slipominiums”) backed by the sketchy Tommy Calandro. The attorney pleading...
the case for a permit is a hotshot lawyer named Earl Franks whose reckless lifestyle has made him beholden to Calandro. Bribe is dangled; threats are made. Jason records some of these exchanges. In the pivotal point in the book, Jason—about to take his findings to the police—is shot down in the street, as is Tara. The rest of the story focuses on a courtroom drama leading up to a startling conclusion. Boldt is a retired administrative law judge and passionate about justice and the environment, and this shows on every page of this remarkable novel. It’s no surprise that the courtroom scenes are so well handled. Jason is a finely drawn and thoughtful character, as is Tara. Their falling in love is delightfully paced. These are idealistic and wary people who make their own slow magic. The author even manages to make Earl a borderline sympathetic, or at least understandable, character. There is humor even in the worst of times, as when Earl tries to kill himself but finally realizes that his hybrid Lexus will not consistently spew enough carbon monoxide to do the deed. At some points, Boldt displays a wry wit: Jason “felt righteously indignant that he couldn’t even feel righteously indignant.” And the author’s vivid descriptions of the Wisconsin countryside will make readers put the Dairy State on their bucket lists.

An impressive, wonderfully detailed legal thriller showing the best and worst of humanity.

THE END
Bray, John
Illustrated by Josh Cleland
Starry Forest (32 pp.)
978-1-951784-12-6

In Bray’s picture book, readers learn the value of starting and finishing activities. Endings are hard. Many kids struggle with finishing one task and moving on to another, but, as this book points out, “THE END of one thing is the beginning of something else. And the beginning of one thing is THE END of another. And that’s okay.” The text offers more guidance than
narrative, providing many examples of how the start of one task (reading, adventuring, matching up socks, and so on) means another is being left behind, or how being in the middle of things can be fun but eventually becomes a snooze: “Boredom is THE END of fun.” The art reflects the text’s sentiments but also tells its own story of a pigtailed, dinosaur-loving child who joyfully heads into a school’s summer vacation, has adventures with their cat, then returns to school in the fall and makes a new friend. (The unnamed child has light brown skin and straight hair; the friend has dark brown skin and curly hair.) Cleland’s illustrations are charmingly whimsical, and characters’ faces are beautifully expressive even though the protagonist never says a word. They’re a perfect fit for the playful, lively text that explains the good and bad elements of concluding things without ever talking down to its audience.

An engaging book about accepting endings and celebrating beginnings.

**MY PAPA MY PRINCE**

*Brown, Keegan*

*Illus. by Katya Tabakh*

4 Blank Books (36 pp.)


April 12, 2022

978-1-73774-474-0 paper

Four girls wait for their fathers to pick them up from ballet class in this picture book.

Four young ballet dancers with different skin tones, hair colors, and features are all dressed in their leotards and tutus in a performance studio overlooking a rainy city scene. Each is “awaiting a prince from their part of the world,” and the story shifts to the fathers as they travel from their jobs—as a fisherman, train conductor, taxi driver, and briefcase-carrying businessman. Three of the papas have journeys that dovetail: The fisherman takes the train with the conductor, and both get into the taxi driver’s cab. But the last father, after losing his umbrella to the wind, is sidetracked rescuing a dog stranded in a sinkhole. When the three papas arrive at the studio, they dance a waltz with their daughters, and the last girl feels left out and worried. The rest bring her into a group dance, but she sadly makes to leave the studio—until her father arrives at the last moment. (“And the stars lit a waltz by the sea.”) In this lively and inventive tale, Brown’s rhythmic, dance-centered rhymes focus on the rain and the waltz metaphor, allowing much of the poignant storytelling to happen in the pictures. Tabakh’s beautiful digital illustrations, completed in Procreate, appear hand-drawn, using a painterly style with vivid textures that encourage young readers to pore over the pages.

Offering graceful rhymes, this imaginative celebration of fathers and daughters dances across the page.
Estela González is a Mexican American writer with a focus on social and environmental justice from her experience as a Latinx (her preferred term) and LGBTQ+ person. Her debut novel, *Arribada* (Cynren Press), follows Mariana Celis home from the U.S. to Mexico after her mother’s stroke and uncle’s mysterious disappearance. Mariana quickly realizes that the community she left behind has changed at the hands of developers and vacationers. Gracefully interweaving environmental topics with explorations of queerness and womanhood, the novel is “a suspenseful but tender tale that exemplifies the power of intersectionality,” according to our reviewer, and there’s no wonder why it earned a spot on our Best Indie Books of 2022 list. González answered some questions by email.

**What was the original idea that started you working on the book?**

Witnessing the ebb and flow of Mazatlán’s fortunes was one main motivator. My family normally spent vacations in my dad’s hometown enjoying Mazatlán’s dunes, the seaside walks, the sight of ships from everywhere. Then, there was a hiatus when I left for grad school. I returned in the ’90s to find many of Mazatlán’s historic homes turned to rubble; beaches thinned to a strip. The city’s economic focus on sol y playa—beach and sun—led to neglecting the center and its beaches.

Other experiences that led me to writing the novel were personal. I, too, had a beloved uncle who disappeared from our lives. Writing toward understanding his fate—and toward mourning—was another great motivator.

**Who is the ideal reader for your book?**

My ideal reader is someone who empathizes with the vulnerable and wants to see what some women face in a particular kind of patriarchal society. Someone who cares about nature and coastal societies that live off of—and try to survive—a touristic economy.

**Were you able to do live events for the book this year? Any memorable highlights?**

Yes! I was lucky to have my book come out toward the tail end of the lockdowns. By May 2022, I launched my book twice in Middlebury, where I live. I have had a number of readings, for instance, at East End Books in Provincetown and Giovanni’s Room in Philadelphia, where the conversation continued into dinner and beyond. I am particularly heartened that my novel is now out in Spanish (titled *Limonaria*). There has been interest in my creative process since I do not translate but write from scratch in each of the two languages. The result is two novels that tell the same story without being beholden to doing it in the same way. My metaphors and cultural references, my voice and cadence are unique in each language.

**What book published in 2022 was among your favorites?**

I binge-read Javier Zamora’s *Solito*, a beautiful, haunting book. The kind that becomes part of your uni-
verse of emotions and ideas.

In Arribada, we see firsthand the various negative effects tourism can have on communities. What is a takeaway for readers considering vacationing in coastal communities?

Thank you for asking. This is a very important issue for me. I think the most important is to stay curious and humble. Tread lightly, strive to leave no trace, as we do when we visit a national park. Coastal environments are fragile and essential to human and nonhuman communities’ health. Why do we not treat them as such?

How has writing this novel shaped your view of what it means to return home?

During my writing process, the novel became a compendium of the many meanings of coming home. When we return after a long absence we naturally discover our home has changed. We are often not aware of how much we have changed until we arrive in the place we believe we know best. We have taken on cultural traits and assumptions from the new place we live; we take certain freedoms for granted while learning to live without some we relinquished in leaving our ancestral land.

Interview by Costa B. Pappas.
his life are, the intellectual backbone of this marvelously edifying book remains the nuanced articulation of France’s identity crisis, one not resolved but rather repressed in the wake of its wartime trauma. At some points, readers may feel buried under a pile of minutiae—the authors spare no details, often packaged within long, cascading paragraphs. But this is a minor quibble—this magisterial study deserves and amply repays readers’ patient labors.

A thrilling work of historical scholarship, thoughtful and scrupulous.

**BRUTAL BEASTS**
Stories
Buchner, Craig
NFB Publishing (195 pp.)
$14.95 paper | $5.99 e-book | May 6, 2022
978-1-953610-31-7

A volume of unconventional short stories features hardscrabble characters facing extraordinary circumstances.

North Carolina fiction writer and poet Buchner’s dazzling assortment of 18 tales offers a diverse cast struggling with some outlandish situations, both earthly and otherworldly. A man’s celebration of his wife’s pregnancy is cut short in the darkly humorous opener, “Made by Brutal Beasts.” Homer, a heavy-drinking child care company worker in therapy, becomes alarmed at his wife’s startling transformation into an excessively hirsute beast with prenatal “animalistic urges.” The theme carries forward with a different couple in the apocalyptic “Baby Teeth,” in which the pair’s “undead” newborn is anything but normal. Buchner experiments with form in “American Metal,” a sensory treat comprised solely of brutally vivid blog entries from a soldier deployed in the Middle East during wartime. The author also experiments with narrative brevity. Among the volume’s shortest tales is the marvelously morbid, two-page “Last Days at Wolfjaw,” which depicts a small family locked inside a cabin at the mercy of a plague of giant killer flies buzzing just outside the front door. Just spanning a single page is “About Future,” in which a man takes it upon himself to “put down” members of his own family who seemingly have outlived their usefulness to him. Conversely, the fantastically cinematic “Dracula Mountain” conjures a world dominated by vampires and the “nightwalkers” they create. A family tries to survive when a relative who’s “seventeen years old, but pale and skeletal” reappears. This story, along with several in the collection, disappoints only because it deserves a more fully realized treatment.

One of the assortment’s greatest assets is its sublime unpredictability. From junkies who donate plasma to the moving, tender father-son relationship in “Good Night,” the book crosses boundaries and traverses genres with seamless ease. Dominating these tales are themes of struggle and vulnerability, hardship and loss. Families buckle beneath the weight of grief, financial woes, or even supernatural forces, while others simply become prey to online entertainment, “drawn in like a wolf to raw meat.” Many characters are pensive and reflective only after the worst has occurred, while others recognize the fleeting nature of beautiful things as they “stayed awake past midnight and watched the fireworks from the balcony, content with all we didn’t know. A brocade crown filled the air with big hanging breaks of gold, slowly fading to right us. But beautiful things never last.” Buchner’s literary talents are on brilliant display. The prose he employs vacillates between raw descriptions of hungry teeth biting into greasy meat to lovely turns of phrase from brothers lamenting their father’s abandonment when they were young and how that affects their desire for children of their own. Nearly every tale has appeared in a variety of literary journals.

“There is indeed mild, sunlit horror embedded in Buchner’s stories, but he also demonstrates a deep understanding of human nature.”

BRUTAL BEASTS

Cursed With Magic
Abigail’s Dragons
ISBN: 978-1-73307-777-4

“...A beautiful story about the power of friendship, the kindness of strangers, the power of truth and how goodness will always triumph...”
—ReadingWithYourKids.com

FOR ALL INQUIRIES, PLEASE EMAIL: PAT@SECONDSTORYUP.COM
SECONDSTORYUP.COM/ABIGAILSDRAGONS

“...A beautiful story about the power of friendship, the kindness of strangers, the power of truth and how goodness will always triumph...”
—Kirkus Reviews (Starred Review)
and with good reason: They shimmer with the gloss of a creative imagination and enticing characterization. As the expectant father remarks in the opener, “Life was a horror movie, but only if you looked for it.” There is indeed mild, sunlit horror embedded in Buchner’s stories, but he also demonstrates a deep understanding of human nature and how it operates in times of desperation and when faced with the paranormal.

Transgressive, audacious tales steeped in gritty human struggles and otherworldly oddity.

**WINGS OVER THE WALL**

*Faith, Birding, and Walking With Jesus in the Holy Land*

*Burden, Matthew*

North Wind Publishing (194 pp.)

$19.95 paper | Oct. 1, 2021

978-1-73293-196-1

A bird-centered devotional memoir about a trip to Israel.

In this well-designed remembrance, Burden, who previously authored the historical-fiction Hidden Kings Trilogy and several other religious works, relates a trip he took with a group to the Holy Land in 2018. Christian readers will particularly appreciate the centrality of religious pilgrimage in this account, particularly the narrative’s centerpiece—his visit to “the place where it all began,” Nazareth. Indeed, he makes sure to characterize his trip as less of a vacation than a religious journey, although he notes: “If I had taken a tour just to snap a few pictures and add a few birds to my life list,” says the avid birder, “it would not be a pilgrimage.” This note of affection for avians sounds throughout the book; for all his sightseeing and spiritual experiences, Burden is also always keenly aware of feathered friends flitting around him. These sightings range from the “usual suspects,” such as hooded crows, common mynas, and countless doves, to newer encounters with the Eurasian blackcap, the common whitethroat, and Old World warblers: “Above my head wheeled dozens of swifts, cutting through the morning air with graceful, scythe-like sweeps,” he writes at one point, with the understated lyricism that characterizes much of the narrative; at another juncture, he intriguingly imagines Nazareth as closely resembling what Jesus would have seen: “The birds winging about were the same species he would have spied as a child,” he writes, “the same sparrows and doves that he referenced in his teaching.” This combination of birding and faith works surprisingly well, resulting in a spiritual memoir of memorable sincerity.

An eloquent and often moving Christian meditation.
A tiny, impoverished order of nuns in a remote corner of Brooklyn has been praying for world peace continuously for 347 years. Now, to keep the lights on and the vigil going, the elderly sisters of Our Lady of the Highway start brewing beer and bring in a rather unusual new Mother Superior as well as some undocumented recruits from Central America. They are also joined by a beautiful insurance adjuster named Lola who has magical powers, is a saint, or possibly is just plain nuts. Meanwhile, their cloister has been targeted for acquisition by the evil CEO of Magnificent Waste Management, Inc., who already owns the rest of the neighborhood.

Cinematic? Indeed. This is Our Lady of the Highway (Elboro Press, June 14), the debut novel of acclaimed independent filmmaker Hal Hartley (The Unbelievable Truth, Trust, Henry Fool, etc.), known for his work with such actors as Adrienne Shelly, Edie Falco, James Urbaniak, and Martin Donovan. Hartley discussed his pivot to fiction recently on Zoom; our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What was the original inspiration that started you working on the book?
It was something about nuns making beer. I’m always interested in the way genuine religious belief bangs into the secular world and the conventions of everyday life.

Why was this project a novel rather than a screenplay?
Actually, it did begin as a script for a TV series. It was the first time in my career where I had to pitch—go into studios and tell them the story, explain why the show would be exciting. This required a lot of talking around the dialogue I had written, fleshing out the characters and their backgrounds, extrapolating from what was there on the page. If I’ve learned anything in my years of screenwriting, it’s that the only thing you put in a script is a description of the activity and the dialogue: what people say and what they do. You want the audience to infer about their motivations and feelings.

And the actors, too, I would imagine?
Actually, a large part of my approach to directing is to remind the actors not to psychologize too much in their performances.

But in a novel...
Right, in a novel, you’re expected to get into the heads of the characters. I’ve always loved the way a fiction writer can slip into the moment-by-moment consciousness of each character and keep the story moving along. When I got back from Los Angeles, I took the 10 episodes I’d written and turned them into 10 chapters.

This could explain the ending of the book, which seems more like a season finale than the end of the story. Are you planning a sequel?
Yes, I chose to keep the ending as in the script—because series do often end that way, with an opening for a second season, but also because it is something I do in a lot of my films: an inevitable conclusion that doesn’t necessarily resolve. I, too, want to see how this story ends, so I’m planning a sequel. Prose fiction is becoming my main creative work.
Did you seek a traditional publisher for the novel?
I never really thought about going the traditional route. In 2019, I started a publishing company, Elboro Press, because I wanted to make my screenplays available to the like-minded. Then I discovered that I liked making books and ended up publishing the work of other people. When I finished *Our Lady of the Highway*, it just seemed like the way to go. Actually, it’s the same approach I took with my films—which I guess you could say are self-published.

There’s a lot of Catholic prayer in the book. What was the inspiration for that?
I’m pretty steeped in various kinds of religious thinking and poetry, whether it’s Hebrew, Islam, or Christian. When my father died at 90 and I cleaned out his house, I found materials he had from when he was a young man in the Holy Name Society, which was an evening training program for working-class dads, trying to make them just a little bit more Catholic so they could bring their kids up correctly. There were all these prayer books I had never seen! I literally cut and pasted from those books into the novel.

What books published this year were among your favorites?
I’m afraid I’ve spent the entire year in the past—my summer reading project was the collected stories of Clarice Lispector. Reading Clarice was a project, a relationship—fueled by a sense of something kind of miraculous being done to the space and time around me as I read. I hear and see and feel more acutely even as I have to set her book aside for a while and take a walk.

*Interview by Marion Winik.*

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**WHAT DO YOU DO?**
*When the Life of a Loved One Has Come to an End*
*Cardamon, Callie*
Sublimatio Books (222 pp.)
$15.95 paper | $9.99 e-book | April 25, 2022
978-0-578-96548-2

A young crane seeks out ways to keep from forgetting a deceased brother in Cade’s series picture book about love, loss, and healing.

A mother, father, and child crane mourn the loss of Archie, the child’s sibling; the parents struggle to discuss what has happened. Finally, the child says, “I will miss him forever, but I am still here. / Don’t forget about me when I need you so near.” As the family comes together to remember their loved one, they focus on the good times, but the child worries about forgetting those memories. During a walk, the young crane asks Mr. Frog, Mrs. Bison, Mr. LeBron the dragonfly, Mrs. Beaver, and the bison’s companion birds how each remembers those they’ve lost. Cade’s smooth, simple rhymes go to the heart of the young crane’s grief without feeling overwhelming; the animals’ advice provides a new outlook to help young, grieving readers find ways to channel their emotions into empowerment. Einer’s mixed-media illustrations feature a painted blue background with cartoon animals; the realistic landscapes and somewhat realistic animals with human accessories (boots, bags, skateboards) bring the situations to life in a kid-friendly way. The sympathetic words and comforting images create a safe space for children to sit with grief and for parents to begin healing conversations.

A poignant work about seeking and finding comfort.

**THE PRINCESS WHO SANG LIKE A FROG**
*And Other Tales of Love*
*Cardamon, Callie*
Sublimatio Books (222 pp.)
$15.95 paper | $9.99 e-book | April 25, 2022
978-0-578-96548-2

This debut collection of fairy tales tells lyrical stories of loss and grief transformed through the power of compassion.

In the title story, a princess must sing so a man will fall in love with her, but she realizes that she can’t. Fearing she has no heart and will never know love, she leaves home. On her journey, the Frog King, the Snake Queen, and the Wolf King teach her to sing by croaking, hissing, and howling. She meets a singing young man who reassures her that “there is nothing wrong with you. You are perfect as you are,” but she doesn’t believe him. A cruel wizard bars her path because it’s prophesied that “a princess with four voices will destroy me and free the prince whom I have been holding prisoner.”
Nevertheless, two birds teach her the fourth voice: shrill and shrieking bird song. Before surrendering the prince, the wizard poses four riddles to the princess. The answers reveal the wizard’s past, how he became evil, why he enjoys being wicked, and his path toward redemption. In “The Yellow Bird,” a boy follows and then becomes one with a small yellow bird, forgetting his human self. He helps a king mourning his son to discover the purpose of life, which is “to love and comfort others on their journeys.” In “The Woodcutter’s Daughter,” an older mother rabbit gives a young woman the power to hear her angry, brutish father’s true yearning for love. But the woman can’t save him, so she journeys to offer her love to the wider world. She’s given the task of filling a lake with healing water, which gives new life to many. Her father’s heart, too, is freed. In another tale, a childless older fisherman catches “The Joyfish,” which gladly allows itself to be eaten. The man and his wife are taken to an undersea kingdom where they are magically renewed.

In her book, Cardamon achieves an authentic and pleasing fairy-tale cadence, as in the opening line of the title story: “Once upon a time, when wishing still mattered, a princess lived in a land neither here nor there.” Elements such as the quest motif, animal helpers, and special tasks and characters like the princess and the woodcutter also give the tales a solid grounding in tradition. More contemporary are the stories’ themes of discovering redemption and purpose through love for everyone, even villains like the wizard and the woodcutter; there’s no typical fairy-tale revenge ending. This could seem unfitting, but the author makes it work by staying true to the worlds of the stories and the symbolic imagery. The woodcutter, for example, dies (in one sense) beneath a beautiful magic tree that grew from the buried eyes, tongue, and heart of the mother rabbit, who sacrificed herself to save the man’s daughter. But in another sense, he is asleep, dreaming of finding peace. Although the well-written collection has lessons to teach, they aren’t didactic among so much magic. While “The Princess Who Sang Like a Frog” meanders somewhat, the other offerings are more focused.

Eloquent tales that skillfully tap into a deep well of ideas.

A girl finds an inventive solution to missing representation in the toy aisle in this clever debut picture book about inclusion. Molly Morningstar is so excited to be invited to her friend Emma’s birthday tea party. The invitation says to bring a doll, but Molly just can’t choose. “Emma has lots of pretty dolls. And they all look like her. I wish I had a doll that looks like ME!” Molly laments. At the toy store, the brown-skinned, curly haired Molly sees only pale-skinned dolls; even on the internet, Molly and her mother can’t find a good match. When Molly comes up with the solution to make her own doll, she finds all the right materials and creates a twin for herself, impressing all her friends and making a doll she loves. Molly is a narrator who knows what she wants and is determined to find a way to achieve it—even if she makes a mess along the way. Coke uses a straightforward, realistic narration style to emulate Molly’s voice, with occasional poetry sprinkled throughout. Orozco’s exuberant illustrations capture Molly’s attitude (and her mother’s exasperation at those messes) while giving the story’s lead a great range of diverse friends of both genders at the party—some whose dolls match them and some who don’t. Emma’s birthday present—a doll that looks like an action figure—is a nice touch that critiques gender expectations.

Creative kids, especially those who also feel unrepresented, will be inspired.
A human teenager finds herself on a series of alien worlds in this YA adventure. A 16-year-old girl is trapped in a sandy oasis. There are no people or animals, and she has no memories of how she arrived or of anything else about herself. She does, however, remember a “blue glow coming through a swirling vortex” and sinister whispers. When she tries to explore her surroundings, a strange voice says, “Let us guide you,” but she can't seem to escape the oasis. She then finds Sidaire, a younger girl who has glowing, emberlike hair and doesn’t seem quite human. Sidaire warns her about a place called the Hollow and about a threatening monster. When the teen dives into a spring in an attempt to escape said creature, she enters a series of underwater caves. She emerges in a new world of forests and mountains. A friendly humanoid named Maetha rescues her from danger, names her Ambrielle, and explains they’re in Anatharia. With no clear way back to Earth, Ambrielle tries to live among Maetha’s people, the Kavekkians. They’re a wary group and warn her not to engage with their enemies, the Darterrans. This proves impossible when Ambrielle spies a human among the latter. Cox’s YA novel lives up to its title, keeping the protagonist in a consistent state of bafflement over new developments. He also provides occasionally striking visuals, such as a description of Maetha, who has a light-gray, oblong face and “rust-colored eyes.” Ambrielle encounters more familiar things, as well, including prejudice from the Kavekkians and petty tribalism among the Darterrans. The worldbuilding branches out in surprising ways when the setting moves to the technologically marvelous world of Elyravess. As Ambrielle remembers more details from her previous life, such as her falling-out with her friend Hannah, a fuller emotional journey evolves. Ambrielle also pursues a well-earned romance with Gavian, a teen living with the Darterrans. A superb final moment ensures that fans will return for the sequel.

This meticulously crafted YA journey will challenge readers’ expectations until the last page.
Darcy Pattison has been connecting stories and children, two of her passions, for decades. In addition to being an author, Pattison is also the publisher at Mims House, an independent press that aims to publish entertaining and informative children’s books. Pattison’s new picture book, Diego, the Galápagos Giant Tortoise, illustrated by Amanda Zimmerman, shines a compelling light on the heroic effort to revive the Española tortoise population, focusing on the titular tortoise who helped repopulate the species during the 40 years he lived at the San Diego Zoo. A starred Kirkus review called the book, recently named a 2022 Eureka! Nonfiction Honor Book by the California Reading Association, a “well-crafted success story of a species’ salvation [that] will encourage budding environmentalists.” It made our list of the 100 best Indie books of the year. Pattison answered our questions via email, and the responses below have been edited for length and clarity.

How did you learn about Diego and the effort to salvage the giant tortoise population on the Galápagos Islands?

My series, Another Extraordinary Animal, already included a bird, a spider, an amphibian, and a mammal. Books in the series have received a starred PW review and two NSTA Outstanding Science Trade book honors. Each book features the unique story of one outstanding individual animal in a species: an orphaned puma, a spider who goes to space, the oldest known wild bird in the world, and the true story of the celebrated jumping frog of Calaveras County [in California]. I was looking for a fascinating reptile story when I heard that the Giant Tortoise Restoration Initiative was declaring their Española project successful and returning tortoises to their native island. I reached out through friends in the conservation community and connected with Linda Cayot, who had been the main herpetologist on the project for 30 years. She directed the Galápagos breeding programs, worked with volunteers, and faithfully advocated for the giant tortoises and other endangered species.

When you have the rare privilege of talking with such an expert, it’s easy to get excited about a project. Sadly, Linda passed away this year, so it’s especially poignant to have a book that celebrates the work of one of the great lights in the conservation world.

What motivated you to tell this story, and why did you choose to tell it as a picture book?

Success! Humans saved a species from extinction. It took expert scientists, many volunteers, and over 50 years, but we did it! In the midst of today’s doom and gloom, I wanted to give young conservationists and scientists a bit of hope. It may be hard, but we can make a difference.

How did your collaboration with illustrator Amanda Zimmerman come about?

Illustrator Amanda Zimmerman is a pro. I saw her portfolio on the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators website, and it turned out that she loved the tortoise’s story. For such a book, anatomy is crucial, but to elevate the story to a different level, the illustrator must also be able to tell a story with their art. Amanda does that skillfully, using images to build drama and excitement.
It’s the small things that matter. For example, on the last page, the text reads: “Sometimes, humans get it right.” Amanda lifts the tortoise’s head in triumph, echoing the words, which is brilliant. She’s done a coloring page for Diego, which is available free on our website.

It’s story hour at the library. Who is the ideal person to be reading your book to the kids?

Anyone motivated by the widespread need for conservation and a desire to pass that passion on to kids! Teachers tell me that they are reading this to preschoolers because it’s easy to understand and it’s a hopeful story. They consider it a good introduction to conservation because it doesn’t hide the difficulties of such a project yet it ends with success.

What book published in 2022 was among your favorites?

Kellie McIntyre’s book The Passport Project: Two Sisters Ditch Middle School for a Life-Changing Journey Around the World is a semiautobiographical middle-grade novel about a family’s global journey. Kellie nails the voices of the preteen and teen girls who narrate the story. It’s a stunning book.

Interview by Nina Palattella.
who attract; Will is a bookish misfit who speaks 11 languages and is an expert ornithologist, and Dolly’s a flapper who flirts up a storm. Will, a lesbian, likes traditionally male clothes and is getting over a lifetime of shyness, while Dolly revels in the attentions of either sex and teasingly receives Will’s adoration. Their relationship deepens during giddy outings to Harlem speakeasies and intensifying make-out sessions, but it’s especially stoked by classroom discussions of the Nietzschean superman—or superwoman—whose superiority allows any crime in pursuit of a supposedly higher morality. This creed fires up Dolly’s socio-pathic streak, and she ropes Will into a series of thrill-seeking transgressions, starting with arson and burglary. After the two are paired off with different roommates by Barnard officials, Dolly decides that they must defy the ultimate taboo by kidnapping and murdering a child. Dearman’s tale tweaks the real-life story of child-killers Leopold and Loeb into a love story of two women set in a richly atmospheric panorama of New York in the Roaring ‘20s, awhirl in high society, hothouse dorms, and uptown gin mills. It’s also a crackerjack procedural, as Dolly and Will plot out a crime that’s almost perfect—except for a few slip-ups that put dogged detectives on their trail. At its center are indelible portraits of the doomed lovers: Will, who’s incurably awkward and ardently besotted, and Dolly, whose glittering, teasing surface belies a hollow core. Dearman perfectly renders the noir mood in evocative, punchy prose: Dolly, reacting to a pregnancy scare, “couldn’t imagine being strapped with a tot. It made her feel dead inside….Daddy had a few prize pistols in his office. She would sneak one out and practice firing it out in the woods, then once she had a feel for it she’d eat the barrel.”

A wildly entertaining and energetic period thriller.

THE MUSIC WE MAKE
DeBellis, Michelle Rene
Paradise Publishing (392 pp.)
979-8-98616-721-3

A young musician deals with love, heartbreak, and addiction in DeBellis’ debut novel.

As the story opens in 2017 in Redlands, California, 22-year-old Santiago DeAngelo’s friend Abby Wilson asks him if he’s going to make any New Year’s resolutions. Santiago, a talented musician who’s four years into a five-year architecture degree and plans to apprentice with his successful architect father, tells her he doesn’t need to make any resolutions: “I’m right on track.” But life has other plans: While driving home with his mother, Ana, their car is struck by an SUV, and after a few days, his grief-stricken father decides to take his severely injured wife off life support. The family—father, son, and sister Lucy—is devastated by the loss, which encourages Santiago to lose himself in the fog of his postoperative pain medication. With Lucy’s help, he eventually starts to process his grief, but by that time, he’s also struggling with a Vicodin addiction. He pursues his dream of a music career and starts to find some success; however, he also meets a woman named Kitty Holladay who seems perfectly comfortable feeding his drug habit, which she sees as keeping his music flowing; he thinks that she’s “opened up a portal into a variation of my life where I could be happy,” but his family members think otherwise. The narrative, told in fast-moving chapters, charts Santiago’s rise in the music industry, his unhealthy relationships, and his ongoing drug dependence. His collaboration with Kitty is energizing; when they come up with a future hit song, she tells him, “A product like this is the miracle of pop music.” However, that energy comes at a very high cost.

Over the course of this novel, DeBellis crafts a story of one man’s rise and fall with remarkable empathy and sharp, often lovely prose. Overall, Santiago often comes across as a bit of a puzzle, as his keen intelligence doesn’t seem to allow him to see the damage he’s doing to his own life; the moment when he finally says “I can’t live like this anymore” is likely to strike many readers as coming far too late. However, he’s an unquestionably well-realized character, and the author does a particularly sensitive job of depicting the thorny interplay between him and his father; the latter initially blames Santiago for causing Ana’s
death, and things don’t get too much better from there. The book’s most effective plot thread, however, is an interior one: Santiago’s powerful artist’s personality confronting a persistent pill addiction: “I don’t expect you to save me,” he writes to another character while deep in its throes. “I won’t lie and tell you that I’ll never take another pill. But I will say that you’re the first person who ever made me feel like I could quit.” The dramatic, shifting tides of faith that others have in the protagonist bring his difficulties into sharp relief, which makes it easy for readers to root for the troubled artist.

A moving story of pursuing one’s goals through pain and loss.

THOSE BRISBANE ROMANTICS
de Valera, Danielle
Old Tiger Books (390 pp.)
$16.28 paper | $4.33 e-book | Nov. 2, 2021
978-0-9942745-6-4

An Australian agriculture student forms a tightknit bond with creative friends and lovers who are planning for their futures in this literary novel.

Dara Mahoney is living with seven other students in Brisbane in 1961 in an old rooming house. They are agriculture students, but their hopes and dreams veer far from the secure futures their degrees promise. Dara carries a torch for Joe Gordon, who yearns to play the violin in Europe. Bill Hereward wishes to motorbike to India, and Cass Clayton wants to sing. The guys stay up late drinking and planning an ocean voyage on a catamaran. They all feel pressure to get married young but fear that a wedding may...
signal the end of their aspirations. Against the backdrop of the White Australia Policy, Cass is in a relationship with Ling Chang, an Indonesian facing deportation. Doug Jarratt wants to marry Tripta Srivastava, a beautiful Indian doctor and dancer, but she’s thinking of the fallout from her family back home. Dara is defiant about marriage, in part because she had parents who fought (“She hadn’t lived with two mad people for nine years without learning the rudiments of good drama”). Joe pairs off with Klarid Nadassy, an immigrant who fled war-torn Hungary, losing her ballet career and becoming a teacher. As tragedy strikes the group, Dara must decide if following her heart means she has to give up her dreams. De Valera’s powerful coming-of-age tale doesn’t shy away from tackling difficult subjects. The strongly drawn characters are young, bright, and artistic, and the author is keenly aware of the emotional states of those raised during World War II (“Sixteen years had passed since the end of World War II, but Dara and her crowd remembered it well: the threat of a Japanese invasion had hung over all their childhoods. From February 1942 onwards, searchlights raked the night skies”). The Brisbane “Mates” aren’t afraid to get their hands dirty working in the fields or to confront any serious problem head-on. Cass, in particular, deals with horrifying acts of misogyny while Doug tackles Aboriginal rights. There is a multitude of issues raised in this story, but de Valera has woven everything together with vivid, dynamic prose.

A beautifully written tale about Australian dreamers that pointedly captures them at a crucial time.

**LOST IN CHINA**

A Memoir of World War II

Dobbs, Jennifer F.

Peach Pit Publications (362 pp.)


Dobbs recounts her fascinating, unusual childhood in China, an experience that came to a crashing end during World War II.

Dobbs grew up in China, though her parents, Ted and Alice, were British. In fact, her first language was Chinese, and English was largely reserved for school and special occasions. Dobbs’ father lived in China because he was recruited by the British Foreign Office to work as a salt mine inspector under the supervision of China’s department of finance. Her mother was born there since Dobbs’ maternal grandfather, John McGregor Gibb, worked as a chemistry professor at Peking University. The author’s family lived a happy life in Shanghai’s International Settlement, but the onset of war—China and Japan began their hostilities in 1937 before Germany invaded Poland two years later—irrevocably upended everything. Even as danger loomed closer, however, Dobbs’ parents seemed to trust in a false sense of security. Ping San, the head houseboy, anxiously observed: “It’s as though Master and Missy think the Japanese bombs can’t hurt them. They think they’re safe because they’re Western. I don’t think Jap bombs know the difference between Chinese and Western people.” These words turned out to be sadly prophetic—the family was forced to move to Chungking, Guiyang, and Kunming to avoid the relentless Japanese air raids. Disaster finally struck while Ted and Alice were visiting Hong Kong. Japanese forces invaded, killing Ted and taking Alice prisoner, a chilling turn of events moving chronicled by Dobbs. The author deftly combines memoir with imaginative creation. She fills in the blanks of both her memory and experience with artful invention. Her reminiscence is simply extraordinary—historically edifying, emotionally dramatic, and elegantly conveyed.

A gripping memoir brimming with personal and historical insight.
DETOUR AHEAD

Ehrenberg, Pamela & Tracy López
PJ Publishing (352 pp.)
$9.99 paper | March 1, 2022
978-1-73655-735-8

Two tweens form a rewarding friendship while riding the bus together.

In this middle-grade novel, Gilah meets Guillermo when the bus she is riding hits the boy and his bike and she is the only one who notices. With his bike out of commission, Guillermo starts riding the bus to school, and their initial connection gradually warms into a friendship and a growth opportunity for both of them. Gilah is an avid break dancer who is practicing a special piece to perform at her upcoming bat mitzvah, along with her Torah portion. She is also preparing a speech that will allow her to express herself without breaking the rules of communication she has struggled to learn. Guillermo is a poet, slowly building up the nerve to share his verse with others—even if he first does so by writing a poem instead of completing his math assignment—and finding a place for himself after his family’s move to Washington, D.C. In chapters that alternate between the two characters’ narration—Gilah’s story is in prose, while Guillermo’s account is in verse—they pursue their own goals and offer different perspectives on their shared experiences. Gilah invites Guillermo to her bat mitzvah, where a misunderstanding robs her of the opportunity to present the dance she had planned. But she is able to perform the work later on her own terms and shows up to celebrate Guillermo at his first poetry reading.

Ehrenberg and debut author López have brought the two characters’ interior and exterior lives into vivid relief. Gilah’s narration is filled with elegant metaphors that are never overdone, like her comparison of the Torah’s omitted vowels to the way her mind works differently: “I think that proves that ‘harder to read’ does not equal ‘broken.’” Gilah is on the autism spectrum, which will be obvious to readers from the opening pages. This condition goes largely unmentioned in the narrative, instead serving as a textbook example of show, don’t tell.

FACE THE NIGHT

Alan Lastufka

WINNER Eric Hoffer Award – Best Commercial Fiction
FINALIST Next Generation Indie Book Awards – Best New Horror Novel
SEMI-FINALIST Publishers Weekly BookLife Prize – Best Mystery/Thriller

ISBN: 978-1-7336919-3-2 (PAPERBACK)
ISBN: 978-1-7336919-4-9 (EBOOK)

MORE INFO AND TITLES AVAILABLE AT SHORTWAVEPUBLISHING.COM
Readers get an intimate portrayal of how hard she works to exist in a neurotypical world and how much easier she finds it when those who love her adjust their own behaviors to meet her needs. The poetic forms of Guillermo’s sections—occasionally in rhyme, more often free verse and, in one case, an acrostic—are necessarily sparer than Gilah’s detailed prose but serve equally well to bring readers into his mind. Guillermo is developing independence while remaining connected to his close-knit clan, discovering the confidence to share his work with the public, and defining his own role at his family’s bakery and in his new community. An abundance of local details brings the book’s Washington setting to life. The strong secondary characters, including Gilah’s gymnast younger sister, Miri; her Hebrew tutor, Josh; and Guillermo’s math teacher, Mr. Whitaker, are multilayered and fully realized. Themes of Judaism, identity, self-determination, and family are seamlessly woven into the story, making for a solidly plotted and well-paced novel with emotional resonance throughout.

A well-written and engaging tale of a new friendship featuring a compelling cast.


A woman’s besotted affair with New York is celebrated in these exuberant writings.

Australian-born novelist Emanuel’s rambling memoirs of her sojourns in New York and her short fiction set in the city blend together into a love letter that views Gotham’s iconic scenes and experiences from off-kilter angles. Chief among these are Emanuel’s wanderings through the city’s art scene, viewing everything from classical sculpture to Rembrandt self-portraits to avant-garde gallery offerings. (“I can only think of kneepads,” she remarks of a performance piece in which the artist crawled across a concrete floor strewn with glass shards.) She also got distracted by a man’s jiggling leg during a performance of *Carmen* at the Metropolitan Opera; went on many a shopping expedition (at one boutique, she absent-mindedly shoplifted a purse); ruminated on John Lennon at the Dakota and Dylan Thomas at the White Horse Tavern; encountered celebrated street performer The Naked Cowboy, clad only in undies, on 42nd Street during a blizzard; battled a balky MetroCard reader; savored the fish section at Zabar’s food nirvana; and listened patiently to the yackety anecdotes of natives. (“As I gets out of the car, I closes the door and my coat catches in the door. Ira the stupid klutz starts driving away.”) Later sections of the book feature flash fiction, also about women wandering New York, drawn by tenuous romantic leads but mainly just taking in the city’s aura. A final story removes itself to Sydney to plumb the fraught relationship of an insecure art student and her melodramatic friend—before returning to New York for melancholy reflection on the friendship’s tragic demise.

Emanuel’s feuilletons unfold as a swirling kaleidoscope of impressions that add up to an urban odyssey reminiscent of Stephen Dedalus’ passage through Dublin in *Ulysses*. Her gorgeous, evocative prose renders even a subway annoyance as a standout image: “In the seat opposite us, sits the exact opposite of tantalizing, a stoner ogre slumps half asleep, legs sprawled, a claw hammer poking out of his pocket.” As the city emerges through her layered atmospherics, Emanuel conveys the dynamic of loneliness and longing playing out in them. (“In the shadow of a fifth-floor walk-up, a chain-smoking figure presses his face to the window pane. The tip of his cigarette smouldering red. Two lone voyeurs. Me eating a Twinkie and him slouching on the razor’s edge. Oh Jesus.”) At times the writing breaks free into a surreal lyricism that’s right on the edge of incoherence—"A film, a robot, the city of rationality remembers me giddy as a goddess and maggot man dancing on stained carpet, punching the jukebox as he upends packets of chips into my open mouth of that Sunday, do I whisper, Come home with me”—yet somehow makes sense. Anyone who has lived in—or dreamed of—New York will find here an
“Grass’ audacious mix of dark fantasy, horror, apocalyptic fiction, and Finnish folklore pits a lost boy against a mythic goddess of death who is trying to remake the world in her dark vision.”

“...the sheer uniqueness of the storyline is an obvious strength.”

“A darkly delectable, fresh blend of horror and Finnish myth.”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review) 🌟
engrossing portrait of its mundane magic.
A captivating homage to the city and the restless souls inhabiting it.

THE POSEN LIBRARY OF JEWISH CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION
Volume Eight: Crisis and Creativity Between World Wars, 1918-1939
Ed. by Endelman, Todd M. & Zvi Gitelman
Yale Univ. (1,384 pp.)
$174.00 | April 7, 2020
978-0-300-13552-7

This eighth installment in an extensive series on Jewish culture and history covers the years 1918 to 1939.

As with the previous works in this series, this book, edited by Endelman and Gitelman, professors of Jewish history and studies, respectively, at the University of Michigan, is divided into discrete sections (“Memoir and Reportage,” “Poetry,” and so on), with individual pieces within each featuring short biographies of their creators, such as H. Leivick, author of the 1921 play The Golem, who fled from Belorussia to the United States in 1913. Over the course of more than 1,000 pages, the editors cover a remarkably wide range of material: There are thoughts from David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel; a photo from 1920s Tel Aviv by Russian-born photographer Avraham Soskin; and a Soviet anti-religion propaganda poster with Hebrew text, aimed specifically at Jewish people. There are examinations of everything from paganism in the Bible to problematic depictions of Jewish people in the works of famous artists, as when writer Maurice Samuel asked in 1932, “Why should Aldous Huxley have Richard Greenow, the hero of the story by that name, remark à propos of nothing at all, that he is quite sure that Jews stink?” As stated in the introduction, the preference for this anthology was for longer pieces; although this allows for deeper investigations of dense topics, such as “Jewish Agricultural Colonization in Old Russia,” it also encompasses works that go in unexpected directions, such as an excerpt from French author Maurice Sachs’ revealing 1960 memoir, Witches’ Sabbath. It is in these in-depth examinations that the book shines; overall, the material may be vast, but its individual components also speak volumes.

An immense but exceedingly insightful look at a period in Jewish culture between the wars.

LEARN PYTHON THROUGH NURSERY RHYMES AND FAIRY TALES
Classic Stories Translated Into Python Programs
Eskenas, Shari
Illus. by Ana Quintero Villafraz
Sundae Electronics (80 pp.)
May 24, 2022
978-1-73590-796-3 paper
978-1-73590-798-7

An illustrated book that aims to teach kids the basics of the Python programming language.

In this short work for elementary school–age kids, colorfully illustrated by Villafraz and other uncredited artists, Eskenas, the founder and CEO of Redondo Beach, California–based Sundae Electronics, crafts a simple narrative about a faraway land where an enchanted computer generates nursery rhymes using Python programs. “A program is a collection of code that can be run by a computer,” the narration notes, starting with introductory definitions. “Every programming language has its own set of rules for how the code is written, which is called the syntax.” In small, gradual steps, Eskenas deepens the complexity of the terms and concepts that her young readers will need in order to master this language, always offered in direct,
Lisa was inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame in May of 2022.

Lisa’s invention and its business history are now in the Smithsonian National Museum of American History’s archive, Washington, D.C.

An original “Jogbra” can also be found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s costume collection where this iconic product is labeled a “revolutionary piece of women’s undergarments.”

“A memoir offers the origin story of the sports bra.”

“And thanks to the author’s storytelling skill (and wise decision to render remembered conversations as actual dialogue, a tactic more memoirs should adopt), readers will be rooting for her right from the start.”

“An engrossing account of the entrepreneur—and the bra—that changed women’s sports.”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review) ©

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easy-to-understand terms: “You assign a value to a variable with an equal sign (=), which is called an assignment operator,” goes one such passage. “The value on the right side of the equal sign is assigned to the variable on the left side of the equal sign.” The text uses different typeface colors to give different operations a clear visual element, and it’s all done in the context of well-known nursery rhymes that many kids will already know, such as “Rain, Rain, Go Away” (rendered as a program that begins “if weather == ‘rain’”), and more complex fairy tales, such as “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” (whose program features the line “if large_porridge == ‘too hot’ or large_porridge == ‘too cold’”). The combination of the fairy tale–style narration and boisterous artwork works extremely well, as it completely removes the tedium that often accompanies computer programming instruction for kids. There’s no denying the importance of getting across the basics of coding to youngsters, and it’s hard to imagine a more engaging, and therefore effective, vehicle for that education.

A brightly inventive children’s introduction to a widely used programming language.

THE WAYMAKERS
Clearing the Path to Workplace Equity With Competence and Confidence
Frank, Tara Jaye
Amplify Publishing (272 pp.)
978-1-63755-180-6

A consultant urges businesspeople to embrace equity in the workplace.

In this powerful, passionate book, Frank laments the tendency of many executives to equate “niceness with fairness.” Instead, she writes, they should strive to be “waymakers”: leaders who “make a way for other people” to find real success. She draws on her personal experiences as a Black woman in corporate America and her subsequent leadership coaching role as she notes the many advantages of equitable workplaces. Early chapters concentrate on how to assess a company’s current culture and, in so doing, learn to face “hard truths.” Throughout, the author offers salient, sobering observations that are relevant to larger societal issues, as when she notes that “We look for signs of dissent before we look for signs of agreement, and as human nature would have it, we usually find exactly what we’re looking for.” Still, she reassures readers that “Anyone can be the kind of leader who makes a way for others, if they want to be.” Most importantly, Frank provides clear, concrete strategies and tools for her goal of waymaking, pointing out “four roadblocks that have the most profound effect on the underrepresented employee experience,” for example, and four positive “business and culture outcomes” that can result from fair and equitable practices. Frank’s convincing argument presents a well-balanced blend of big-picture thinking and granular, practical advice, with references to the works of others, including Malcolm Gladwell and Soraya Chemaly, and examples from her own experience and other sources. She makes a compelling case that a leader who’s sensitive to workplace equity issues is a better leader in other areas, since such sensitivity requires such things as transparency, collaboration, and humility. Frank also points out the larger goal of such a proactive executive: “If we make the system work better for marginalized talent, we make it work better for everyone.”

A timely and profound dissertation on equity and leadership.
One dead in a city parking lot, the other on an organic farm. Two Swiss cops have to learn what links two murdered men—and confront the connection they feel to each other.

“Swiss detectives dig into the cutthroat world of organic farming...The result is an engrossing page-turner. An entertaining whodunit...”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review) ★

“A tense, character-driven crime debut perfect for fans of thoughtful police procedurals.”
—BookLife Review

For All Inquiries, Please Email
kimhaysbern@gmail.com • www.kimhaysbern.com
ARDO BY THE SEA
Gibbs, Chad Alan
Borne Back Books (300 pp.)
$12.95 paper | $3.99 e-book | May 17, 2022
978-0-98571-658-5
A 16-year-old investigates her new high school’s murderous secrets in Gibbs’ YA novel.
Izzy Brown and her twin brother, Axl, are living in a trailer with their mother in Dandridge, Florida, when Axl’s football talents earn them both a wealthy and powerful benefactor. Real estate mogul Dalton Wolfe moves the twins to the exclusive Bardo Academy, named after its neighboring “laboratory-developed beach community,” as Izzy calls it. Axl quickly feels at home there as the star jock, but Izzy’s feisty comebacks and thoughtful nature make it harder for her to feel at ease with kids whose houses look “like the set of a drug lord film.” Still, she finds her place on the staff of the Bardo Breeze, the school newspaper, and befriends Elton Jones-Davies, a nice boy with Asperger syndrome who loves editing Wikipedia entries. Wanting to become an investigative journalist on a par with Nellie Bly, Izzy, with Elton’s help, starts digging into the unsolved 1983 murder of Ricky Lee, another star football player who was attending Bardo on a scholarship. As adults who remember Ricky become skittish around the investigation, Izzy finds herself turning to prescription drugs to numb the stress of trying to untangle dark secrets. Set in 2008, months before that year’s financial crisis and at the beginning of the opioid crisis, Gibbs’ teen thriller has smart, relevant social commentary bubbling under its surface. Izzy is capable and smart but also relatably flawed and critical of herself, and flashbacks to 1983 reveal Ricky’s status as an outsider at Bardo in multiple ways. The parallel stories reinforce the book’s complex perspective on privilege, otherness, and Florida in general while leading up to an outlandish twist.
A fun mystery with a clever hero that offers sharp, surprising takes on big issues.
"Torres’ writing is vivid, moving, and often funny as it homes in on telling details..."

"Her characters are well rounded and authentic, and she takes her time to paint a fully realized portrait of a family with unspoken secrets and unshakeable bonds..."

"The novel’s nuanced treatment of complex themes, including death, divorce, illness, sexism, racism, and even the supernatural, makes this a very impressive debut, indeed."

"An intimate and remarkable family saga."
—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review) 

FOR ALL INQUIRIES, PLEASE EMAIL
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“A darkly delectable, fresh blend of horror and Finnish myth.”

**A BOY’S HAMMER**

_González, Estela_
_Cyrren Press (236 pp.)_
__$30.00 | $5.99 e-book | May 10, 2022_
_978-1-947976-31-3_

Themes of environmental justice, queer love, and Indigenous rights intersect in González’s mystery.

Mariana and Luisa Sánchez Celis grew up in a household with a mother disabled by a stroke, their uncle Alonso, and caretaker Amalia. The novel, set in 1990 and 1991, filters the events of the story through the colorism, racism, and patriarchy of their society as 22-year-old Mariana falls in love with Fernanda, an Indigenous Seri woman who’s passionate about protecting the turtles of the Sinaloa coast from extinction. After leaving Mexico to attend Juilliard, Mariana returns to find that Alonso has gone missing, and anti-poaching laws are harming local fisherman while industrial development hurts the wildlife and beaches. She, Luisa, Fernanda, and others start a business to preserve the livelihoods of locals while speaking up against powerful family friends. As the mystery of Alonso’s disappearance is resolved, a truth about Mariana is revealed.

The second part of the novel focuses on Clavel Celis Coulson, Luisa and Mariana’s mother, as a high-society 16-year-old forced to find her place in a complex and dynamic social setting. González’s characters feel simultaneously archetypal and individual. On one level, they represent changing attitudes of various segments of Mexican society from the 1970s to the 2000s—enthusiastic, money-hungry land developers; an Indigenous conservationist; and an uncomfortable elite clinging to traditionalism. Yet the first-person perspectives of Mariana and Clavel showcase the specific desires, hopes, and dreams of each person as they try to find their place in a complex and dynamic social setting. González shines at exploring the effects of racist discrimination against Indigenous Mexicans without ever reducing characters to mere pawns. Her prose style is simple yet poignant and emotive, particularly when describing human desire and natural beauty: “Nothing relaxed me more than Bach combined with the aromas of the ocean and the sight of beauty. If only music could bend life to its rules.” González’s closing notes provide the story’s critical real-world origins.

A suspenseful but tender tale that exemplifies the power of intersectionality.

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**ARRIBADA**

_González, Estela_
_Cyrren Press (236 pp.)_
__$30.00 | $5.99 e-book | May 10, 2022_
_978-1-947976-31-3_

Grass’ audacious mix of dark fantasy, horror, apocalyptic fiction, and Finnish folklore pits a lost boy against a mythic goddess of death who is trying to remake the world in her dark vision.

Fifteen-year-old Alan and his mother, Lena, disappeared in a plane crash off the coast of Helsinki and were presumed dead. But 20 years later, when a “massive, inked savage” inexplicably appears after an explosion creates a crater in a petroleum refinery outside of Philadelphia, the amnesiac giant eventually remembers that his name is Alan—and that for the last two decades he has been wandering in a place called Tuonela, a purgatorial realm of the dead in Finnish mythology, where he has had to survive a never-ending onslaught of hellish creatures bent on his annihilation. Covered with ritualistic hammer tattoos and 7 feet tall, Alan is brought to the home of his affluent aunt by Jefferson O’Brady, a Philadelphia homicide detective who used to be his childhood best friend—O’Brady is tasked with finding a prolific serial killer who is terrifying the inhabitants of Philadelphia. As O’Brady finds tangential connections between the serial killer’s crime scenes and the strange arrival of Alan, the murders begin to increase, and soon the body count is in the hundreds. As an otherworldly terror blankets the city, Alan sets off on his own quest—to go back to Helsinki, locate his mother, and somehow figure out his role in the interdimensional conflict.

In this genre hybrid—which seamlessly fuses elements of horror, police procedural, and mythology—the sheer uniqueness of the storyline is an obvious strength. Readers will be kept off balance throughout, and the numerous plot twists make for a satisfyingly unpredictable read. Additionally, Grass, whose previous novel was _Dreck_ (2021), ably creates layered, emotionally astute characters. Alan and O’Brady are deeply and insightfully portrayed, and so are numerous secondary characters, like Alan’s aunt Mimi, his friend Rebecca, and Christian Henneman, a cultist who is fittingly described as “a cross between Ra’s-al-Ghul and Tony Robbins.” Along with the genre elements and bombshell-laden storyline, the richly described worldbuilding helps create a wildly immersive read. The various interdimensional worlds, and their nightmarish creatures, come alive on the page: “The biggest swarm were eyeless, humanoid devils with double-joints, obsidian black skin and long tongues slithering out past needlepoint teeth; their wings stretched from their waists up to their deformed wrists, odd-angled bones jutting out like compound fractures.” An excerpt from the novel perfectly describes the reading
experience: “A bloody feast. A bountiful cornucopia of carnage, to be relished, to soak in.”

A darkly delectable, fresh blend of horror and Finnish myth.

MAKING THE ROUNDS
Defying Norms in Love and Medicine
Grayhall, Patricia
She Writes Press (344 pp.)
$17.95 paper | $8.99 e-book | Oct. 11, 2022
978-1-64742-273-8

A young woman steadfastly challenges sexism, prejudice, and societal norms in this memoir.

Grayhall's pseudonymous debut takes on crucial topics by detailing the author's experiences in love and medicine. Immediately, the reader steps into the shoes of an isolated young woman who imagined herself as the “only lesbian in Arizona” in 1965. The author describes discovering her attraction to women and the ugly stereotypes that bigots attached to being gay. However, the author’s strong spirit shines through in moments of empowering self-discovery, her passion for education, and her confidence in the possibility of finding love. As Part I concludes, Grayhall tells of heading to medical school at the University of Utah. Part II follows Grayhall as one of five female students in a class of 100, showing the stark realities of being a woman in a world dominated by men. Grayhall's love of science propelled her forward, and she excelled in school as she continued her search for love. It's heartening to read about her pursuing relationships after her earlier loneliness and confusion, but life for Grayhall pivoted once again when she accepted an internship at Boston University Hospitals. In the grueling Part III, she recalls working 36-hour shifts in hostile environments where she was treated as inferior to her male peers; at home, she struggled to maintain relationships with women. The author writes with a sense of blunt reality and warm humanity, revealing how a doctor's life can be exhausting and despairing. After beginning a residency at the Harvard School of Public Health, however, Grayhall's life improved, and from this moment—including Part IV, aptly titled “The Reckoning”—the memoir centers primarily around love and loss instead of the demanding work of a doctor. The struggles, deeply felt emotions, and coming-of-age triumphs make this memoir touching and personal, and it will stir reflection in those who read it.

An honest, heart-rending memoir about finding oneself.

FLIGHT
A Memoir of Loss and Discovery by an Aviator’s Daughter
Gustaitis, Rasa
Self (306 pp.)
$18.00 paper | $2.99 e-book | Sept. 27, 2021
978-1-73770-510-9

In this debut memoir, Gustaitis recalls her family’s flight from Eastern Europe during World War II and her father’s disappearance.

The author, a former reporter for the Washington Post, writes that she enjoyed a “peaceful and comfortable childhood” in Kaunas, Lithuania, until the fateful day in 1940 when she learned that Russian forces had invaded her country. Her father, Antanas, was a brigadier general and chief of the Lithuanian air force; he devised a plan for the family to escape to Argentina via Poland and Germany, but when they left the country, he...
stayed behind, planning to rejoin them later. The author fled with her mother, Bronislava, and never saw her father again. Before this, the author says, she was “oblivious” to the war’s impact on her part of the world, but no longer; although they briefly escaped to Germany, they soon returned to Lithuania to try to find Antanas, to no avail. They lived under Nazi occupation there for nearly four years and then had to leave again when Russian forces returned at the war’s conclusion. She longed for a return to what her mother called “The Time Before”—an aching desire that Gustaitis depicts in heartbreaking, poignant terms: “Of course, I thought, the war would soon end. Then the Russians would leave our country; Lithuania would again be free. And then my father would return...he would find his way back, and so would we.” Decades later, once the Soviet Union crumbled, the author returned to Lithuania to learn the tragic fate of her father at the hands of the Soviet secret police. This is a rare book, written by a gifted author: a thoughtful and rigorous rendering of history and a deeply candid recollection of survival against formidable odds. Over the course of this work, Gustaitis conveys, in affecting, elegiac language, not only the impact on her part of the world, but no longer; although they soldiers are as hostile to freed Blacks as their Southern counterparts. Alongside vivid descriptions of the chaos and intensity of 19th-century warfare, this stirring book explores the evolving class and racial attitudes of the time. An author’s note gives a brief biography of Joseph Pierce, the “real-life Chinese Yankee” on whom the book is based.

A moving depiction of courage and immigrant pride amid the horrors of war.

**FREEDOM FOR ME: A CHINESE YANKEE**

*Haas, Stacie*
Farmer’s Lane Press (228 pp.)
April 13, 2022
979-8-98594-100-5
979-8-98594-101-2 paper

In a new edition of this novel for roughly ages 10 and up, a Chinese American boy enlists in the Union Army to fight against slavery but must also battle prejudice.

Young Thomas Beck is not really sure how old he was when his uncle saved his life by hiding him on an American merchant ship about to sail away from Canton harbor in China. The kindly captain, Joseph Beck, took the young stowaway home to Connecticut, where he and his wife named him Thomas and raised him as their own alongside his brother, Robert. Ten years later, Thomas is a normal, rough-and-tumble, freedom-loving American boy, with only his Asian facial features and the hair-style known as a “braided queue” to signal his Chinese heritage. Thomas and his brother long to fight in the Civil War, though Robert scoffs, “There ain’t no such thing as a Chinese Yankee.” Ignoring their mother’s warning that their place is at home with her, both boys run away to enlist in the 14th Regiment Connecticut Volunteer Infantry. Thomas soon finds harsh truth in Robert’s warning that, “Folks don’t know what being Chinese means,” as he faces rejection and hostility from new comrades, including, heartbreakingly, his own brother. Unable to hide his difference, Tom embraces his Chinese identity with stubborn courage and an American belief in freedom and fairness as he is plunged into one bloody battle after another. Haas’ narrative brings the contradictions of that devastating conflict to life as the brothers encounter a world of complex moralities. Saved from a life of enslavement as a coolie in China, Tom feels a deep connection to the fight against slavery, but many of his fellow soldiers are as hostile to freed Blacks as their Southern counterparts. Haas’ works in translation of contemporary Nepalese poet Durga Lal Shrestha’s works in *The Blossoms of Sixty-Four Sunsets* (2014). His own “Sense and Reference,” set in Patan, Nepal, pairs two columns of stanzas; at left, the poet recounts a conversation with a Nepalese friend working out the meanings of mākbu, a word for many disparate flavors, such as those of bananas, rice flakes, and avocados. He doesn’t get it, concluding that “Clearly, I have no taste / and no clue.” On the right-hand side, a column in italics describes birds and animals above and around a temple carved with erotic images, said to protect the temple from “the prudish / virgin goddess of lightning.” Like many other poems in the book, this one contrasts the mundane—a tea stall, a snack—with the numinous while also drawing connections between them. The mystery of taste, the birds and monkeys living their animal lives, the sculptured tantric couplings, the casual conversation effectively intertwine like the words of a poem itself. The poet explores other seeming dualities in other works, including birth and death, fate and chance, and the natural and human-made worlds; there is a clear sense of longing for connection as well as images of thirst, hunger, and desire. Although one poem (“News at Eleven”) employs the hendecasyllable meter of classical poetry, most are written in free verse that’s lushly allusive yet chiseled to essentials. The prosody is marked by pleasing alliteration and assonance, as in “Now & Then,” in which the
“A rauously funny yet heartfelt and illuminating tale of holy orders at their most chaotic.”

OUR LADY OF THE HIGHWAY

Hartley, Hal
Elboro Press (316 pp.)
$17.99 paper | June 14, 2022
978-1-73792-743-3

Rogue nuns and a psychic novice reinvigorate a failing convent in this comic novel.

Hartley’s rollicking yarn centers on Our Lady of the Highway, a run-down convent in a grim, industrial area of Brooklyn where the sisters have spent 347 years praying non-stop in shifts for world peace. But with only three nuns left, the youngest being the 71-year-old Mother Superior, Sister Bernadette, their vigil will sputter out unless the parish priest and selfless even as she pauses to slip a handgun into her ankle.

The family was homeless for the first six years of the author’s life. Despite her father’s being employed full-time, they could not afford a permanent residence. Haslam became accustomed to squatting or staying in slums, during which time she witnessed the deaths of her twin siblings, who suffered from malnutrition. The author was determined to gain an education, and her first break arrived when she was offered a job with Bank of America, where she later became president of its Charity and Diversity Network in India. Devoting her life to charitable causes, including the founding of Remedia, a trust that helps educate hundreds of children in India, Haslam was honored with the Mother Teresa Memorial International Award in 2017. This is a deeply affecting, harrowing story that will remain locked in readers’ memories. Haslam’s delicate, descriptive writing style captures even her most distressing moments, including when her deceased baby sister was placed in a tea chest rather than a coffin: “My mother began to seal the top of the chest in place—methodically, like an artist, dripping candle wax along the narrow edges.” Always capable of pinpointing emotions, the author elegantly describes how her childhood shaped her later purpose in life: “I had never forgotten how much the small gestures of kindness in my childhood meant to me and what a difference they had made for my family.” Drawing on her talent as a motivational speaker, Haslam delivers succinct words that have the power to both inspire and move, and inspire readers in equal measure.

A remarkable account that captures the horror of hardship and the power of charity.
Swiss detectives dig into the cut-throat world of organic farming in Hays’ twisty murder mystery series starter.

The city of Bern—Switzerland’s clean, orderly capital—has a rare moment of mayhem when a policeman named Jonas Pauli is accused of clubbing Simon Etter to death during a riot. Det. Giuliana Linder is assigned to investigate the incident and subtly pressured by police brass to find another culprit to take the heat off Jonas, who swears he hit Simon only once, lightly, and that the second, fatal blow must have been struck by someone else. Giuliana feels torn by the case: She’d like to exonerate Jonas, but she’s also prided to believe the worst because of her immersion in Bern’s counterculture as a student, her leftist journalist husband Ueli’s distrust of all police (except her, she hopes), and her 15-year-old daughter’s arrest for rioting on the night of the murder. Pauli’s story gains credence when Giuliana turns up evidence that Simon was a drug dealer who might have had enemies. But the case takes a swerve when Giuliana’s colleague Renzo Donatelli links it to the murder of an organic farmer named Frank Schwab, who was found beaten, smothered to death, and drenched in pesticide—a substance the doctrinaire Frank never allowed on his farm. The prime suspect is a suspicious young man known as Simu, who was often around Frank’s farm—and turns out to be someone connected to Giuliana’s other case. The plot thickens as Giuliana ties Simon to an Albanian drug kingpin and Renzo probes the harsh economics of organic farming. Meanwhile, Giuliana and the handsome Renzo struggle to fend off their intensifying desire for each other as their marriages fray.

This first installment of Hays’ Linder and Donatelli mystery series steeps readers in intricate procedural details, such as turning horrific photos of a dead victim’s bloated face into recognizable artist’s sketches; piecing together timelines to verify alibis; and even sussing out the niceties of organic certification and agricultural subsidies. Hays’ plotting is first-rate as she keeps the sleuthing believable and offers up earned revelations, which make sense of the clues even when they go in unexpected directions. Her punchy, evocative prose looks beneath Switzerland’s veneer of antiseptic quaintness to find grungy atmospherics, as in a description of an informant: “A piercing through the nasal septum reminded her of snot dangling from each nostril, and tattoos of thorny vines covered what she could see of his arms. Steel plugs had stretched his earlobes into gaping tunnels.” The author is equally good at painting the inner worlds of her characters, from overworked cops and worried parents to fog-brained criminals: “Christ, he was blitzed... The shots of schnapps—that’d been his mistake. Still, he’d managed; he’d managed everything. Things were set up the way he wanted them. And if he’d messed up somewhere...well, it could be fixed. Later.” The result is an engrossing page-turner.

An entertaining whodunit that finds plenty of toxic rot in a seemingly wholesome setting.

Baseball players travel back in time to the wild major leagues of the early 20th century in this fantasy. Hermanos’ tale follows three modern-day San Francisco Giants teammates—prima donna star André Vélez, who keeps hammering homers with the help of illicit steroids; struggling rookie second baseman Johnny Blent; and grizzled manager Bucky Martin. They get catapulted back to the year 1906 during an earthquake and wash up with the New York Giants. The trio takes in a barely recognizable sport where bats weigh 50 ounces; unkempt playing fields are studded with rocks and potholes; spitballs are legal; drunken fans routinely attack players on the diamond; and contracts pay $800 a year. Blent and Vélez painfully adjust—the half Black Vélez pretends to be a Native American to get into the segregated majors—to become top players. Martin, meanwhile, gets hired as manager thanks to his 21st-century sabermetrics; he gradually tames a team that likes liquor, vandalism, and gunplay better than practicing and leads the Giants from the cellar to the World Series. Unfortunately, the trio’s new timeline is warped by the presence of New Glory, a Caribbean slave empire run by Confederates who escaped to Cuba after the Civil War and are forcing Albert Einstein to build them an atom bomb. When New Glory’s baseball league challenges the Giants to a “Solar Series,” the fate of the world hangs in the balance. Hermanos’ novel mixes steampunk themes into a vivid baseball yarn that’s full of colorful period details and piquant sketches of historical figures, from wily mound genius Christy Mathewson to a blustery Theodore Roosevelt and a mad Nikola Tesla. The author’s portrait of old-time baseball steeps readers in intricate strategizing, punchy dialogue—“Phillippe, you fucking infant! Suck your thumb! Shake your rattle!” goes a typical on-field razzing—and play-by-play that’s riveting and even lyrical. (“Head down, legs churning, he senses the white light of God is emanating from second base as he races for it, the ball crossing his field of vision as he slides, the ball ticking off the second baseman’s glove, Blent popping up and zipping for third, McGraw’s fist of a face staring at the ball coming in, ‘Down! Down! Down!’ ”) Readers will stick with this riotous page-turner to the last out.

A raucously entertaining, richly atmospheric SF–tinged sports fable.
As the story unfolds, Baba tells the children a quest tale about 2009, and Kimia is working as a spiritual counselor in California. She and her family still grapple with the psychological impacts of war—her mother in particular is afflicted by bouts of shaking yet longs to return to her homeland. Kimia and her brother, Arman. Kimia and her friend Reza Khan return to Iran, to buy naan at a bakery when she is distracted by a puppet show performed by an enigmatic, aging storyteller. The square is targeted by a missile strike, and Kimia is dragged to safety by her brother, Arman. Kimia and her friend Reza Khan return to the scene of the devastation and discover a trapdoor that leads them into the magical realm of the storyteller, Baba Morshed. As the story unfolds, Baba tells the children a quest tale about the Simorgh, a bird from Persian mythology. Fast-forward to 2009, and Kimia is working as a spiritual counselor in California. She and her family still grapple with the psychological impact of war—her mother in particular is afflicted by bouts of shaking yet longs to return to her homeland. Kimia and her family journey to Iran but find themselves in the midst of the Green Uprising, where the ghosts of their past pose a clear danger. Honarvar’s gorgeously evocative prose subtly captures the young Kimia’s irrepressible delight in the face of oppression: “My sun-soaked eyes followed the touch, and although I couldn’t make out his face, I knew it was Reza. I broke into a smile. Not even my hijab could restrain the elation beaming from me.” The narrative is written predominantly from Kimia’s perspective, but some chapters are devoted to the viewpoints of other characters, such as Arman. Each is written in the first person, and although the author presents a variety of distinct voices, some readers may feel that a third-person narrative mode for such players would add further stylistic texture. This is a minor criticism of a story that draws beautifully on the power of Iranian fables to unearth the magical, restorative world that Kimia finds beneath the rubble of war: “The smooth texture of the wall changed to a rugged surface with dramatic peaks and valleys. I paused and examined a stone carving of the giant Simorgh stretched out before me.” This stellar first novel marks the writer as an author to watch.

A spellbinding, compelling, and multifaceted tale about an Iranian family haunted by war.

In Huddles’ fantasy novel inspired by South Asian culture, an abused princess finds love in the arms of a traveling musician and later undertakes a quest to achieve inner peace. Twenty-one-year-old Asha is the last Raajakumaaree born to Palace Isha, a house that, by the decree of the royal Shaasak, sits in the subpolar forest 800 miles north of the Shaasak’s seat of government. However, she’s ceded her hereditary title to her abusive husband, Cabaan, whose only love is money. As Cabaan uproots the forest for profit, clearing it to plant the grotesque and deadly kuroop trees that feed on mineral deposits and harden into priceless wolfram-wood, Asha takes a substance known as dava to endure his marital attentions. When Asha isn’t numb, she’s miserable; it was she who instigated the marriage, and now she blames herself for the forest’s destruction. Then, on the eve of her 22nd birthday, she meets and falls in love with Ilarô, the royal geetakaar, or poetry singer. Their time together is soon cut short, but Ilarô’s influence on Asha is lasting. She sets out to petition the Shaasak to get a divorce, but will she survive the 800-mile journey and find the closure that she so desperately seeks? Huddles’ omniscient narrative frames Asha’s life as a fable told in the far future. This conceit effectively allows for a fairy tale–like melding of the real and the unreal as well as occasional breaking of the fourth wall. As a result, events feel heightened throughout; the characters—with the exception of Asha’s inventor cousin, Omala—tend toward familiar archetypes, and the second half of the book takes on a mystic bent that adds gravitas and slows the pace. The prose style is accomplished and often unrestrained, with simple dialogue but descriptive flourishes and lengthy musings on meanings and motivations: “the forces of impossibility and inevitability were working evenly on her, leaving no remainder.” The result is immersive and beautiful—a tragic romance that will appeal to lovers of diverse, original storytelling.

A rich, dreamy tale that’s infused with spirituality.
cruising areas, the narrator, who is only given the nickname Deep Thoughts, notices a sign admonishing pedestrians to “Stay on Paths, Avoid Desire Lines.” But Deep Thoughts’ life has already taken him far from the prescribed path of a working-class Black youth growing up in a 1970s Brooklyn housing project and yearning for the sexy sophistication of Manhattan. His first deviation came when a school desegregation lottery provided entrance to a mostly White school and the superior education it offered while driving “a wedge into my life that would forever separate me from my origins.” His second desire line was his gay identity, which transformed from subconscious longing to physical reality when he was 15 years old. By 1982, he had achieved his Manhattan dreams, living in a tenement in Hell’s Kitchen and inhabiting “a country where convention no longer matters.” Now, his life is fueled by drugs, easily available moments of intense physical release, and the exhilaration of being part of a newly awakening community in which pride still battles with shame. On the fringes of his awareness, newspapers begin to report a new disease with the bleakly ironic acronym AIDS, though “nothing about it promises to be the least bit helpful.” The precision and honesty of Johnson’s writing bring an immediacy and universality to a narrative that is firmly anchored in its historical time and its particular set of marginalized identities. The narrator’s gay world combines hard-boiled hipster coolness with an easily wounded sensitivity. The exultant freedom of the dance club and even the first anonymous sexual experience in a subway bathroom are portrayed with a poetic sensuality that invites empathy. Explorations of the Black experience are similarly nuanced and varied, from a description of the protagonist’s mother’s “proper family” with “good hair and paper-bag tested complexions” to the contradictions of African nations’ emerging from colonization, learned during Deep Thoughts’ Peace Corps stint in Zaire.

A riveting, lyrical tale about a Black gay man’s unflinching odyssey during a cultural upheaval.

THE HIGH PRICE OF FREEWAYS
Juanita, Judy
Livingston Press (210 pp.)
$29.95 | $18.95 paper | July 20, 2022
978-1-60489-318-2 paper
978-1-60489-319-9

A volume of short stories reflects aspects of the Black experience on the East and West coasts.

This prose collection from poet and fiction writer Juanita (following Manhattan My As, You’re in Oakland, 2020) features tales set in Northern California and the New York metropolitan area. Some are set in the present and recent past, while others reach back to the 1960s and ’70s. Some of the characters are political activists, working for the Black Panther Party and attending student conferences, while others are more practical than intellectual, focusing on day jobs, chronic pain, and failing relationships. The protagonist of “Making Room” sees ghosts. In “Driving,” just two paragraphs long, the narrator’s poor skills at the wheel tie her to the other motorists who keep her safe. In “Not a Through Street,” one of the more lighthearted works in the assemblage, a comedian works on her material while dealing with an attraction to her acupuncturist. “Between General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz” is the story of a hapless woman who tries her relatives’ patience one time too many, and “Triplets” explores family relationships from another, sadder, angle. “Huelbo” borrows from the author’s own autobiography in its depiction of a woman editing the Black Panther Party’s newspaper, with the fictional characters joined by historical figures. “If 9/11 Had Happened in Harlem, This Would Be a Different World” encapsulates its premise in the title, then dives into a sardonic alternative history in which some outcomes seem inescapable.

The thought-provoking and evocative collection offers stories with enjoyable and well-designed plots, a constant stream of vivid imagery (one house is “a light green between celery and onion”), and well-turned phrases (“I began drinking legally about when he exited the womb”), and insightful meditations on why the world is the way it is. All have the idea of Blackness at their core, both implicitly and explicitly. Juanita’s characters understand the nuanced differences among Oakland, Berkeley, and San Francisco and the gradations of skin color elided by the Brown Paper Bag Test (characters are identified as “shades between sand and the shore’; “leaf brown”; and “the brown of an overripe peach’). Some of the tales explore the generational divide between parents who achieve the milestones of Black middle-class respectability and their children, who would rather overturn the system than rise to its upper ranks, particularly “Sorors,” a dark take on joining a Greek organization. A few of the settings and characters appear in multiple stories, but each one stands alone. Readers can easily follow Ouida into the Ira Levin–esque domestic horror of “A Lucky Day” without first watching her marriage fall apart in “The Hand.” The tales raise plenty of questions without offering easy answers, and the mix of historical and contemporary settings suggests that the questions of belonging, equity, love, and responsibility remain unsolved over the course of decades. Fans of Danzy Senna and ZZ Packer will find plenty to appreciate in these pages.

A compelling and challenging collection of tales that will entice readers.

THE REZ DETECTIVES
Judd, Steven Paul & Tovi Jacob
Illus. by G.M.K. Perker
Literati Press Comics and Novels (60 pp.)
$13.99 | Dec. 7, 2021
978-1-943988-33-4

Choctaw youngsters and amateur sleuths tackle their first case—missing ice cream—in this irresistible middle-grade graphic novel.

When summer brings the blistering heat, people in a small community on an unnamed reservation scrounge for loose
change for frozen treats. This year, however, the ice cream truck is a no-show. Fifth grader Tasembo would prefer staying indoors with video games. But when his crush, Okchanlush, wants to know what happened to the ice cream man, Tasembo sees a chance to prove himself as a card-carrying detective. He doesn't have much beyond a hand-scrawled card, but he quickly recruits his brainy neighbor, Nuseka, into the Rez Dog Detective Agency. Finding the ice cream man is easy but only deepens the mystery; someone swiped his inventory, leaving Tasembo, Nuseka, and Tasembo's trusty dog, Billy Jack, to trail a thief. As an investigator, the lovably goofy Tasembo is clueless, but Nuseka has the know-how and the lab (aka her bedroom) to point right to a culprit. Judd and Jacob's story is endlessly fun and funny. Nuseka gathers legit evidence (e.g., fingerprints) and schools Tasembo on all the gumshoe lingo. While Tasembo seemingly annoys Nuseka, they're unquestionably good friends. There's likewise educational value for younger readers, from translated Choctaw words (e.g., keyu, meaning no) to the mild, solvable mystery. The book teems with comedy told through visuals, and illustrator Perker, who's drawn for Marvel, DC, and the New Yorker, layers details onto every character and colorful backdrop. The ice cream man, for one, looks like an ice cream cone, complete with a perfectly round head like the scoop on top. The writers and the illustrator round out this novel with hilarious faux ads. Includes instructions for making a tin-cup phone and a mini air conditioner.

Unforgettable kid detectives plus dazzling artwork make this book a must-have.

UNSAY THEIR NAMES
Kannemeyer, Derek
Blurb (244 pp.)
$170.00 | Sept. 15, 2021
978-1-00649-018-7

A powerful photographic testament to a series of inspiring protests.

Poet, playwright, and photographer Kannemeyer's book opens with a compelling preface on the "great American rift" after the 2020 murder of George Floyd and goes on to present six months' worth of images of the author's home city of Richmond, Virginia, from June to November 2020, as well as two appendices following up on events in 2021. Across eight chronological chapters, anchored with expansive notes throughout, Kannemeyer presents an astounding photographic catalog of changes that were happening in Richmond, centering on statues of Confederates and other historical figures. The book opens with an image of the Robert E. Lee monument, Richmond's statuary centerpiece, and readers see its marble facade covered in inspirational art and messages that offer celebrations of Black Lives Matter and criticisms of policing. Kannemeyer's eye is also drawn to many people who stand up against monuments to White supremacy, showing them protesting the statue's “Lost Cause” legacy. Kannemeyer interperses notes throughout that give the collection a diarylike feel—naming, for example, how daytime gatherings were peaceful but that ones at night “hardened the tone.” He also includes historical commentary, such as a passage dispelling the oft-cited myth that Robert E. Lee was opposed to slavery. Later chapters include powerful photos of a toppled edifice of Christopher Columbus as it was fished out of water; the removal, by crane, of a statue of Stonewall Jackson as people look on in a blustery rainstorm; and the Jefferson Davis Memorial, covered in graffiti condemning his racist legacy. In closing appendices, Kannemeyer offers thoughtful reflections on ongoing questions about how Americans memorialize their history; he writes of his hope to find "other ways, and other places, to pay tribute."

A stirring record of anti-racism in a Southern city.

CRIMINALS
Karpa, Mike
Mumbler Press (336 pp.)
$11.95 paper | $3.99 e-book | Sept. 21, 2021
978-1-73624-441-8

Two lost souls in Japan attempt to get their lives on track by running drugs in this caper novel.

Karpa’s tale follows characters living on the margins of an atmospheric Tokyo circa 1994. Floyd Conner, a 20-something gay American expatriate, smuggles a brick of hashish from Bangkok to help his lover, bar owner Arata, pay his debt to the yakuza. Conner is surprised to discover an attraction to his housemate, Katie, when she seduces him; later, he wakes up to find that Katie has stolen the hash and fled. When he tracks her down, she beats him up and gives him the slip again. He desperately tries to recoup his losses with a drug run to Hawaii on behalf of American ex-intelligence operative Paul Barkley. Along the way, Conner meets Marika Shirayama, a 30-year-old Japanese bar hostess who’s fleeing a stifling marriage and an awful mother-in-law. Paul ropes Marika into the Hawaiian trip to help him with a shady real estate deal he’s plotting, but she and Conner quickly recognize each other as kindred spirits and wind up in bed together, as well. When police nab Conner at the Tokyo airport, he and Marika become tangled in a web of betrayals. Karpa's comic noir has the feel of an Elmore Leonard novel, with colorful grifters and creeps tangled in tawdry machinations in a vividly rendered demimonde. Tokyo is a vibrant setting of traditional niceties and crass modernity, where “the diesel-scented air flowing freely into [Conner’s] lungs felt excellent.” The mysteries are psychological and spiritual as well as conspiratorial, as much about Conner's thoughts about his sexuality and Marika's longing "to see the vastness of the world," as when a woman bows “too low, as women her age always seemed to do, as though competing for a national title in submission.” Readers will root for Conner and Marika to make it through Customs unscathed.

An entertaining crime yarn full of sly humor and unexpected uplift.
“The dissection of a disintegrating marriage in these pages is unsettlingly vivid.”

**BLUE HAVEN**  
*King, Lisa*  
The Story Plant (336 pp.)  
$26.95 | $16.95 paper | $7.99 e-book  
May 31, 2022  
978-1-61188-320-6  
978-1-61188-355-8 paper

In King's suspense novel, a newly wealthy woman buys a condo at an exclusive oceanside development only to find that her new home is hiding troubling secrets.

Aloe Malone had a challenging early life, including abandonment by her mother, time in foster homes, and work at her aunt's dingy diner. Things changed when she won the lottery and bought a place in Blue Haven, the world's most exclusive beachside housing development. The experience of moving, however, was rather odd: She was rendered unconscious while traveling there, to keep its location secret, and upon arrival, she finds only five other residents. Although Blue Haven boasts the world's tallest skyscraper, it's a ghost town. Her concierge, Amir, is welcoming, though, and the other residents are also happy to see her; they include an eccentric retired couple, a muscled 25-year-old named Westley, and a former opera singer named Bibs. They have amazing dinners on the beach: “Aloe loved the ambiance, cast somewhere between Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream and an episode of Survivor.” But when she tries phoning her grandmother and others, no one picks up. A diary she finds under her bed, written by a former resident, tells a chilling story that suggests something at Blue Haven is terribly amiss. King's smart thriller starts as an enticing trouble-in-paradise drama, but it soon blossoms into something more complex—an unexpectedly engaging psychological quagmire with SF elements. As Aloe’s mental state deteriorates, more is revealed about her identity and about her family's history. Her new address is a don't-miss for science-minded middle schoolers. Set in a wildly inventive world, “entropic elves,” invisible to humans, create disorder and chaos. The book's lively, relatable narrator, Typo, a young elf in third grade at the Primary School for Aging Things, speaks directly to readers, explaining that all things inevitably become older, damaged, or lost thanks to the work of the entropic elves. (And today's built-in obsolescence, he enthuses, is a golden age for the elves: “never before has aging occurred at such speed.”) Typo's specialty is mistakes in published works. His best friend Skim excels at cocoa spilling (one page of the text in Petr Štěpán's inspired book design features a realistic cocoa stain). Typo considered entropy to be the elves’ noble calling, he says, until the day his faith was shaken: During a field trip to a human bakery, his creative misspelling of a little girl's name on her birthday cake made her cry. Within the authors’ clever, informational framework, faintly reminiscent of *The Phantom Tollbooth* (1961), Typo recounts how he set out, with a talking dung beetle as his guide, to find entropy's master, the legendary Cog of Time, and stop the process of aging and disorder. Špaček's illustrations encompass witty, full-page, full-color imaginings of the elves' busy, messy world and cartoon renderings, in color and black and white, of the characters, their gadgetry, and more, on text pages. With various font sizes for emphasis and eccentric juxtapositions of text, illustrations, and chapter titles in large, transparent blue letters, Štěpán's design adds to the book's delights. *Imagination soars in this smart, humorous, visually captivating approach to a scientific concept.*

**TYPO AND SKIM**  
*Klárová, Barbora & Tomáš Končinský*  
Illus. by Daniel Špaček  
Trans. by Andrew Oakland  
Val de Grace (120 pp.)  
$26.00 | Oct. 11, 2022  
979-8-9858-7871-4

In this physics-themed fantasy, an elf’s quest to prevent entropy has unintended consequences.

What is entropy, and what would happen without it? Originally published in the Czech Republic, this new U.S. edition of co-authors Klárová and Končinský's book (translated by Oakland) is a don't-miss for science-minded middle schoolers. Set in a wildy inventive world, “entropic elves,” invisible to humans, create disorder and chaos. The book's lively, relatable narrator, Typo, a young elf in third grade at the Primary School for Aging Things, speaks directly to readers, explaining that all things inevitably become older, damaged, or lost thanks to the work of the entropic elves. (And today's built-in obsolescence, he enthuses, is a golden age for the elves: “never before has aging occurred at such speed.”) Typo's specialty is mistakes in published works. His best friend Skim excels at cocoa spilling (one page of the text in Petr Štěpán's inspired book design features a realistic cocoa stain). Typo considered entropy to be the elves’ noble calling, he says, until the day his faith was shaken: During a field trip to a human bakery, his creative misspelling of a little girl's name on her birthday cake made her cry. Within the authors’ clever, informational framework, faintly reminiscent of *The Phantom Tollbooth* (1961), Typo recounts how he set out, with a talking dung beetle as his guide, to find entropy's master, the legendary Cog of Time, and stop the process of aging and disorder. Špaček's illustrations encompass witty, full-page, full-color imaginings of the elves' busy, messy world and cartoon renderings, in color and black and white, of the characters, their gadgetry, and more, on text pages. With various font sizes for emphasis and eccentric juxtapositions of text, illustrations, and chapter titles in large, transparent blue letters, Štěpán's design adds to the book's delights. *Imagination soars in this smart, humorous, visually captivating approach to a scientific concept.*

**PERMISSION**  
*Kristal, Marc*  
Atmosphere Press (370 pp.)  
978-1-63988-111-6

A burned-out writer hits rock bottom and eventually reinvents his life in this novel.

The narrator of Kristal's tale leaves the slough of Los Angeles at the outset of the book in hopes of striking it big in the heyday of Ronald Reagan–era New York City. There, he lives the life of a high-profile freelance writer rubbing elbows with a seedy but glamorous set. “My friends were seldom writers or artists,” he reflects, “but rather a phylum of those I worked for: commodities traders, junk bond dealers, all of them arrogant, brainless, materialistic.” He also has a series of lovers, “high-strung girls, ferocious drinkers, all with hard, tiring jobs that owned a weird insubstantiality: focus group leaders, time buyers, food stylists.” Only belatedly do readers learn that the narrator has had a wife this whole time in New York, a woman who inherited a “blue-chip portfolio that paid enough in dividends to float a vie de la boheme; and the lack of a need to work
had leached into the groundwater of her emotional conflict.” Despite her initial resistance (“I’m not leaving” becomes something of a refrain throughout the story), the narrator and his wife ultimately move back to L.A, where the “consuming reality” is that everything had to sell, and if people weren’t buying your thing, you bloody well fixed it until they did. The narrator is nakedly ambitious. “God knows I wanted to make it,” he confesses. “I was dying to see a hideous flash picture of myself, snapped at an opening, on the back page of Variety.’"

The return to L.A precipitates many descents for the narrator and a key change in his wife’s life. She starts going to Alcohols Anonymous meetings. But the narrator’s efforts in the script-doctoring business feel uninspired (“The work might lack originality,” he allows, “but one sustained a career and, no less valuably, a reputation”). And as his marriage dramatically tumbles into savage antagonism, the narrator falls into a $5,000-a-month addiction to sex workers and cocaine. Kristal confesses. “I was dying to see a hideous flash picture of myself, snapped at an opening, on the back page of Variety.”

A searingly moving picture of a personal, professional, and marital crackup.

PLACES I REMEMBER Tales, Truths, Delights From 100 Countries Lane, Lea Illus. by Greg Correll

A seasoned traveler shares memories of her adventures on seven continents in this memoir.

American travel writer Lane’s first travel overseas was in 1965 for her honeymoon, when she and her then-husband traveled from the United States through Europe. In the ensuing decades, she lived in London, Bangkok, and Manila and began writing for such venues as the New York Times and HuffPost. Her desire to be her definition of a traveler (“tourists do what makes them comfortable. Travelers seek discovery”) took her to more than 100 countries over the course of 50 years. Proceeding alphabetically, beginning with Andorra and ending with Zimbabwe, Lane shares an array of memories tied to specific locales. The author describes being mugged in Barcelona, when she instinctively tried to wrestle her handbag back from her assailant—an unsettling event that was mitigated by an “idyllic” picnic in Andorra the following day. Lane also discusses reviewing hotels in Russia after perestroika and taking a river cruise from St. Petersburg to Moscow. In far-flung Madagascar, she says, she realized her lifelong dream of photographing lemurs in the wild. The author also turns her attention to the United States, celebrating the beauty of Antelope Canyon, Arizona, pondering her most treasured experiences, and listing the five states she has yet to visit. Lane stresses that this isn’t intended as a guidebook but rather a record of how she perceived the world through decades of voyaging. Charming watercolor illustrations by Correll, which are based on Lane’s photographic travel archive, complement her memories.

This is a beautifully balanced memoir that packs a wealth of personal experience into a comparatively short book. Lane captures the atmosphere of each location with swift and evocative precision, as when describing a street in Cairo: “Vendors sell issue on the dusty streets for drivers who blow their noses and wipe their sweaty faces, then toss the tissues out the windows. The snotty papers swirl like huge snowflakes as cars pass on the hot pavement.” The author also offers laconic yet thoughtful commentary throughout, as when describing the historic Mostar Bridge in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was destroyed then rebuilt following the Croat-Bosniak War in the 1990s: “Time heals. But history warns.” The unconventional but fun A-to-Z format allows the reader to work through it from cover to cover or to dip in at any point for travel inspiration. Readers concerned that this format might make for a fragmented memoir in which they never truly get to know the author need not worry. She avoids dry reportage and offers candid snippets about her personal life and travel partners: “I was traveling for the first time with an elegant man whom I was seriously dating, and I wanted to make a good impression.” Correll’s striking works offer a color palette that leans toward blues and greens, and they make this cleverly conceived and satisfying voyage of escapism all the more vivid.

Lane’s sharply observant yet intimate writing will transport readers to places all over the world.
In this debut novel that fuses horror and supernatural mystery, a woman struggles to understand a recurring nightmare that has haunted her since childhood.

Set in the fictional town of Cellar, Ohio, in 1987, the story begins as Adriana Krause—an unemployed, single mother trying to make ends meet—is embroiled in a custody battle over her 3-year-old son, Dylan, with her estranged father, Bradley Krause. Bradley is the longtime mayor of the town. After a court judge decides that in order for Adriana to keep custody of her son, she needs to secure gainful employment in the next 30 days, her life goes from bad to worse. Dylan's biological father, Eric—a drug addict who has had nothing to do with Adriana and her son for years—overdoses and dies on her couch while babysitting the boy as she attempts to get hired as a sketch artist for the local police department. Because of her uncanny ability to bring subjects to life on the sketch pad, she gets the job—barely—andbefriends a rookie cop named Matthew Hinkley. The two are both outsiders of sorts and find common ground questioning the strange and seemingly unethical decisions coming from the mayor and the police chief. As Adriana fights to keep custody of her son, she becomes increasingly beleaguered with a dream that has haunted her for years. In the dream, she is underwater at the bottom of a lake when a rotting arm explodes from the sediment, grabs her, and begins pulling her down. When she sees the corpse’s face, it’s trying to tell her something. As her father becomes embroiled in a contentious mayoral race, Adriana and Matthew begin to piece together the clues that they’ve uncovered—some from his work with cold-case files and others from her evolving nightmare—and the conclusion they both come to is as shocking as it is gruesome.

This outstanding novel is reminiscent of early works by Stephen King and Peter Straub. Lastufka brilliantly uses subtle imagery and symbolism throughout to create a decidedly dark undertone that is simultaneously creepy and nostalgic. In the very first sequence, for example, Adriana tattoos a laughing, rotting skull onto the arm of her former boyfriend as ’80s tunes blare from the radio. The utilization of music from the era adds another layer to the narrative and creates a memorable soundtrack to Adriana’s story that includes Depeche Mode’s “Strangelove,” Prince’s “Little Red Corvette,” and Pat Benatar’s “Hit Me With Your Best Shot.” And, like the aforementioned horror luminaries, the author employs sensory descriptions masterfully, using them to fully immerse readers in the eerie atmospherics. “She listened. The water lapped gently at the shore, hundreds of branches cracked under the weight of the breeze, nearby frogs croaked at the moon, and there was a faint chiming. Adriana didn’t expect to find anything pleasant in this nightmare world, but the distant bell chimed continuously, monotone and somewhat soothing.”

But, above all, it’s the surprisingly intricate plotline that powers this narrative. The wide-ranging characters—from Adriana’s neighbor’s deaf teen daughter to the courageous wife of the candidate running against Bradley—are like puzzle pieces, and with each new revelation, the gristy picture becomes clearer.

An impressive, complex horror tale—two (rotting) thumbs up.

 Massage therapists tangle in a physically and spiritually gnarly love triangle in this steamy romance.

Lilienthal’s debut novel follows Vera West, a single mom and massage therapist living in San Francisco. Vera enters into a business partnership and an affair with her massage therapy instructor, Ernesto Archer. That Ernesto is married causes Vera to fully immerse readers in the eerie atmospherics. “She listened. The water lapped gently at the shore, hundreds of branches cracked under the weight of the breeze, nearby frogs croaked at the moon, and there was a faint chiming. Adriana didn’t expect to find anything pleasant in this nightmare world, but the distant bell chimed continuously, monotone and somewhat soothing.”

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But, above all, it’s the surprisingly intricate plotline that powers this narrative. The wide-ranging characters—from Adriana’s neighbor’s deaf teen daughter to the courageous wife of the candidate running against Bradley—are like puzzle pieces, and with each new revelation, the gristy picture becomes clearer.

An impressive, complex horror tale—two (rotting) thumbs up.
In this first volume of Litton’s Kansas Murder Trilogy, “the boys”—including handsome Frankie Sage, one-eyed Jacko Swenson, fan-loving Gabe Swenson, and Lee Clayton, who has “a pretty wife”—have no money or worthwhile plans and little education. But they realize they can profit by growing, drying, and bagging hemp. Somebody else will sell it, as they know selling leads to the murkier side of things, and “Frankie always cautioned, ‘It’s not the law, it’s our own kind we’ve gotta watch out for.’” Indeed, the entry of a vicious rival group coincides with a brutal double murder. Dead are a teenager girl and her boyfriend, who recently told others that he “saw something.” The homicide investigation dovetails with the increasingly dangerous hemp harvesting and selling. A spooky subplot has Lee and his wife and young child thinking that ghosts reside in their house. The author excels at storytelling and characterization, creating a mood of loneliness. The frustration and desperation of being poor are vividly illustrated. Litton also shines at establishing a sense of place; for example, a farm carries the rich scents “of autumn grasses, cattle grazing, the milo harvest, and the broad blankets of turned-up soil.” Vibrant details enrich the novel: the clink of a glass, the swish of a dress, the yips of coyotes accompanying the wail of a distant train. The author gets the feel of the ’70s just right—the cars (Ford Fairlanes, GTOs), the clothes, and the songs. Lee keeps his radio tuned to a country station, and Litton gets bonus points for referencing not just “City of New Orleans” and its singer, Arlo Guthrie, but also the songwriter, Chicaogean Steve Goodman. Still, racist language, used infrequently, is jarring, and descriptions of cruelty to people and animals—chickens, puppies, and a beloved old bull—are hard to read.

Beautiful writing about so many sad and disturbing things in a riveting crime story.

70 ADS TO SAVE THE WORLD
An Illustrated Memoir of Social Change
Mander, Jerry
Synergetic Press (136 pp.)
$26.95 paper | $11.49 e-book | Sept. 27, 2022
978-0-907791-81-2

An activist surveys socially conscious advertising strategies as he melds an illustrated memoir with advice and critiques of runaway capitalism and environmental damage.

With hundreds of millions of dollars spent daily on razzle-dazzle advertising, “corporate or commercial interests dominate mass-media, ‘free-speech’ ad expressions in the US,” notes career adman Mander (The Capitalism Papers, 2012, etc.). Despite titans like the Jolly Green Giant and the Geiko Gecko, this book argues, ncorporate campaigners operating on “exquisitely small budgets” have had “startling success” in public engagement. Many were one-offs with short newspaper runs that maximized their efficacy through a careful blending of jarring headlines and images with
informational text. As the co-founder of the United States’ first nonprofit ad agency, Public Interest Communications, and a lifelong environmentalist and critic of capitalism, Mander is perhaps the nation’s most experienced activist advertiser. He devotes significant attention to his own years in the profession, which included antisemitic experiences such as being told by a Park Avenue ad agency in 1949: “Your hair is too kinky; try Seventh Avenue.” That initial brush with the discrimination in the industry began the yearslong transformation of an Ivy League business school graduate “from Adman to Anti-Adman,” which led to his co-founding of PIC. A skilled writer, Mander gives engaging behind-the-scenes looks into the opposite worlds of advertising and nonprofits, describing the backstories of effective ads for groups such as the Sierra Club, Planned Parenthood, Friends of the Earth. Yet the undisputed stars of this book are the socially conscious advertisements themselves, which are reprinted in full-page, high-quality images and deal with topics from animal rights and the environment to gun control. Indigenous voices and perspectives, also heard in Mander’s previous books, are highlighted in critiques of environmental degradation and unfettered capitalism. The book ends with due diligence analysis prior to the sale. As the two investigate, they steer through corporate and government agency regulations and roadblocks, and they come up against Rodney Henry, AFR’s major shareholder. He’s a middle-aged, tough player in the international mining fraternity. While McBain flies to Africa to check out the AFR mines where Neto was gathering samples, O’Daniel stays local to cover Henry—figuratively as well as literally in his penthouse bedroom. And although McBain promises O’Daniel that when he goes to Africa, he won’t take up with a former lover living there, he does connect with his blond ex, and the “air conditioning could barely keep up with the two of them.”

Aside from giving his main characters names that invite eye rolls and chuckles, Masters offers readers an intelligently written book about big business, ambition, seduction, and danger. The author’s experience working in international finance supplies authenticity to the novel, and his familiarity with Boston adds richness. Characters are complex. On the cusp of 30, and 10 years younger than McBain, O’Daniel is an analytic wunderkind with an hourglass figure wrapped in Gucci; is quick to anger; and still has feelings of inadequacy stemming from a hardscrabble past. The fact that Henry, who grew up dirt poor, recognizes those feelings in her draws her to him. McBain also suffers from flaws. He drinks too much (well, he is Boozy), can’t stop smoking, and still stings from a years-old divorce. But any failings make the high-power investigators more intriguing and relatable. Exploiting Earth’s resources is a timely topic, as are the stock market angle and heart-wrenching descriptions of African poverty. Details about McBain and O’Daniel’s past cases and their supposedly platonic relationship emerge slowly. O’Daniel could be talking about readers when she tells McBain: “Never give them too much too soon....Make them work for it.” Dialogue is sharp and often amusing; for example, one mining executive tells McBain: “We are all ruthless sons of bitches when it comes to the land. At the end of the day, we crawl out of a hole in the ground. Remember that.”

A detective story that’s sexy on the surface and smart to the core.

**THE STUFF THAT DREAMS ARE MADE OF**

**Masters, Riley**

Lost Haven Press (400 pp.)

$27.33 | $12.73 paper | $9.99 e-book

Oct. 30, 2020

978-1-64999-595-7

978-1649995964 paper

From a mine deep below Angola’s surface to a penthouse high above Back Bay in Boston, a pair of “financial detectives” investigates a corporate shark engaged in rare Earth minerals—and maybe murder—in this geopolitical thriller.

At the start of Masters’ second Boozy McBain and Boston O’Daniel novel, geologist Daniel Neto sneaks mineral samples out of a pitch-black African tunnel leading from a restricted zone 800 feet below. Leaving the area, he encounters a guard who says he’s been given “the green light to handle things my own way”—and his way relies on a machete and a crocodile. Meanwhile, in Beantown, engineer and geologist Harold Rogers is about to sell his company, HR Tech, to another mining outfit known as Africa’s Future Resources. HR Tech recently developed proprietary technology to extract and process minerals, which skyrocketed the company’s stock. Harold Rogers—and maybe murder—in this geopolitical thriller.

**ABIGAIL’S DRAGONS**

**Matthews, Patrick**

Second Story Up (308 pp.)


July 1, 2022

978-1-73307-777-4

978-1-73307-776-7 paper

From Matthews, a group of young teens must work together to escape fairy captors and control their own burgeoning powers.

Thirteen-year-old Abigail has spent the last two years shut up in a cave. She has a magical force growing inside of her, a gallu draig that affords her the ability to both heal and put others into comalike sleep. But if the gallu draig isn’t drained periodically, it will turn Abigail into a monster. Or so Abigail has been told by the tiny fae man who guards her. That is why she
Will is an earnest young man, and when his patient, little Molly V asbinder, and two of the co-conspirators who dug up V an Pelt.

Abigail believes the fae are searching for a cure. But when two Abigail and the other sleepers are accepting yet temperamen-

Abigail revives the remaining sleepers: Dwayne, Jeff, Meili, and Luca. At first they are hostile, holding Abigail to blame for her
disabilities to unleashed when Meili turns into a dragon! Can Abigail and her companions stay free from their fae pursuers and ward

off their own transformations? Matthews writes in the third person from Abigail's perspective, delivering realistic dialogue and

a well-constructed storyline. The fantastical elements are fresh, and the relationships among the teens feel authentic.

Abigail and the other sleepers are accepting yet temperamental, good-hearted but self-absorbed, brash though insecure.
The cast is diverse—Dwayne is Black, Meili is Chinese, Luca is Latine, and Abigail and Jeff, who is deaf, are White. The plot,
while never slow, gains traction as it unfolds and carries some genuine surprises. Abigail's story is the second in a series but is
more or less entirely self-contained, requiring no knowledge of the first book. Middle-grade readers (and above) will immerse
themselves in the adventure.

A serious, exciting coming-of-age fantasy.

endures her lonely life, working to protect six other “sleepers.”
Abigail believes the fae are searching for a cure. But when two
of her charges are taken away, their gallu draig having supposedly
claimed them while Abigail herself was sleeping, her doubts
turn to certainty. She and the others are being held captive!
Abigail revives the remaining sleepers: Dwayne, Jeff, Meili, and
Luca. At first they are hostile, holding Abigail to blame for her
complicity in their imprisonment. But Abigail’s knowledge and
healing powers help them to escape...as does the destructive
force unleashed when Meili turns into a dragon! Can Abigail
and her companions stay free from their fae pursuers and ward

off their own transformations? Matthews writes in the third
person from Abigail’s perspective, delivering realistic dialogue and

a well-constructed storyline. The fantastical elements are fresh, and the relationships among the teens feel authentic.

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OLD GRIMES IS DEAD
McFadden, Dennis
Self (264 pp.)
979-8-7984-7481-3

The award-winning McFadden tells a tale of grave robbery, the Underground Railroad, and more in a historical novel set in Western Pennsylvania.

It’s 1857 in Hartsgrove, Pennsylvania, and four doctors and a druggist exhume—“resurrect” in the parlance of the era—the body of recently deceased Black man Fudge Van Pelt in order to further their studies in anatomy. This is illegal, and things heat up when a skinned corpse turns up. Another eerie grave-digging episode involves Dr. William Darling, mentored by the old Dr. Cyrus V asbinder, and two of the co-conspirators who dig up Van Pelt. Will is an earnest young man, and when his patient, little Molly Plotner, goes from near death to robust health and then, supposedly, to death, Will is flummoxed. He and his friends hope to dig up Molly’s body to see if an autopsy will yield answers, but they find an empty coffin. Against this backdrop, the plot goes galloping off, with a dramatic trial, a jail escape, the blossoming of love between Will and the spirited Kathleen O’Hanlon, and a tragic Underground Railroad escapade. The conclusion is both shocking and weirdly believable and satisfying, as befits an author who has earned multiple honors for his work, which was included in The Best Mystery Stories of the Year 2021. Memorable characters include the kindly but compromised Dr. Cyrus V asbinder; the bloviating politician Levi Smathers; Henry Westerman, a free Black man known as Black Hen; and the mysterious Augustus Hamilton, who claims to be free but may or may not be. The tremulous desire of old Black Hen for the widow Van Pelt is deeply touching. A wonderful writer, McFadden has a poet’s way with words: “Fudge wore his worry like a necktie”; “[Will] was a free man, shackled to his fears”; “a sleep of refuge more than restoration.” His thoroughly engrossing book seamlessly weaves humor and sadness, wit and tragedy, fear and love.

An exceptional plot and characters make this historical novel a keeper.

MASKIROVKA
The Russian Science of Deception
Meredith, Richard
BluewaterPress (390 pp.)
$23.95 paper | Oct. 25, 2022
978-1-60452-191-7

A freshly minted police detective doesn’t believe a man died of natural causes, and his investigation leads all the way to Russia.

In Meredith’s fast-paced thriller, San Francisco homicide detective Steve Nguyen gets his first solo assignment: investigate the death of 31-year-old Luke Miller, an accountant at The Glass Foundation. Established by Julian Glass, an Eastern European transplant with ties to the United States Senate, the foundation supports groups focusing on education, health, and the environment. Steve’s news of Luke’s suspicious death—no forced entry, drugs, or trauma—shocks the foundation’s human resources head, Jennifer Krauss. Although 10 years older than Luke, the two were close friends. Jenn marveled at Luke’s attention to detail, saying he could find “things, little things, buried deep in an audit.” Unknown to anyone except Executive Director Roger Dayton, Luke also found one big thing: a file detailing questionable payments from international companies. Roger, who has ties to Russia, told his Russian contact that Luke discovered the file. The Russian arranged for the accountant’s elimination by an assassin and suggested that Luke may have told Jenn about his discovery. Forget #MeToo: Roger woos his underling to find out. He also helps in bugging her apartment and phone, allowing the Russians to hear what Steve tells her about the investigation’s progress. Meanwhile, Jenn becomes intrigued with Steve. She asks his cousin Tina—a smart-mouthed lawyer—for Steve’s backstory and learns “he’s addled with self-doubt.” Indeed, the detective’s sessions with his therapist add depth to the character and make the book more than a thriller, albeit an exciting one. Meredith’s characters are intriguing, fresh, and flawed. For example, Tina wears her “most revealing blouses to police interrogations. She’d use anything to her advantage, including her well-proportioned figure.” Steve—a Vietnamese American Stanford Law dropout and Bruce Lee look-alike, per Tina—graduated from the University of California at Berkeley at the age of 20. But he now has trouble fitting

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A collection of works in English by 51 African poets provides a vibrant tapestry of modern perceptions about the continent. In the foreword to this rewarding anthology, the editor, Zimbabwean poet Chikumbu, notes that, in spite of Africa’s cherished oral tradition of poetry “through its griots and praise singers,” there is a dearth of published African poetic voices. He means to counter this lack with a volume of poems dedicated to the broadest definition of love: “A love of grappling, a love of taking up space, a love of beauty, a love of finding, a love of words, images, sound and a love of the creative passion.” The poems Chikumbu has chosen are intoxicating both in the beauty of their language and the depth of their analysis, and they sweep readers into the dazzling and wounded landscape of Africa’s past and present.

In “Playing God in Old Love Skin,” Henneh Kyereh Kwaku sets up a central paradox: “You, god—have given / the crow the wind / & here’s the crow flying against / the gift & not gliding with it.” A number of poems confront the ongoing violations of colonialism. “The Gospel According To Colonialism” by Carolynne M. Acen seethes: “The colonialists...Taught us how to / pray with our / eyes closed. /To a God who hates / our dark skin.” In “Elec(sanc) tions,” Adjei Agyei Baah uses the Japanese Senrū form of ironic verse to satirize how this legacy persists: “Bursting at his seams / the politician tells us / to tighten our belts.”

A wealth of poems that offer penetrating glimpses into the wide range of African experiences.
like survival, longing, connection, grief, and the bonds of family, with each playing out across America’s wind-swept dairy landscape and beyond. The tender, intimate opener, “Poetry Bayswater,” chronicles the beautifully fluid love life of a war veteran and insurance salesman who learned about the mechanics of sexuality at age 12 from his “loopy Aunt Violet.” Readers will get a sense of the author’s uncanny knack for intriguing characterization from her description of Violet, who spoke with a “nicotine bark” and sported “pink cat-eye glasses with fake diamonds, had a head of tightly curled gray and black hair and wore bright red lipstick, even at home.” The evolution of families forms the framework for other stories, like “Asa at the Foundry,” in which details of healing and the grief and anger that eventually yield to places where “pink flowers come up year after year without being asked, in a place they’re not supposed to grow.” Whether the stories concern age, death, cruelty, or love, the author creates bold, authentic characters with no choice but to adapt to circumstances they’d never expected in order to proceed with strength and grace. Orbit by players who are bound by mortality, ancestry, pathos, and perseverance, this emotionally satisfying volume becomes a sublime, interconnected wonder.

An outstanding collection of tales with delightfully diverse and memorable characters.

Catholic priest who spent four years trying to groom the adolescent author for the clergy by cultivating his love of literature and art (Nanfito’s piquant pencil drawings grace the memoir); a youth who tried to rape him at the age of 14; and a Vietnam veteran he befriended who was haunted by his wartime experiences. Many vignettes center on women who walk on the wild side, including a hitchhiker and former Haight Ashbury communique who started riding shotgun on narcotics deliveries; a sex worker whom he rescued from an assault, getting a knife wound in the process; an aging stripper who took a liking to him that she expressed in the ladies’ room; and a woman who was once thrilled to take up with a drug kingpin but then yearned to be free of him. Nanfito’s pieces meditate on themes of escape and self-fulfillment, especially from social strictures that keep people from a more intensive immersion in life. His writing is a blend of philosophical meditation—Plato’s speculations on the soul keep cropping up—and a rapt, evocative attention to gritty impressions, couched in punchy, dynamic prose. (Stopping for gas during an urgent drug run, he writes, he spied “a blonde woman with a backpack at her feet sitting on the table top lounging in the sun, smoking, drinking a beer. All smiles and eyes as I pass by. Plan already running off the rails.”) Sprinkled in are the author’s poems, by turns searing and lyrical, which ambivalently convey pain and the strength that comes from it. (“I hate that you hit me but / I love how you release that venom.”) The result is a captivating account full of stark incidents with shaded, nuanced meanings.

A richly textured vision of life that’s pungent and disorderly but vibrant all the same.
arrived Albanian immigrant who is being bullied at school. If the team is to survive, Mose knows he'll need to bring the members closer together. His first step? To seek out the mentorship of Viktor Fleischmann, a Russian player. Viktor “was rumored to be an international grandmaster who’d lost his marbles and run out of luck.” Under his guidance, will the five young players become greater than the sum of their troubled parts? In this series opener, Novak writes in the first person, past tense from Mose’s perspective. The dialogue is convincingly Generation Z, Powered by dark imagery (a mountain peak resembles a “gothic castle in a child’s fable,” and wind whips around a cabin like “snow melting.” But arguably the tale’s biggest strength lies in the sheer amount of breathtaking, heart-stopping action and adventure, which creates a relentlessly paced, adrenaline-inducing thrill ride that will have readers on the edges of their seats until the very end.

A riveting page-turner starring prehistoric beasts; Arthur Conan Doyle’s The Lost World in California.

**CANIS DIRUS**

O’Neill, Denis

Off the Common Books (184 pp.)

$18.00 paper | Aug. 15, 2022

978-163879322

Set in Yosemite National Park, this fusion of horror, SF, and mainstream thriller involves the discovery of a pack of prehistoric predators believed to be extinct for more than 10,000 years.

After a hiker disappears in Yosemite’s high country, chief park ranger Axten Raymond and his fiancee, Petra Stahl, a world-class rock climber and manager of a nearby camp, set out to find the man. Forced to deal with a significant earthquake—whose epicenter is just 40 miles away—and its aftershocks as well as a looming threat from a group of anti-government militiamen bent on “reclaiming” the park, Raymond and Stahl soon discover the missing hiker is just a precursor to a much larger problem. A pack of dire wolves, existing in a massive subterranean cave system for millennia, has been freed after the earthquake created a new opening. The formidable alpha wolf—“the size of a healthy tiger”—has a grotesque head, “with a blunt, unwolf-like muzzle, and oversize bat-like ears that bordered on Albino, huge, the size of quahogs.” Powered by dark imagery (a mountain peak resembles a “gothic castle in a child’s fable,” and wind whips around a cabin like “a legion of angry harpies”) that complements the narrative’s brutal and bloody tone perfectly, O’Neill’s tale savvily alters the entertaining, at least until “you plummet straight down” after jumping from a building ledge, as Vox did. Another captivating element is the NApp personal downloads, augmented reality tutorials that take individuals through activities such as walking, cooking, and dancing. This is a fun yet terrifying exploration of
technology catering to people’s desire to split their attention into ever smaller pieces. The casual deadliness of the class divide is revealed when Bear must drive Bertram through the advertisement-saturated lowlands. The car is armored against the BT-27 into reverse and drive backward down the highway while thin, pink slices of meat cascade down the tunnel walls.” Fans of reality TV will recognize characters like Chef Casper Fiori—a play on Guy Fieri—who has “bright orange hair” and an “aggressive handshake.” Even more biting is Young Lady Kallista Tel-ladyne’s idea for a LifeCast in which 10 lowlanders receive makeovers and go “from garbage to glam.” Immersed in such a cringe-inducing backdrop, readers will root for outcasts like Bear and Aleks to tear it all down. Frequent twists complicate the heroes’ journey and will leave readers enthralled and eager for the sequel.

A clever and cutting fantasy that takes modern society to task for its corruption.

**REMOTE LEADERSHIP**

**How To Accelerate Achievement and Create a Community in a Work-From-Home World**

Pachter, David

Amplify Publishing (240 pp.)


978-1-64543-539-6

A debut guide offers a levelheaded strategy for leading in the remote workplace.

One disruptive result of the Covid-19 pandemic was the rapid acceleration of work from home, leaving senior executives legitimately concerned about how to manage and lead remote employees. Pachter, founder and co-founder of several businesses, has personally navigated the ups and downs of remote leadership and shares both his experiences and his insights in this outstanding book. Primarily targeting the small company owner/CEO, the author makes a strong case for transformational change. He effectively suggests that it is time to jettison the traditional “command-and-control authority” of the CEO and instead adopt “leadership-based sharing” because “in your remote enterprise, each employee is in his or her own world, a single-serving CEO of themselves.” Pachter lays out a specific plan for making this transition, basing it on “the Three Pillars of great remote organizations”: “Reflective Leadership,” “Coaching Mindset and Culture,” and “Peer Learning.” An overview of the new workplace provides an unsparring look at how far-flung employees’ various locations affects not just the way they collaborate, but also the manner in which they need to be managed. Leaders, writes the author, must move out of their comfort zones, learning such potentially unsettling techniques as adopting “radical candor,” “giving up being the problem solver,” and embracing “skip-level management.” Ultimately, the most important measurement criterion for WFH success is “Accountability.” Pachter explores the Three Pillars in detail, thoroughly explains their importance, and illustrates each with superb examples drawn from his own experiences and other sources. The content surrounding Reflective Leadership is filled with wisdom that is sure to spark introspection. Here, the author talks about practicing “servant leadership,” “distinguishing between empathy and accountability,” and learning how to “slow down your reactions.” In Coaching, Pachter cites pertinent examples, makes salient observations, and provides perceptive counsel. Peer Learning is a captivating view into how the author’s own organization used “Circles,” a digital methodology designed to encourage participation with the objective of “reflecting the group’s shared purpose.” Pachter is a polished communicator; his writing is clear, fluid, and engaging.

Extremely timely and highly actionable advice on remote leadership.

**MUST READ WELL**

Pall, Ellen

Bancroft Press (284 pp.)

$27.95 | $9.49 e-book | Oct. 18, 2022

978-1-61088-542-3

Liz Miller has spent nine years at Columbia University and is heavily in debt. Her incomplete dissertation, about mid-20th-century women writers, is in desperate need of more information about Anne Taussig Weil, author of the 1960s bestseller *The Vengeance of Catherine Clark*. The novelist has rebuffed Liz’s attempts at contact, but then a miracle happens: Liz sees a Craigslist ad for a room for rent in Greenwich Village that requires the applicant to be able to “read well.” She figures out that it was placed by Anne, so she replies, hoping that it’s her chance to finally interview the author. Liz, using the false name Beth, is offered the room and, to her delight, finds that her cheap rent comes with an obligation to read Anne’s old diaries to her. The writer is frail and visually impaired but still “looked commanding enough to have been the notorious author of a book that galvanized a generation,” according to Liz. The diaries recount a brief but massively consequential affair between Anne and a concert pianist. It’s a stroke of luck for Liz and her research, but her deceptive game leads toward a very uncertain future. Pall’s novel takes a deep dive into the personal lives of New York writers and musicians, and it has a premise that many readers are sure to find irresistible. Liz is revealed as hardworking and intelligent and crafty enough to get what she wants but also sympathetic. She is, however, no match for Anne, who’s portrayed as a grande dame who knows exactly how to handle a budding scholar such as Liz. The novel’s unpretentious sophistication and smart, savvy characters make it an enjoyable read—one that’s heighten ed by the unexpected and satisfying conclusion.

A thought-provoking novel about the mysterious ways that creative people use others for inspiration.
When pirates first visited Española Island, one of the Galápagos Islands, they found thousands of giant tortoises. Valued because of their size and because they could be kept alive on very little food or water, the tortoises were captured as food sources for sailors on long journeys. Due to overhunting, the population dwindled to only three—and a clutch of eggs—counted by scientists in 1905. Diego hatched from those eggs and was later taken to the San Diego Zoo to live for 40 years. During that time, scientists realized the dire situation for the Española tortoises and started a breeding program. When it was discovered that Diego was an Española tortoise, he was brought to the breeding center to help repopulate the species. The program’s success—as Pattison writes, “Sometimes, humans get it right”—led to thousands of tortoises, including Diego, once again inhabiting Española Island. Pattison offers this dramatic story in accessible prose, using the appropriate scientific vocabulary in an understandable context. Each two-page spread offers a substantial amount of information but never overwhelms, and Zimmerman’s vibrant illustrations always illuminate the text. Pattison toggles between the greater story and Diego’s more personal involvement, giving readers a central character to follow. Important ideas and numbers are set apart in a larger font, making them good places for emergent readers to chime in. Zimmerman’s realistic paintings invite readers into the times and places described, animating the tortoises and their saga. Human features are less detailed than those of the tortoises, making it clear that the creatures are the heroes. Detailed endnotes provide more information about tortoises, stories about less successful species rescue attempts, notes on invasive species and the Galápagos Islands, and the names of conservation organizations readers can support.

This well-crafted success story of a species’ salvation will encourage budding environmentalists.

A species comes back from the brink of extinction with the help of human intervention in this beautifully painted nonfiction picture book.

Stretching from the late 1600s to the modern day, this book outlines the plight of the Española tortoise and its recovery. When pirates first visited Española Island, one of the Galápagos Islands, they found thousands of giant tortoises. Valued because they could be kept alive on very little food or water, the tortoises were captured as food sources for sailors on long journeys. Due to overhunting, the population dwindled to only three—and a clutch of eggs—counted by scientists in 1905. Diego hatched

A tale of kitchen whimsy starring an underrepresented hero.

Diego, the Galápagos Giant Tortoise Saving a Species From Extinction
Pattison, Darcy
Illus. by Amanda Zimmerman
Mims House
$23.99 | $11.99 paper | June 14, 2022
978-1-62944-187-0
978-1-62944-188-7 paper

A child and mother follow a grandmother’s famous cupcake recipe, unleashing a magical storm of ingredients in this cleverly inclusive rhyming picture book.

A pale, sports-loving child with orange hair, red pants, and a striped blue and white shirt plans for an average day baking across the floor. As each ingredient is added, the last storm stops. Next, milk pours from the faucet, sugar floods under the doors, eggs drop from the ceiling, and butter flows across the floor. As each ingredient is added, the last storm stops, until salt, vanilla, and baking powder are all added to the mix. After a dash of sprinkles, the cupcakes go in the oven, and the result is delicious. The narrator offers an almost Jack Prelutsky–ian tale of kitchen chaos, never mentioning in the text the limb difference shown in Bassani’s fantastical cartoon illustrations. The child’s shorter arm doesn’t ever hinder adding each ingredient and stirring it into the mixing bowl; instead, this story is about magic, chaos, and baking a family recipe, and it features a hero with a limb difference. Parham’s scansion sometimes adds or drops a beat, but the rhymes are solid, with fun-to-say words (goop, bonker) sprinkled throughout.

**Baking Up a Storm**
Parham, Jessica
Illus. by Srimalie Bassani
Mascot Books (58 pp.)
$16.95 | Jan. 4, 2022
978-1-63755-013-7

**Mora tori um**
Percesepe, Gary
Atmosphere Press (278 pp.)
978-1-63988-107-9

A poet’s poignant debut collection of prose stories.

Percesepe is an editor at *New World Writing* and an established, well-respected writer of poetry, but this is his first published book of short fiction, and it’s a stunner. It contains more than 35 stories, many set in and around upstate New York in winter, with sudden deaths or losses frequently serving as narrative starting points. In “You Look Different,” for example, a father is haunted as he replays a nightmarish scene in his mind: “the one the driver with the thick fingers never saw as he swerved on the ice to avoid the yellow school bus, in his panic not seeing the small dark form that was your son.” Percesepe returns often to two themes: how one continues to live on after the death of a loved one and how one’s recognition of frail mortality affects one’s ability to be intimate. “It’s not death that’s difficult,” one character in “Summer: 1972” insightfully explains to her lover, but the act of dying is: “Death loves us. Death is easy. It’s getting there that’s hard.” Some narrative voices appear more than once, but although readers are allowed glimpses of the same characters at different moments of their lives, they always seem to remain stuck, glaring “into the dead space of time,” like Joe.
in “Lulu,” reflecting on a lost love while visiting his childhood home for a funeral. Appropriately, Percesepe’s writing has been compared to that of the late, great Raymond Carver; both writers revel in brutal vulnerability—a world, as Percesepe puts it, in which “love is a brawler” and characters have “had sex for the first time at fourteen” and by 18, have “had four lovers, a drinking problem, and an abortion.” It’s a world that yields a startling and exceptional collection, and it’s one that comes highly recommended.

**Powerful works that examine the violent and erotic lives of characters struggling with mortality.**

**LOUSE POINT**

**Stories From the East End**

Raebeck, Shelby
Gatekeeper Press (228 pp.)
$14.95 paper | Sept. 23, 2021
978-1-66291-782-0

A short story collection that delves into the intricacies of love, family, marriage, and community in the East End of Long Island, New York.

Raebeck begins with “Dream Girls,” about a family coping with grief. Fourteen-year-old Ricky’s mother has died, but he still sees her as an apparition in the bathroom; he talks to her about his life and how he and the family are getting on in the aftermath of her death. In “Walking Dunes,” Darlene’s husband leaves her, and she chases after him, dragging her daughter and son along with her. Later in the collection, “Wiborg” shows how a woman’s close relationship to the land has caused a rift in her family. There’s an ongoing theme of loss and division in these tales—of people yearning for each other but unable to bridge the gap caused by their circumstances. This is especially apparent in the titular story, in which an adult Ricky describes how his sister, a single mother who just left a terrible relationship, begins to follow a similar pattern with Ricky’s 29-year-old stockbroker friend Babiak. In another story involving a troubled marriage, “Fremont’s Farewell” tells the tale of a teacher who tries to teach his students about what he feels are life’s most important lessons but instead reveals his own personal history. He describes spending the day with his son in a touching scene that’s effectively juxtaposed with his generally cynical point of view.

A poignant and often riveting collection of small-town tales.

“Raebeck has a talent for showing how characters play different roles in others’ lives.”
Inviting locations around the world fill the pages of this illustrated, rhyming alphabet book.

“A is for alleyways, all painted blue,” readers are told, as a White girl and a tan-skinned boy walk down a blue street in Chefchaouen, the “blue city” of Morocco. On each page, a short phrase describes the remarkable thing about a place (named in small print), with the same two kids appearing somewhere in a glorious spread of color and magic. Ratti’s fluid poetry leads readers from one page to the next, across five of the seven continents, visiting attractions both well known (the Valley of the Queens in Luxor, Egypt) and less frequently represented (the reflective salt flats of Salar de Uyuni, Bolivia). The majestic sites are wide ranging. Some showcase ancient landmarks; others feature natural wonders (the monarch migration in Angangueo, Mexico) or popular celebrations (the Yi Peng lantern festival in Chiang Mai, Thailand). While the larger text on each page is designed for youngsters to decipher, the vocabulary words (pointed, monarchs) may require emergent readers to pause to sound them out. Lap readers will happily pore over Bergeron’s lovely digital illustrations, which capture the enchantment of each of these places in the realism of her landscapes. Half of the book features locations in the Americas, with Africa and Asia each showing up for five letters, Europe three, and Australia and Antarctica missing from the story.

This tale’s gorgeous images and graceful poetry should inspire travelers to see the world’s beauty.

In this fifth installment of a far-future SF series, a well-connected Earth Intelligence Service agent gets tested to the limits of his resources when a vicious alien empire launches an invasion of Earth.

The setting is the year 4608. Sirius Kade, Renneberg’s recurring hero and first-person narrator, is a top Earth Intelligence agent, once masquerading as a humble merchant. Now, he’s no longer an undercover operative because of his Forrest Gump–like tendency to be at the center of all the action in intergalactic intrigue and warfare between numerous, highly advanced alien cultures and races. (Sirius also happens to be the brother of a prominent space pirate.) After having finally revealed his hidden life to his true love, Marie, Sirius is enjoying a vacation idyll in the French Alps, where he plans to propose. Then, a long-awaited catastrophe erupts. Earth is invaded in a blitzkrieg action by the series’ primary menace, the Spawn, a pitiless, amphibian-style race whose robotic soldiers and invulnerable, armored ships are paving their way to conquering the cosmos. Earth is the latest Spawn beachhead to be easily defeated, and Sirius, one of the alien empire’s most wanted enemies, sacrifices his freedom to keep Marie safe. How can he (and the planet) get out of this jam? These momentous events occur in the opening chapters. Renneberg’s skillful prose then sends readers on fairly breathless leaps from one planet to hell world or hopelessly outmatched/outgunned combat scenario to another. This rousing tale is for readers who may have complained that Star Wars did not have enough star wars. But there is actually intriguing intellectual content (and breathing space) in these pages, as some beings in the supporting cast argue for a more enlightened path and claim that even the ravenous Spawn are not beyond redemption. The characters hit proper larger-than-life notes (though Sirius is a bit of a standard smart/tough guy). A relatively minor complaint is that the author’s deliriously variegated ensemble of outer-space creatures and civilizations often boil down to anthropomorphized versions of recognizable Earth fauna (snakes, pongids, beetles), bringing along their associated personalities and characteristics. But none of that should stop fans turning the pages at rates approaching luminal speed.

Vast-scale space-opera/combat adventure ably handled by a genre master and commander.

Ritchie’s middle-grade debut novel sees a curious young fairy develop an interest in bees, which his people treat as taboo.

Nine-year-old Bosco lives in Somewhere, a fairy community in the mountains of North America. Unlike the fairies of Fairy Land, which is kept locked away from the rest of the world behind an energy Barrier, Bosco’s people exist at one with nature. They cooperate with the birds and animals and practice ecologically responsible methods of subsistence. Bosco loves his life and his home, but the Ten-Year Rule hangs over his head—a decree by Queen Madrina that all young fairies must choose a life path by their 10th year or be indentured for five years at the Royal Court. Ritchie himself is deeply fascinated by bees; the only problem is that all fairies—even the open-minded folk of Somewhere—deeply dislike his new insect
friends. What dark history is there between fairies and bees? And will Bosco be forced to leave his mountain home? Ritchie’s prose style feels every bit as natural as her protagonist’s surroundings. The dialogue is unobtrusive, and the plot unfolds with simple elegance, hinting at dangers but never allowing them to develop too far. Bosco is an inquisitive and likable protagonist who’s principled, positive, and personable. The other fairies of Somewhere are similarly agreeable, and each feels distinct; the fairies from the other side of the Barrier have more a clash of cultures than a villainous act. Humankind lurks as a threat, but it, too, isn’t antagonistic; instead, it shows a critical failure to understand the balance of nature. Ritchie makes the ecological underpinnings of Bosco’s discoveries clear throughout. The message, though, is delivered not with a heavy hand but with the straightforwardness of a child’s perspective, encumbered by adult rationalizations. The result is an easygoing, refreshing adventure that young readers will treasure.

A sweet story of learning about the world and changing it for the better.

MY DAD, MY ROCK

Santos, Victor D.O.
Illus. by Anna Forlati
Linguasoft (32 pp.)
March 14, 2022
978-1-64962-131-3
978-1-64962-122-1 paper

A boy imagines describing his dad to the grandfather that neither of them ever knew in this picture book about the connection between a child and a father.

“I never met my grandpa. And my grandpa never met my dad,” says the narrator, a child with fluffy red hair. He imagines what he would tell the absent grandfather, extolling the virtues of his own father, who keeps the child safe but also teaches him to do things on his own. The child praises his dad’s goofiness, the way he reads bedtime stories, and how he acknowledges the child’s feelings when the latter is sad or angry. Finally, the boy imagines his own future family and the kind of dad he’ll be. The narrator, his father, and his grandfather all appear White; the future narrator’s partner and children are depicted with brown skin tones. Santos ably describes the love and encouraging support that children want from parents at all stages of life. Using short sentences, Santos’ approachable text feels true to a child’s understanding of a nurturing parent, and it will also resonate with caregivers who strive to be positive role models. Forlati’s highly textured pastel illustrations offer realistic depictions of the love between a parent and child. Both the text and images share a subdued, comforting tone.

A beautifully illustrated, touching tale of love.

THE RESURRECTIONIST

Scheuring, Paul T.
One Light Road (328 pp.)
978-0-9984502-2-3

A man is offered a fortune to illegally excavate a body for scientific research in the second novel by screenwriter Scheuring (The Far Shore, 2017), who co-wrote the 2003 film A Man Apart.

In 1820, professional anatomists in England had a vexing problem: They had an intense desire to the soiled underbelly of the poor. Scheuring does a masterful job of juxtaposing two incongruent worlds, glittering high society and the devasting mistake at a Birmingham, Alabama, hospital cost a life and ended her nursing career. Now, this ignites her thirst for vengeance, as she hunts down this man England had a vexing problem: They had an intense desire with cold rolling waves of shock. Some readers will guess later plot turns, though that doesn’t dampen their impact on this unforgettable grim tale. Notwithstanding brutal acts on display, the story isn’t as violent as some readers will anticipate. Melissa remains a sympathetic hero whose sincerity, regardless of what unfolds, never dissipates.

An exhilarating, sorrowful, and terrifying descent into retribution and possible madness.
to understand the human body but a chronic undersupply of cadavers to autopsy. This created an unusual partnership between respectable physicians and unseemly grave robbers, euphemistically referred to as resurrectionists. Scheuring deftly captures its peculiar nature in an author's note: “A more antithetical set of bedfellows I cannot imagine, especially in England, with its rigid class structures: the university-educated doctor of high station conspiring with the brutish, illiterate criminal of such compromised moral standing that he would breach hallowed convention, steal from the Lord's own soil, and traffic in the sludge and decay of rotting corpses.”

Job Morwatt is one such resurrectionist, desperately trying to build a better life for his daughter, Ivy, both beautiful and brilliant, her future sure to be stymied by the “trappings of station” if he can’t raise enough money for her education. Then, an opportunity arises: Job is offered an “astronomical” sum of money to unearth the body of Ella Beddoe, the wife of Marcus Beddoe, a powerful and dangerous man. The offer is made by Dr. Percival Quinn, “one of the most learned anatomists in all of London,” and not just out of thirst for scientific knowledge. His wife, Neva, is pregnant but, due to prior illness, is unlikely to survive the delivery, and he hopes studying Ella’s body—she was pregnant at the time of her death—will provide the clues that saves his wife.

Scheuring does a masterful job of juxtaposing two typically incongruent worlds, glittering high society and the soiled underbelly of the poor. Ivy exists on the border of those worlds—constituted by a socio-economic accident of birth but also blessed with the looks and brains to rise above her lot. And despite the great social distance between Job and Percival, both men exist primarily to protect the loved ones who face grave danger, a comparison drawn by the author with impressive subtlety and power. Moreover, Scheuring provocatively raises questions not only about the gruesome work of resurrectionism, but of the lust for science that demands it and how scientific procedures are themselves implicated in a dark dehumanization. Consider this chilling depiction of the anatomy of a human body: “Another hallmark moment: the first violation. When a student must take blade to a body and cut away what heretofore had been critical to life and dispose of it as if it were nothing more than table scraps. When the body goes from the virgin, inviolable province of the human soul to a work-thing of science, an assembly of disparate, inanimate, investigative possibilities.”

This is a bracing, remarkable work. Both historically astute and grippingly dramatic, it implicitly raises questions about the human cost of saving human lives and of the potential degrada-tion wrought by a science meant to elevate humanity to a higher plane of civilization.

A thrilling historical drama, thoughtful and emotionally poignant.

**AN ART, A CRAFT, A MYSTERY**
*Scheuring, Laura*  
Livingston Press (181 pp.)  
$18.95 paper  |  $9.95 e-book  |  Feb. 22, 2022

Two women journey to Colonial America and are accused of witchcraft in poet Secord’s debut novel in verse.

“Don’t think these skills were simple, / they were an art, a craft, a mystery, / yet when the men took notice, / they doubted diligence and named it witchery,” reads the closing verse of this book’s title poem. The skills to which the poet refers are those adopted by 17th-century women to nurture their communities—skills that outsiders distorted and called malevolent acts. This novel initially hurls the reader into the heart of London, England, at a time of plague. Lydea Gilbert and her niece, Kate, tend to the sick with little success, and after losing loved ones, they decide to journey across the ocean. In 1636, they board a ship called the *Truelove* and set sail for Massachusetts, accepting a period of indentured servitude to pay for their passage. They’re made to work for Hutchinson, a merchant; his wife, Anne, is later put on trial for heresy. Lydea and Kate then travel on to Connecticut, where they go their separate ways, with Lydea going to stay with her cousin, Thomas, and Kate marrying John Harrison, a grower of hops, barley, and tobacco. In 1654, Lydea is accused of being a witch by families she “nursed through pox,” and in 1668, Kate, too, is dragged from her bed and charged with witchcraft. In a final note, the poet reveals that the characters of Lydea and Kate are based on real women, the author’s ancestors, who lived in and were persecuted by Puritan society.

Secord powerfully captures the precariousness of the lives of women healers in the space of a deceptively simple quatrain: “My pockets carry sentimental pieces. / These womb-shaped bags hang below my skirts / hiding needed things, tools for nourishing, / locks of my children’s hair and linen strings.” These brief lines speak volumes about Lydea’s maternal benevolence and the need for her to conceal her practices from those around her. The work presents poems from the separate perspectives of Lydea and Kate, and these first-person accounts shape two psychologically distinct characters. The younger Kate’s vulnerability is palpable on occasion: “I thought that I could live / without her presence, but being with child / again, I wish I could feel her hands.” Secord is also expert at communicating atmosphere, as when, on their arrival in America, Lydea observes: “The air smells / ever green, and trees outnumber men...” a stark contrast to the “many funeral pyres” of the London they left behind. Some readers may be initially skeptical of a novel written entirely in verse, but Secord maintains a strong storyline throughout, and her poetry adds a deeper sense of mysticism. From its opening line, “We kept the small alive from day to day...,” this book is a passionate celebration of historically undervalued daily endeavors of women and a vital reminder of what victims of persecution endured.

A smartly conceived and emotionally stirring poetic tale.
“This is a profoundly moving story courageously told, one that reveals the heights and depths of human possibility.”

FROM AUSCHWITZ WITH LOVE

CARBON TECHNOCRACY

Energy Regimes in Modern East Asia

Seow, Victor

University of Chicago (376 pp.)
$40.00 | $29.99 e-book | April 8, 2022
978-0-226-72199-6

An exploration of the effects of intensive coal mining on the evolution of East Asian energy systems.

In his debut book, Seow, a historian and assistant professor at Harvard University, examines the effects of fossil fuel energy on global Chinese and Japanese markets in the early to mid-20th century. His analysis of Japan’s modern industrialization centers specifically on a “colossal open pit” in Fushun, China—a locale the author repeatedly visited—which was the former site of East Asia’s largest coal-mining operation. His extensive research probes the rise of fossil fuel use in East Asia and globally, showing how it was used to realize industrialization objectives: the technological taming of nature, the mechanization of labor, and the voracious pursuit of production. He also assesses why the fossil fuel transition occurred and how our increasing dependency on this type of energy comes with numerous societal and environmental ramifications, including regional ecological deterioration and terrible labor conditions. Seow builds his thesis with extensive source materials, including illustrations, travelogues, coal miners’ oral histories, mining engineers’ testimonials, and company records. Impressive in scope, the book begins in 1927 and concludes with Seow’s analysis in the 1960s at the height of Communist China’s Great Leap Forward, in which industrial and economic stimulation came at the expense of the health, safety, and longevity of citizens. Overall, Seow’s prose is accessible and his research soundly delivered. However, the book is not a casual read; although it’s immensely informative and comprehensive, it’s essentially an academic text, dense with statistical data, cultural and geopolitical analysis, historical examination, and industry analysis. Still, the book is not only an erudite history, but also—perhaps most critically—an urgent call for environmental intervention, as when Seow laments that “unless radical transformations take place,” his offspring’s generation will inherit the “world that carbon made, so deeply despoiled and unjust.”

An ambitious, scholarly study of the societal complications of energy extraction.

SOMETIMES WHEN I’M BORED

Serani, Deborah

Illus. by Kyra Teis

Free Spirit Publishing (40 pp.)
$14.99 | July 19, 2022
978-1-63198-695-6

A boy copes with boredom with parental guidance in this wise picture book about finding opportunity in quiet moments.

A young child laments that idle time is no fun: “Sometimes when I’m bored, everything bothers me.” But when the narrator talks to Momma, she promises that boredom just means something special is ahead. All the child has to do is find it by exploring natural curiosity, using imagination, building something new, or following a natural sense of wonder. Daddy suggests that feeling lonely is an opportunity to play pretend, draw a picture, or write to a loved one. The boy takes these suggestions to heart, and now, when he’s bored, the world is full of possibility. Serani, a psychologist and professor at Adelphi University, carefully balances the “Ugh!” feeling of childhood boredom with the open door of opportunity that unstructured time presents. Along with crafting the authentic child voice of the narrator and using straightforward text and simple sentence structure to help emergent readers, she also offers adults detailed notes on how to support children through their boredom. Teis’s realistic paintings center a Black family in images filled with familial love. Highlights of blue and purple represent the child’s imagination and sparking creativity.


FROM AUSCHWITZ WITH LOVE

The Inspiring Memoir of Two Sisters’ Survival, Devotion and Triumph as Told by Manci Grunberger Beran & Ruth Grunberger Mermelstein

Seymour, Daniel

Amsterdam Publishers (208 pp.)
$19.95 | $16.95 paper | $5.99 e-book
Jan. 27, 2022
978-9-49323-189-4
978-9-49323-188-7 paper

Two sisters recount their terrifying experience in Auschwitz and their extraordinary survival.

Ruth and Manci Grunberger were both born in the 1920s in Mukacevo, Czechoslovakia, a small city at the base of the Carpathian Mountains. They lived a quiet, happy life free from any visible antisemitism and in a community that was largely isolated from the gathering storms that threatened Europe. That life changed once their land was annexed by Hungary in 1938. As Jews, they were forced to wear yellow stars, their father’s...
store was confiscated, and they were ejected from their home and forced to live in the Jewish ghetto. When the Germans arrived, they were sent on cattle cars to Auschwitz; Manci ruefully remembers it as “my life’s black day.” The sisters’ experiences were gruesome. Ruth puts it poignantly: “All the horrors that had been told were true. These innocent people, just off the trains, were being gassed to death and their lifeless bodies taken to the ovens and burned—the flames, the thick smoke, the heavy dust particles and the putrid odors were from bodies. Somehow, I managed to get back to the barracks. I was in shock and was screaming, ‘I know! I know everything!’” Seymour, the son-in-law of Manci, intelligently facilities the telling of the sad but ultimately inspiring tale. The entire Grunberger family was sent to Auschwitz, and Ruth and Manci were the only survivors, but their book is not a lamentation—they both managed to make their way to the United States following the war and start afresh. Of course, this is ground well covered in scholarly and literary terms, though the perspectives of women, particularly those subjected to the “death marches” in 1945, aren’t widely represented. This is a profoundly moving story courageously told, one that reveals the heights and depths of human possibility.

A remarkable tale, dramatically affecting and historically significant.

HELEN IN TROUBLE
Sibbison, Wendy
Booksmyth Press (242 pp.)
$18.00 paper | July 18, 2021
978-1-73665-063-9

A 16-year-old girl’s unexpected pregnancy leads her on a hero’s journey in this 1963-set debut historical novel.

Waking up in a university library with her 18-year-old boyfriend, Quentin Caffrey, after a night of drunken, frat-house partying, prep schooler Helen Bird is panicked, and not just because she missed her chaperone’s curfew. The couple’s unspoken agreement, formed in “their foggy world of wordless decisions,” has been to use coitus interruptus as their only form of birth control, but this time, Helen can’t find the sticky evidence. She says nothing to Quentin. Later, in his dorm room, he contemplates writing her a letter about his mystical, profound “epiphany” that justified not pulling out (it “would be wrong, even evil, a turning away from the sublime”). But his next missive is silent on the subject. As for Helen, she returns home to Arlington, Virginia, and her junior year at St. Joan’s. She figures out (more or less) how to use her mother’s douche bag and hopes for the best but never considers talking to her parent, who also grew up in a family where many important things were unsayable. Her father, too, knows how to bite his tongue, as when forced to write pro–strip miniatures, which Rosemary could not risk.” Moral characterization is complex, as when delineating the Bird’s support of the civil rights movement; their sympathy “was real but almost entirely abstract.” Another character, Ilse Gaulden, a young woman who helps arrange abortions, became involved after realizing that civil rights workers were getting pregnant in the name of free love. Since something should be done, Ilse did it. The author does a fine job of tying Helen’s everyday life, during which she must hide every sign of her pregnancy, to the compelling archetypal elements in her experience. The correspondence is especially powerful when—emotionally and literally—the girl must make a tenebrous voyage to Ilse’s rough, ill-lit neighborhood before reaching her destination’s unexpected warmth.

A beautifully written, compassionate coming-of-age tale with subtle mythic overtones.

THE MOONSTONE GIRLS
Skipstone, Brooke
Skipstone Publishing (338 pp.)
978-1-73700-644-2

In this coming-of-age novel set in the late 1960s, a young lesbian challenges her bigoted father and rigid society to claim her identity with pride and hope.

In 1967 San Antonio, Texas, gay siblings Tracy and Spencer Franks are faced with more than the usual teenage problems and family secrets. Both are talented musicians, but this engenders little pride from their harshly conservative father, who perpetually finds Spencer too feminine and Tracy not feminine enough. With the gay liberation movement still years away, Spencer and Tracy support each other in exploring their queer identities. They go so far as to stage heterosexual double dates, during which they switch partners as soon as they are out of the public eye. Tall and athletic, Tracy soon finds that she can gain a degree of safety by dressing as a boy, daring in an era in which girls are seldom permitted even to wear pants. In disguise as “Tray,” she can relax with her girlfriend in public. But Tracy also discovers that she has more overall freedom when she is no longer trapped
by the societal expectations tied to being a girl. Still, public scrutiny is relentless, and it is not long before both siblings are unmasked and their gay identities exposed. While the tidal wave of repercussions threatens to drown Spencer, Tracy finds the inner resources to stand up to public condemnation and force a grudging respect from those who would ridicule her. She looks toward a life in which shame is replaced by affirmation and joy. Skipstone has delved into a vibrant era of rapidly changing values with empathy and authenticity. Tracy is a fiercely sympathetic protagonist as she resists the numerous forces trying to drive her toward self-hate and conformity. Her story is satisfyingly positive, perhaps a little too much so for realism, but readers will find it hard to complain about her upbeat journey. A few anachronisms, such as “That’s so gay” and “her binary mind,” which were not in common usage until decades after the ’60s, demonstrate that the author is not a member of the baby boomer generation. Nonetheless, the book adeptly captures the zeitgeist of social repression and change that energized the 20th-century counterculture movement.

A moving and romantic coming-out story and a triumphant celebration of lesbian liberation.
**Islands**,” in which a group of friends assembles for a weekend resonant tales. The brilliant, darkly comic opener and one fiance desperately struggling with artificial insemination; her dysfunctional band of walking disasters. These include her despite being divorced and depressed, anchors a rudderless, fun, renewal, and promise. The author rises to the challenge evidenced in the collection’s best-realized entry, “Honour,” leavened—feathers turning in the air, perfect and pure.” Speak’s stories discover a new love—one just as bruised by life as she is—waiting on her doorstep. The author’s prose is blissfully lyrical and often descriptively sets each tale’s tone in a single sentence. Impatient people beaten down by a winter season stomp across a snowy sidewalk “with the teeth of their winter boots, they have assaulted it with their demand for spring”; folks consumed with soul-searching do so with the passion of “a detective out trying to find a missing person”; first snowflakes are as “large as goose feathers turning in the air, perfect and pure.” Speak’s stories champion aging underdogs, many addled by disease or discontent, and throughout their grief or despair, she demonstrates an acute sensitivity to their plights. Into tales that could become overly sentimental, she injects redemption and sacrifice, as evidenced in the collection’s best-realized entry, “Honour,” leavening what seems like perennial hopelessness with glimmers of fun, renewal, and promise. The author rises to the challenge of compiling a group of Canada-set stories that will enchant with the beautiful, diverse, and ever evolving essence of human nature. As one character adores another’s wrinkles and sees “all the beauty life has wrought in her face,” readers will appreciate how Speak translates life’s pain and struggles into beauty.

**An impressive and luminous assemblage of artful and quietly devastating tales.**
A fun tall tale that’s also a resonant meditation on the magic of an iconic American landscape.

SPIRIT VALLEY RADIO

Tall, Jennifer
Self (500 pp.)
$12.00 paper | $3.99 e-book | June 3, 2022
979-8-8339-7986-0

Mysterious radio broadcasts from the past are among the spooky goings-on roiling a corner of the Missouri Ozarks in this fantasy.

Tall’s novel centers on KSR, a pirate radio station whose Saturday-night broadcasts in the vicinity of Joplin, Missouri, feature uncannily accurate present-day weather forecasts, hit-parade songs, St. Louis Cardinals games from the 1960s, sermons of the long-dead Rev. Franklin L. Hewitt from the 1930s, and “air traffic control for a mysterious WWII airfield.” Federal agencies have tried and failed to locate and silence the station, whose signal seems to emanate from an area called the Spirit Valley, which includes an abandoned airstrip, the village of West Bobcat, a rain tank that amplifies a disembodied voice, and the site of John Jesty’s experiment in 1776.

Tall’s narrative wanders back and forth over decades, telling the loosely integrated stories of characters around the Spirit Valley. They include Charles J. Howell, a Cherokee man who has visions of a spectral old man; his buddy E.J., who hires on a slate of untalented local musicians to scare tourists from his diner; Jake, a government paranormal investigator; Sylvie T., a teenage mind reader; Merlie, an unhoused woman in New York City who picks up KSR on her radio and is drawn to West Bobcat; and even a rooster. Tall’s yarn enfolds readers in a world of magical realism where supernatural occurrences and astral adventures are a prosaic part of natural occurrences and astral adventures.

A beguiling fable that’s full of rich whimsy with a thought-provoking theme of the magic of an iconic American landscape.

FIRST PATIENTS

The Incredible True Stories of Pioneer Patients
Tanchanco, Rod
First Hawk Publishing (368 pp.)
Jan. 9, 2022
979-8-9853937-2-9
979-8-9853937-1-2 paper

A physician and medical journalist describe 10 clinical cases that helped to revolutionize medicine.

Tanchanco found an early inspiration for this book in a story he’d read about a heart failure patient whose life was saved by the 1958 invention of an implantable pacemaker rudimentarily molded from a can of shoe polish. The author then sought out other accounts of patients whose cases had spurred breakthrough therapies, treatments, and lifesaving devices and essentially became medical game-changers. He begins with Benjamin Jesty, an English farmer who controversially experimented with introducing the cowpox virus into human tissue in the late 1770s, hoping to initiate an immune response against smallpox. Jesty didn’t publicize his work, but physician Edward Jenner did, and Jenner usually gets the credit for developing the vaccine. The book features other historical medical revolutionaries like English obstetrician James Blundell, responsible for developing successful blood transfusion techniques that turned the formerly stigmatized procedure into a lifesaving protocol for severe hemorrhagic cases. Other chapters applaud patients who inspired breakthrough technology like the cardiac defibrillator and early advancements in the identification of HIV and treatments for AIDS. In a section notably demonstrating his knack for compelling and factual prose, Tanchanco presents young mother Anne Miller, the first woman injected with penicillin in 1942 and subsequently cured of her recurring strep infection; it was “as though the drug banished a dark demon” and “every tissue, taxed to exhaustion from protracted sepsis, now craved nourishment.” Another fascinating chapter on disease-transmitting mosquitoes credits the death-defying courage demonstrated by a group of enterprising doctors and an Army Surgeon General who used the insect itself to help analyze and eradicate yellow fever and malaria in Cuba and near the Panama Canal. Many subjects of this book suffered horribly from their maladies, but their cases inspired a host of radical therapies, some of which remain efficacious today. Tanchanco tells their stories chronologically and in a smooth, clear style lacking clinical jargon. That approach makes this book ideal reading for anyone intrigued by medical innovations.

An informative retrospective of medical pioneers and their innovations.
The Proxima Plague
Thornton, Robert
Self (327 pp.)
$10.50 paper | $2.99 e-book | Oct. 8, 2021
979-8491897872

Blending elements from three genres, this sequel pits a physician and amateur sleuth against a viral-like illness that, if left unchecked, could annihilate the human race within a matter of days.

As the novel begins, Hope Allerd—the chief of the Infectious Diseases Division in the Department of Internal Medicine at the University Medical School in Birmingham, Alabama—finds herself suspended from her position. She faces potential prison time for malfeasance involving a foundation she began to provide care for indigent people in the Caribbean. But as she attempts to extract herself from her legal entanglements, she becomes aware of a bizarre outbreak spreading across the globe that seems to have its epicenter in Birmingham. Most victims have fevers, respiratory ailments, and a penchant for chewing other people’s faces off before they die. But others seem to have supernaturally enhanced cognition, strength, and agility—and have bodies that slowly transform into nightmarish monstrosities. As Allerd races to uncover the truth and a cure for the horror-inducing plague with her on-again, off-again boyfriend, journalist Clive Andrew, and courageous Centers for Disease Control and Prevention investigator Connie Wu, she realizes that humankind’s time with her hard-won project of claiming her feminine identity: “I want to be a real girl. I want this one thing.” She’s visited by Sophia, considered in the Orthodox Church (Tønnessen’s academic focus is Slavic studies) to be the sainted, feminine personification of divine wisdom. Sophia tells the poet she’s been listening all along and trying to respond, assuring her, “I want you to be a woman too.” The poet asks to be called by their shared name, signifying their mutuality: “(Whisper it to me / like you love me). Whisper it like you want to be inside me.” This conclusion fulfills the poem’s title; theosis means transformation into union with God. Tønnessen’s sprawling poems often employ pauses or unfinished lines, sometimes to convey wry or fraught understatement. As throughout the collection, the speaker works her way from anguish to a deeply felt sense of spiritual union (with herself? with Sophia?): “I will lay with you in the sun until / we both burn swim with you in the river til we both drown,” then “Dance with you until / we are tired / and no longer ashamed.” It’s particularly moving that the speaker in these poems, so often distracted by porn or TikTok or Netflix, continually achieves lyrical moments of grace that feel utterly authentic, making these seeming dislocations into a connected whole and a beautiful manifestation of her experiences.

A well-crafted, tender collection that emphasizes exploration.

We Are the Kings
Torres, Ariane
Bold Story Press (255 pp.)
$17.99 paper | March 1, 2022
978-1-954805-13-2

Torres’ debut novel tells interwoven stories of three generations of brilliant, complicated women—and a ghost.

While traveling in South Africa with her boyfriend, Marcella glimpses an unknown but oddly familiar woman through a train window and is suddenly flooded with memories of her grandmothers, Adele and Nana, and other notable women in her life. This opening leads into a story that offers a nuanced exploration of a complicated family history. Marcella’s father came from a wealthy Protestant family, and her Jewish mother’s family owned a deli in Providence, Rhode Island. Over the years, Marcella, her sisters Isabella and Alessandra, her mother, her aunt Joan, and her grandmothers all experience volatile and difficult relationships with their own fathers, boyfriends, and husbands. Glamorous Adele, living alone on an elegant seaside estate, believes that she’s been haunted and protected all her life by the spirit of a nameless woman—an apparition that also appears to other female
“Underwood has a poet’s love for words and the grounding of a moralist without being oppressively moralistic.”

GENESIS ROAD


It’s the summer of 2021, and Todd Tillotson, a 60-year-old ex-Mormon, commutes to his job as a supermarket cashier on Seattle’s municipal buses and light-rail lines. In addition to the ordinary travails of slow travel times and erratic schedules, he gets in tussles over masking rules—“Do you need some help keeping your mask up?” he asks a Tillotson, a 60-year-old ex-Mormon, commutes to his job as a supermarket cashier on Seattle’s municipal buses and light-rail lines. In addition to the ordinary travails of slow travel times and erratic schedules, he gets in tussles over masking rules—“Do you need some help keeping your mask up?” he asks a woman with a brazenly uncovered nose—and has other conflicts with obstreperous passengers. He feels lonely since the death of his husband, Brigham, who was hit by a car while they were marching in a Black Lives Matter protest, and he thinks that his heavy physique, due to the effects of AIDS and diabetes, will keep him from ever finding a new love. Todd finally takes steps to get out of his rut: He loses some weight, makes efforts to attract men (sporting a T-shirt reading “Consent -ish in the fire. Desperate, she gets in touch with her old friend Carey, a gay history professor. She is in Eastern Tennessee; he is in Atlanta. They met in the third grade and became fast friends and allies. Off they go on a road trip to the West Coast and back. Carey is carrying his own grief: His husband, Stan, died a couple of years ago. What follows is a travelogue (Yosemite, Yellowstone, Canyon de Chelly, the Gateway Arch) with wide-ranging commentary. They visit gay friends of Carey’s in San Francisco. Along the way, Glenna tortures herself with the secret of the miscarriage, which she finally confesses to Carey, allowing her healing to begin. Glenna and Carey start searching for happiness, and the details of their journey are both intriguing and believable. Underwood is a first-rate writer with a collection of poetry, The Book of Awe (2018), to her credit. One mark of a superb novelist is a dogged digging into characters and events, seeing things from all sides. In short, she is thoughtful and not afraid to spend four or five pages on an important scene, which she does time and again. And she gives readers arresting phrases, such as “the brain’s hot little terrarium of regret” and “Carey pushed out of the tent like a hatchling.” In fact, she has a poet’s love for words and the grounding of a moralist without being oppressively moralistic. The audience will find Glenna and Carey immensely appealing and will be convinced that they will remain lifelong pals.

ORGY AT THE STD CLINIC

Townsend, Johnny Booklocker.com (314 pp.)$18.95 paper | Jan. 1, 2022978-1-64719-938-8


It's the summer of 2021, and Todd Tillotson, a 60-year-old ex-Mormon, commutes to his job as a supermarket cashier on Seattle's municipal buses and light-rail lines. In addition to the ordinary travails of slow travel times and erratic schedules, he gets in tussles over masking rules—“Do you need some help keeping your mask up?” he asks a woman with a brazenly uncovered nose—and has other conflicts with obstreperous passengers. He feels lonely since the death of his husband, Brigham, who was hit by a car while they were marching in a Black Lives Matter protest, and he thinks that his heavy physique, due to the effects of AIDS and diabetes, will keep him from ever finding a new love. Todd finally takes steps to get out of his rut: He loses some weight, makes efforts to attract men (sporting a T-shirt reading “Consent -ish in the fire. Desperate, she gets in touch with her old friend Carey, a gay history professor. She is in Eastern Tennessee; he is in Atlanta. They met in the third grade and became fast friends and allies. Off they go on a road trip to the West Coast and back. Carey is carrying his own grief: His husband, Stan, died a couple of years ago. What follows is a travelogue (Yosemite, Yellowstone, Canyon de Chelly, the Gateway Arch) with wide-ranging commentary. They visit gay friends of Carey’s in San Francisco. Along the way, Glenna tortures herself with the secret of the miscarriage, which she finally confesses to Carey, allowing her healing to begin. Glenna and Carey start searching for happiness, and the details of their journey are both intriguing and believable. Underwood is a first-rate writer with a collection of poetry, The Book of Awe (2018), to her credit. One mark of a superb novelist is a dogged digging into characters and events, seeing things from all sides. In short, she is thoughtful and not afraid to spend four or five pages on an important scene, which she does time and again. And she gives readers arresting phrases, such as “the brain’s hot little terrarium of regret” and “Carey pushed out of the tent like a hatchling.” In fact, she has a poet’s love for words and the grounding of a moralist without being oppressively moralistic. The audience will find Glenna and Carey immensely appealing and will be convinced that they will remain lifelong pals.

"Underwood has a poet’s love for words and the grounding of a moralist without being oppressively moralistic.”

GENESIS ROAD


A novel explores whether a road trip across America with a gay friend will put a troubled woman's life back together.

Glenna Daniels' life is a big mess. Three times married and with a third divorce pending, she has a miscarriage after trying hard to get pregnant. Then her father—and what a piece of work he is—accidentally burns her house down and perishes in the fire. Desperate, she gets in touch with her old friend Carey, a gay history professor. She is in Eastern Tennessee; he is in Atlanta. They met in the third grade and became fast friends and allies. Off they go on a road trip to the West Coast and back. Carey is carrying his own grief: His husband, Stan, died a couple of years ago. What follows is a travelogue (Yosemite, Yellowstone, Canyon de Chelly, the Gateway Arch) with wide-ranging commentary. They visit gay friends of Carey’s in San Francisco. Along the way, Glenna tortures herself with the secret of the miscarriage, which she finally confesses to Carey, allowing her healing to begin. Glenna and Carey start searching for happiness, and the details of their journey are both intriguing and believable. Underwood is a first-rate writer with a collection of poetry, The Book of Awe (2018), to her credit. One mark of a superb novelist is a dogged digging into characters and events, seeing things from all sides. In short, she is thoughtful and not afraid to spend four or five pages on an important scene, which she does time and again. And she gives readers arresting phrases, such as “the brain’s hot little terrarium of regret” and “Carey pushed out of the tent like a hatchling.” In fact, she has a poet’s love for words and the grounding of a moralist without being oppressively moralistic. The audience will find Glenna and Carey immensely appealing and will be convinced that they will remain lifelong pals.

"Underwood has a poet’s love for words and the grounding of a moralist without being oppressively moralistic.”

GENESIS ROAD

A luminous tale of friendship; readers will be excited to travel with these complex characters.
A LIGHT TO DO SHELLWORK BY Poems
Valoyce-Sanchez, Georgiana
Scarlet Tanager Books (84 pp.)
$18.00 paper | Nov. 14, 2022
978-1-73453-135-0

A poetry collection that speaks of Indigenous culture and history by telling a family's story through its relation to sea, land, and memory.

Prose poems begin each of the three sections in the collection, establishing its overall themes. “The Gathering” opens the first section, which brings a refreshing perspective to the relationship between Indigenous people and the sea. Like the ocean ebbs and flows, the speaker illustrates her elderly father’s memories and dreams as his health deteriorates: “The old man had been tending the Sacred Fire since before dawn, each branch and limb of oak an added prayer.” As the family is there to support and witness his transition, now the poems remain to honor his legacy. The use of line breaks and extra spacing between words, as in “The White Buffalo Painting,” in which a physically debilitated grandfather yearns to paint the strong buffalo he dreams about, reproduces the pauses made by culture-bearing oral storytellers and invites readers to reflect on other types of gaps being evoked: “Grandfather / born in 1897 / going blind / losing his hearing and / sense of touch / dreams at night / of the White Buffalo.” “The Inland Sea” begins a segment of poems connected to the desert, the land, California roads, and to women, including the speaker’s foremothers. In this section, “Fox Paw and Coyote Blessing” is particularly memorable. Mixing storytelling and wordplay, Valoyce-Sanchez skillfully illustrates belonging to multiple Indigenous backgrounds, challenging monolithic notions of Indigeneity. As with other long poems in this collection, the reader’s visual and sensorial experience might have been enhanced had the poem been reproduced on facing pages. The overall style and themes of this collection are reminiscent of Deborah A. Miranda’s writing in their fluidity and nuanced portrayal of Indigenous life. The last section begins with “The Pictograph,” which refers to ancestral wall art whose physical, but not spiritual, access is blocked by steel bars. These final poems broach the creation and interpretation of worlds through Indigenous lenses.

An illustration of intimate family history that’s a testament to the continuity of Indigenous life and poetics in California.

PULL FOCUS
Walsh, Helen
ECW Press (272 pp.)
$17.95 paper | $15.99 e-book | Sept. 7, 2021
978-1-77041579-9

The opening of a major film festival goes off script when the CEO’s former husband and his half brother—her current lover—go missing.

In Walsh’s suspenseful debut about the politics, pressure, and glamour behind the scenes of an international film fest, Jane Browning pole-vaults from artistic director to acting CEO of a famous Canadian Film Festival after allegations of sexual wrongdoing sideline the organization’s head. Problems plague the festival: A sponsoring Asian country wants veto power over the screening of a documentary critical of its government, and a hotel maid accuses a famed director of assault, landing him in jail instead of on the red carpet. Jane’s partner of seven years, Bob Walker-Smythe, doesn’t show on the festival’s opening night, and he fails to answer his cell. The previous month, Bob’s half brother Johnnie, who’s Jane’s ex, went AWOL. After Johnnie and Jane had called it quits, she hooked up with Bob (the “sexual tension was exquisite”), and the three of them are now business partners in Smythe Financial, a midsize firm. Her festival a madhouse and her lover missing, Jane’s life is complicated further when the Ontario Securities Commission announces there’s major money missing from Smythe Financial. Tension becomes palpable when Jane realizes someone is stalking her. The title of this taut, thrilling literary novel, written by a former film producer, refers to a camera technique in which the focus adjusts from one character to another. Similarly, the reader’s focus changes from one of Jane’s worsening problems to another. She imagines her varying situations as a filmmaker would. For example, after typing an address into her phone’s GPS, she follows the route on the screen, “watching the journey as a director might: a long establishing shot of a city neighborhood, circuitous jungle of one-way streets, dead ends, and glass towers.” There are rich descriptions throughout; for example, a woman “vibrated with triumph,” and a man’s flesh was as cold as imagined, “although also sweaty, which was an unwelcome surprise.”

Two thumbs up for action, suspense, and lust.
Guatemalan journalist Whitbeck recounts his family’s multigenerational history in journalism as well as travels around the world in this genre-bending Spanish-language memoir.

There are few people who can say seeing a dead body changed their lives for the better, but for the author, it was a light-bulb moment. He was barely a teenager during Guatemala’s civil war in the late 1970s, and violence was everywhere; it was on his daily commute to school, peering out at a cadaver from the bus window, that his future solidified: He was going to be a journalist. After getting his master’s degree in journalism at Columbia University, Whitbeck worked his way up from covering natural disasters in Central America to becoming one of CNN’s senior foreign correspondents. In this memoir and travelogue, he recounts some of his most memorable reporting trips during his decadeslong career, including embedding with U.S. Army soldiers in Iraq, cutting his international journalism teeth at civilian protests in Haiti, and getting to hold the same pen that Gorbachev used to sign the documents dissolving the USSR. He attributes his success to his relentlessly curious nature but admits that journalism may well be his destiny: his ancestors include Spanish conquistador and chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo and American journalist Leonard F. Whitbeck, who covered conflicts between American troops and Indigenous leaders Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse. Whitbeck even devotes one of the book’s best chapters, an outlier of sorts, to detailing his own father’s involvement in the brief and bloody regime of Guatemalan president Efraín Ríos Montt.

As a narrator, Whitbeck’s greatest strengths are the palpable compassion and humility with which he undertakes the task of reporting on communities in crisis and the deft connections he makes to broader themes of the human condition. The author, who considers himself an introvert and identifies as gay, offers a self-conscious peek into the often opaque world of correspondent journalism; in particular, he’s refreshingly frank about facing racism and xenophobia as a Latino and a member of the Spanish-language press and about the complex traumas of his various sources across the world. His clean prose historicizes his location-based essays without ever overwhelming the reader or deferring to an American perspective. He juxtaposes moments of levity, as when he tells of procuring equine transport in Afghanistan, listening to Coldplay while on assignment, and smoking cannabis for the first time, with the descriptions of the carnage he witnesses. The book isn’t chronological, and the way that Whitbeck jumps through time to suit his philosophizing about the human experience results in occasional passages that feel muddled or disconnected. The final chapter, however, is quite sentimental, ruminating on his life after leaving CNN and how he came to understand himself better through taking psychedelics, culminating in his ultimate takeaway: that death and disaster are simply part of the cycle of life.

An often compelling survey of a uniquely demanding career and the life lived around it, with stories that readers won’t find in the news.

**FLORIDA HUSTLE**

Wilborn, Paul
St. Petersburg Press (306 pp.)
$19.95 paper | June 8, 2022
978-1-940300-48-1

A West Palm Beach story about a boy obsessed with a horror movie star.

As Wilborn’s latest novel opens, lanky 17-year-old Michael Donnelly has already crossed the line. The son of Donnelly Avionics CEO and West Palm Beach millionaire Alex Donnelly, young Michael is a horror film fan, obsessed with the works of director Mario Bava, the “Fellini of gore,” the mind behind such masterpieces as *Kill Baby Kill* and *Blood and Black Lace*. Unfortunately, Michael is also obsessed with up-and-coming horror movie star Dawn Karston, to whom he’s mailed what he considers movie storyboards worthy of her artistry but law enforcement would consider death threats (Wilborn’s novel takes place in the 1980s, when parents and cops alike have movie-obsessed John Hinckley’s attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan fresh on their minds). Faced with the hard facts, and knowing that both he and Michael are still reeling from the suicide of Michael’s mother, Crystal (“the loss of a woman they both loved,” he reflects, “hadn’t brought them closer together”), Alex decides to have Michael committed to Palmdale Haven for the three weeks Dawn Karston is filming *Swamp Fiend II* in the nearby Everglades. Michael, “a gawky mantis of a kid,” learns of this plan and goes on the run with his father’s credit card and soon falls in with blistering Cavanaugh Reilly and his lover, Lola, who promise to help smuggle Michael onto the *Swamp Fiend* set before his father’s private investigator finds him—although, to ^up the ante in a relentlessly clever plot, they’re also thinking of double-crossing him before the money runs out. It’s an antic, very Floridian tale, populated with larger-than-life characters and full of Carl Hiaasen–style dry humor and Elmore Leonard–style sharp descriptions. The characters all have penchants for funny one-liners, and a kind of zany logic binds their very strange separate worlds. Wilborn packs a lot of fun and human insight into a slim number of pages.

An irrepressible Florida frolic filled with lost dreams, forlorn love, and horror movie lore.
Wimmer succeeds in creating a world where they are entirely fluous details bring Wimmer's characters to life and add a layer of authenticity, convincing readers that the author knows what she is talking about (whether the topic is used car salesmanship, roller rink playlists, or the duties of sleep lab technicians). The elements of magical realism are presented without fanfare, and as Wimmer blends traditional literary fiction with a touch of the fantastic.

Vivid, thought-provoking stories make an enjoyable and challenging book.
NO HOME FOR KILLERS
Aymar, E.A.
Thomas & Mercer (335 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Feb. 1, 2023
9781662504563

Think your family is dysfunctional? Welcome to the big time.

The Peña siblings have never exactly been close, but the rifts between them have widened to gulfs since their mother’s funeral two years ago, the last time either former social worker Melinda or nonprofit marketer Emily spoke to their brother, Markus, a well-known performer of protest songs. None of them has anything to do with their widowed father, Frank, and when they’re not cocooned in their own individual problems, from Melinda’s continued pursuit by David Martin, her former boss and one-night stand—a secret she struggles to keep from her partner, patent attorney Rick Walker—to Markus’ well-documented record of abusive behavior, they’re actively working at odds with each other. Everything changes, or at least intensifies, when sex worker Dani turns up at Melinda’s place to tell her that Markus is dead. Melinda rouses herself from the guilt in which she’s been wallowing, determined to track down the killer. Emily, who, operating as the masked avenger Three Strikes, has already kidnapped wife beater Jon Winters and taught him a lesson, follows a more activist path, turning to Markus’ ex-girlfriend, Jon’s cousin Rebecca, as her next victim. But she can’t help suspecting the real culprit she should be targeting is Rebecca’s uncle, the powerful and unscrupulous developer Victor Winters, whose real estate deals have already been linked to drugs and sex trafficking. Amiasmal air hangs over the proceedings, but one thing is for sure: This can’t end well.

The perfect gift for friends worried about spending the holidays with their relatives. Things could be worse.

BIG SWISS
Beagin, Jen
Scribner (336 pp.)
$21.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
9781982153083

The author of Pretend I’m Dead (2018) and Vacuum in the Dark (2019) returns with another wonderfully off-kilter protagonist.

Beagin loves weirdos—fully and unironically. Her first two novels starred Mona, a woman whose job cleaning...
As 2022 comes to a close, I’d like to celebrate some of the new voices we met this year. Let’s begin with Arinze Ifeakandu, who was a Kirkus Prize finalist for his stunning debut, *God’s Children Are Little Broken Things* (A Public Space Books, June 7), a collection of “nine blazing stories about the joys and tribulations of queer love in contemporary Nigeria,” as our review said. Ifeakandu begins each story in the middle of the action: “It was past ten when Obum finally called back.” “Obinna did not expect this sort of generosity from Adanna.” He asks you to trust him, to plunge into the lives of his characters even if it takes a few pages to orient yourself, and then you realize that your experience echoes that of the characters themselves, who are engaged in what our review called “relationships that hurl them into the unknown and dangerous depths of their desires.”

Tess Gunty made a splash with her debut novel, *The Rabbit Hutch* (Knopf, Aug. 2), which won the National Book Award for Fiction. Set in a run-down affordable housing complex in a Midwestern city, the book checks in on a variety of residents. Our review said, “With sharp prose and startling imagery, the novel touches on subjects from environmental trauma to rampant consumerism to sexual power dynamics to mysticism to mental illness, all with an astonishing wisdom and imaginativeness.”

Sidik Fofana also sets his debut in an apartment building. *Stories From the Tenants Downstairs* (Scribner, Aug. 16) consists of eight interconnected stories about the residents of the (fictional) Banneker Terrace housing complex in Harlem. Our review said the characters’ voices contain “a rich, ribald, and engagingly funny vein of verbal music, as up-to-the-minute as hip-hop, but as rooted in human verities as Elizabethan dialogue.”

There are three debuts by Native American writers on our list of the Best Fiction of 2022. In *A Calm and Normal Heart* (Unnamed Press, June 21), Chelsea T. Hicks—a member of the Osage Nation—has created “dark and darkly comic stories” about women searching for home, according to our review. Oscar Hokeah’s first novel, *Calling for a Blanket Dance* (Algonquin, July 26), follows the life of a boy named Ever Geimausaddle after he sees his father being beaten by corrupt cops. Told from the perspectives of 11 members of Ever’s clan, the story watches him grow up while those around him wonder if his spirit was altered by the injustice. And in Morgan Talty’s *Night of the Living Rest* (Tin House, July 3), 12 linked stories about a man named David “provide an unsparring perspective on the harsh reality of life in the Panawahpskek (Penobscot) Nation of Maine,” according to our review.

Moving across the Atlantic to Bristol, England, we find Moses McKenzie’s debut novel, *An Olive Grove in Ends* (Little, Brown, May 31). Ends is the neighborhood of Caribbean and Somali immigrants where Sayon Hughes lives. Getting caught up in the drug trade does nothing to help his relationship with Shona Jennings, whose father, a Baptist preacher, makes him a dark deal. Our review said, “Recalling Zadie Smith’s masterpiece *White Teeth,* this is the most exciting U.K. debut in years.”

And finally, in *All This Could Be Different* (Viking, Aug. 2), Sarah Thankam Mathews “achieves what so often seems to be impossible,” according to our review, “a deeply felt novel of ideas.” In telling the story of Sneha, a young woman trying to make it in the world after her immigrant parents have been deported to their native India, “Mathews somehow tackles the big abstractions—capitalism, gender, sexuality, Western individualism, etc.—while at the same time imbuing her characters with such real, flawed humanity that they seem ready to walk right off the page.” What more could you want?
houses affords her a fascinating window into her clients’ lives and an idiosyncratic education in human behavior. Beagin’s new main character is literally paid to eavesdrop on the therapy sessions of strangers. After quitting her job as a pharmacy tech and leaving her fiancé, she moves from Los Angeles to Hudson, New York, and starts working as a transcriptionist for a sex therapist named Om. Her job is to listen to recordings and write down what she hears, but she quickly develops a parasocial relationship with Om’s clients—not that different from a listener’s relationship to a podcaster or, for that matter, Mona’s imagined relationship with Terry Gross of “Fresh Air.” But Greta’s feelings for the client she calls “Big Swiss” are unusually intense, and a chance meeting at the dog park with this well-known stranger—whose real name is Flavia—turns into an affair. This relationship is defined by its intensity and by the ticking time bombs buried within it. Greta gives Flavia a fake name when they meet, and she doesn’t tell Flavia that she knows her deepest secrets. Flavia is married, a fact that she doesn’t hide but which is, obviously, a complication. And both women are still learning how to deal with the central tragedies of their lives. Flavia endured a horrific assault that she insists is no big deal. Greta has repressed significant details from her mother’s suicide. Beagin seems to have a keen understanding of the myriad ways trauma manifests. This not only allows her to build damaged but resilient and fascinating characters, but it might also be why her books are filled with people who do bad—or extremely questionable—things without being bad guys. Beagin gives her characters choices and second chances, and the happiness she offers them begins with themselves.

Beagin establishes her place among artfully eccentric writers like Nell Zink, Elif Batuman, and Jennifer Egan.

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THE MINUSCULE MANSION OF MYRA MALONE
Burges, Audrey
Berkley (352 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Jan. 24, 2023
978-0-593-54647-5

A reclusive woman avoids the outside world by focusing on a magical miniature house—until the real world starts knocking at her door.

When Myra Malone was 5 years old, a serious car accident killed her beloved stepgrandmother, Trixie, and injured Myra herself. The trauma—both from spending months in the hospital recovering and from losing Trixie—caused Myra to retreat into her home, attending school on her computer and only talking to her parents and her best friend, Gwen. But Trixie didn’t leave Myra completely alone. She left behind a beautifully ornate dollhouse called the Mansion—although Myra would argue that it isn’t a dollhouse, since it’s not a home for dolls. Now, in her 30s, Myra spends her days up in the attic where she decorates the tiny rooms, fills them with handmade furniture, and shares the results on her popular website. Myra’s life is small and contained, but that’s exactly how she likes it—until she discovers that her mother has been running up debt that may cause them to lose their home. In a desperate scheme to make enough money to save the house, Gwen convinces Myra to run an essay contest where, for a fee, her fans can win the chance to meet her. Even though Myra has no interest in anyone coming into her home, she agrees. What she doesn’t expect, though, is an email from a man named Alex Rakes who claims to live in a real-life, full-size version of her miniature, magical house. He’s always felt like there was something mystical about his family mansion, where mysterious music often plays on its own. As he and Myra correspond, the two of them realize that they—and their respective full-size and miniature homes—may share some deep and surprising connections. Burges creates a magical, unique world, and her characters are incredibly lovable. Myra is so lonely and stuck inside her house that it’s impossible not to root for her to open up, and Alex is similarly unmoored. The story alternates between the present and past, slowly weaving together storylines that are extremely satisfying when they finally come together.

Perfect for readers who long to escape into a world of magic and romance.
BLAZE ME A SUN
A Novel About a Crime
Carlsson, Christoffer
Trans. by Rachel Willson-Broyles
Hogarth (448 pp.)
$28.00  |  Jan. 3, 2023
9780593449356

A serial killer in the Swedish town of Tiarp eludes the cop trying to track him down, then the cop’s policeman son—and, 30 years after the unsolved murders, a successful novelist investigating them.

It’s 1986. The first victim, 20-year-old Stina Franzén, is found beaten and barely breathing in the back seat of an abandoned car by policeman Sven Jörgensson, who must live not only with his failure to find her killer, but also the accusation that he hastened her demise by improperly handling her body. Taunted on the phone by the so-called Tiarp Man—“I’m going to do it again”—Sven is further shaken by his inability to find the body of a second young murdered woman. Even as the killings are overshadowed by the shocking assassination of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme on the same night as Stina’s demise, Sven becomes obsessed with the local cases—an obsession that will lead him down the darkest paths. His neglected son, Vidar, having failed to heed his father’s warning that becoming a cop will make him cold and distant like his old man, discovers troublesome details about Sven’s pursuit of the killer. The novelist, who narrates Carlsson’s book, uncovers more disturbing secrets after meeting up with Vidar, a one-time schoolmate of his, and Evy Carlén, Sven’s one-time partner on the force and would-be lover. The plot unfolds slowly but masterfully, with serial surprises. But what makes Carlsson’s American debut so impressive is its close examination of “truth,” the way trauma is passed from one generation to the next, the distractions we create to avoid our contributions to the “rot” of our violent age. Pain can be so deep, Carlsson writes, “maybe it’s not even pain anymore. It’s a way of being.”

“….brainy page-turner from a rising star in Scandinavian crime fiction.”

“This novel is a great light read, perfect for holidays or summer evenings curled up with a book.”
—LoveReading UK

“In this mystery series starter, a retired cop moves into an old mansion, complete with literal and metaphorical ghosts.”

“Gill ably balances the book’s eerier storyline with comedy…”

“A...paranormal tale with as many family laughs as fearful held breaths.”
—Kirkus Reviews

FOR AGENT REPRESENTATION AND INFORMATION ON PUBLISHING RIGHTS, EMAIL DKCGILL@GMAIL.COM
“Cerebral and tense.”

**MY NEMESIS**

Craig, Charmaine

Grove (208 pp.)

$26.00 | Feb. 7, 2023

[978-0-8021-6071-3]

An emotional affair toxically intertwines the lives of two families.

After writing a book about Camus, Tessa receives a letter from Charlie, a philosophy professor, and the two begin an intense correspondence. Milton, Tessa’s second husband, also strikes up a friendship with Charlie, but Tessa increasingly finds herself at odds with Charlie’s wife, Wah. Wah is an accomplished lecturer and writer and is also quite devoted to the couple’s 15-year-old adopted daughter, Htet, who was a victim of child trafficking in Malaysia (and about whom she has written a book). This dedication contrasts with Tessa’s more distant approach with her own daughter, Nora. Nine months into the couples’ friendship, Tessa accuses Wah, whom she sees as weak, of being “an insult to womankind,” a blow from which neither couple, nor their friendships, can recover, and which ultimately forces Tessa and Charlie to reckon with the pain their relationship has caused their spouses. Craig has crafted an intense portrayal of an intellectual affair as well as a private competition between two women with perfectly balanced moments of tension and introspection. The relationship between Tessa and Charlie deeply depends on their conversations about Camus and Nietzsche, whom they reference heavily to work through their own attitudes toward each other and the world. Yet as distant and self-assured as Tessa is, Craig never lets her first-person narrator off the hook, as she must acknowledge her own role in the disintegration of every meaningful relationship she has. **Cerebral and tense.**
STONE COLD FOX
Croft, Rachel Koller
Berkley (368 pp.)
$27.00  |  Feb. 14, 2023
978-0-593-54750-2

A New York City woman eager to marry into wealth finds the perfect husband-to-be—but there's much more to the story.

Beatrice is an executive at a large advertising agency in New York, and she's beautiful. She's well paid and good at her job—but she has her sights set on marrying into the security and solid future that only supreme wealth can bring. When Collin Case asks her out on a date after she gives an ad presentation to his family's packaged-goods company, she decides to see if inherited wealth is worth trying to catch. Seven dates in, she decides that Collin will definitely be the man she marries. But Bea is not what she seems. Her childhood was spent bouncing from place to place, acting out long-con swindles with her mother, who married men "one after another after another after another." That made Bea an expert in deception, but she's not interested in replicating that life or being anything like her mother. Even though the backstory—and identity—she's created for herself is airtight, getting the Case family to welcome her into the fold is not easy. Told entirely from Bea's point of view, the story moves between her efforts to get to her wedding day despite obstacles that include Collin's best friend, Gale Wallace-Leicester, who's also in love with him, and her childhood efforts to please her mother, whose love she desperately craved. Author Croft plays with themes of light and dark, right and wrong, moral and immoral, teasing the reader with bits of information that point in one direction only to shift the focus to quite another. Fans of Tara Isabella Burton's Social Creature will enjoy this emotionally dark and twisting story.

An absorbing story that plays with ideas of good and evil, keeping readers guessing who is the hero and who the villain.

OUR SHARE OF NIGHT
Enríquez, Mariana
Trans. by Megan McDowell
Hogarth (608 pp.)
$28.99  |  Feb. 7, 2023
978-0-4514-9514-3

A widower burdened with paranormal abilities tries to protect his son from a dangerous cult.

After two well-received story collections, most recently The Dangers of Smoking in Bed (2021), Enríquez presents a sprawling gothic novel holding a black mirror toward Argentina's history of corruption and political violence and dosed with the conventions of horror fiction. Roughly told from the point of view of a father, a mother, and their son at different stages of their lives, the story can feel aimless, but the sheer dread and paranoia the author delivers are palpable, too. When we first meet Juan Peterson and his son, Gaspar, they're trying to stay under the radar of the Cult of the Shadow. This dangerous, child-murdering religious order is led by the family of Juan's wife, Rosario, who recently died in a car accident. Rosario's creepy family discovered early on that Juan is a medium who can control "the Darkness," a preternatural force that hunger for human flesh, during occult rites. Juan has always grudgingly gone along with his in-laws' wishes, participating in these ceremonies despite the terrible physical toll they take on him. But now, the cult wants to (somehow?) move his consciousness into his son's body before the Darkness takes him completely, and he's frantically trying to undermine them. He has secret allies in his sister-in-law, Tali, and Stephen, the son of the order's leader, who are helping to mask Gaspar's innate abilities. Later, a flashback to Rosario's work as an anthropologist demonstrates how mythology comes into play, while later, a grown-up Gaspar struggles with his dark inheritance. It's awkward and exhausting by turns, often by design. Somehow the shock of such violence delivered upon children and the
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inevitable fatigue generated by unrelenting horror also mirror
the author’s mistrust of reality as we know it.

A strange, arcane journey into South American horror
with roots in the real evil that men do.

CHANCE
FitzSimmons, Matthew
Thomas & Mercer (316 pp.)
$28.99  |  Feb. 14, 2023
9781542009478

As FitzSimmons already demonstrated in Constance (2021), it’s hard out there for a clone.

Five years ago, Palingenesis marketing chief Brett Harker’s two sons were kidnapped by bandits who demanded he turn over the company’s proprietary technology for human cloning—including information about how to implant the old body’s consciousness in the new clone. The negotiations left Marley Harker and his kid brother, Chance, dead to anyone who didn’t have the cloning resources made available to a high-level executive of Palingenesis like his father. Now Chance is a fifth-generation clone who’s amused himself and amassed a string of social media followers ever since his return to life by engaging in a series of death-defying stunts that have repeatedly left him ripe for recloning. When an interview with prize-winning journalist Imani Zari Highsmith seriously damages his brand, Chance thinks the bottom has dropped out of his endless life cycle. But worse is still to come. He emerges from his latest memory revival to find LAPD Det. Val Wolinski about to arrest him for the murder of Lee Conway, an unemployed man he didn’t even know; and Palingenesis about to pull the plug on his unlimited access to clones, making his latest life his last. Although high-powered lawyer Sy Berger gets the murder charge dropped on a clone-specific technicality, Chance is still in hot water, and this time a troubling gap in his recent memory leaves him uncertain how much he can trust his girlfriend, former movie actress Maggie Soto, and even his now-divorced parents. FitzSimmons hooks readers with the clone angle and then expertly mixes SF and mystery tropes till he’s implicated every party in sight in some sort of crime or coverup.

A seriously playful novel of ideas.

THE DECEIT
Foster, Sara
Blackstone (211 pp.)
$26.99  |  Feb. 7, 2023
9798200895632

The threat of a secret imperils the balance between a husband and wife. Who is the person determined to reveal the past?

Not all the love between Lenny and Claire has translated into a happy marriage. After more than a decade together, a pair of school-age twins, Jake and Emily, and a bearded dragon named Bob, the couple seem more like roommates than husband and wife. Claire’s even gone so far as to ask Lenny for an open marriage so that he can enjoy some of the intimacy she can’t find it in herself to give him. As the story unfolds in alternating chapters from each of their perspectives, Lenny longs for a time when he and Claire were deeply in love, and he feels conflicted about his new relationship with Saskia, another parent from the school. Claire presents herself as an overworked personal trainer trying to do what’s right for her family but unable to move beyond a startling secret in her past, a secret she’s never been able to share with Lenny. But the truth may be at hand. Lenny’s been receiving text messages that tell him, “Your wife is a liar.” Though he’s not inclined to believe them, Claire’s distant behavior has him wondering. Ostensibly uncomplicated events like the arrival of new neighbors and a come-on to Claire from a client’s husband are tinged with creepiness and suspense. Will Claire be able to keep the past in the past, or will something— or
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**THE LAST ORPHAN**

*Hurwitz, Gregg*

Minotaur (352 pp.)

$28.99 | Feb. 14, 2023

9781250252326

Has the invincible Nowhere Man finally met his match?

A dark prologue follows horny young lamb Johnny Seabrook to a tryst that turns into a bloody slaughter. Readers will need to put a pin in this, for the narrative drifts to Iceland, where Evan Smoak, the former government assassin known as Orphan X, seeks serenity, or at least escape, in a desolate bar in the middle of nowhere. Evan’s backstory is lengthy and complex; Hurwitz shrewdly paints in primary colors and keeps the action moving. Orphan X has been a freelance avenger for a long time, and the feds would love to eliminate him. Thus the reappearance of his nemesis, Special Agent in Charge Naomi Templeton, and her tense meeting with President Victoria Donahue-Carr, who has sometimes targeted, sometimes allied with Evan in the past, depending on the circumstances. Capture and escape form a recurrent pattern in this eighth Orphan X caper, long on gritty action and crackerjack dialogue, as it ricochets from Europe to Beverly Hills to various points in the New York metropolitan area. Evan reconnects briefly with ladylove Mia, enlists the help of Orphan V after a particularly brutal killing, and eventually gets around to avenging Johnny. The short, punchy chapters’ piquant titles add another tongue-in-cheek layer to the proceedings. With its shoot-the-works plot and cameos by characters from previous Orphan capers, this thriller feels like a finale. But who knows if, like Michael Myers, the unstoppable Evan Smoak will delight fervent fans by coming back?

A popular series ends, or not, with a bang and a healthy dose of wry humor.

**THE APPLICANT**

*Koca, Nazli*

Grove (304 pp.)

$26.00 | Feb. 14, 2023

978-0-8021-6054-6

A young Turkish writer on a student visa in Berlin records her day-to-day experiences as time runs out on both her visa status and her dreams of remaking her life on her own terms.

Leyla, born in Istanbul and raised by an embittered mother and abusive, alcoholic father, is in love with Berlin. When she first visited at 21, Berlin seemed like a place where she “wouldn’t have to give up on her dreams to stay alive,” a city of vagabonds where she could write the kinds of books that get Turkish novelists thrown in prison, inoculated from childhood voices telling her what she could not do. Five years later, Leyla’s master’s thesis has failed, forcing her to sue the university for readmittance or be deported back to Turkey. While she waits in bureaucratic limbo for her case to be resolved, Leyla is not allowed to either enroll in another program or take a full-time job, but must make ends meet working part time as a cleaner at an Alice in Wonderland–themed hostel. As she negotiates her destabilizing new reality—not the bold writer she feels she should have become, not the model minority able to slot her identity into the Germanic system, not the dutiful daughter her sister resents her being to their mother in Istanbul but an invisible cog at the “bottom of the immigrant hierarchy”—Leyla throws herself further into the Berlin club scene, seeking solace, or at least oblivion, in the hypnosis of all-night dancing, drugs, and casual sexual encounters. Written in journal-style entries, Koca’s debut novel keeps its pace.

“An absorbing crime tale fused with an intriguing take on superhero origins.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

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taut without ever seeming strained or frenetic. Leyla is a witty, acutely observant, and deeply sympathetic character who manages to tell the details of her life—both the transcendent epiphanies and the debauched aftermaths—with an honesty that disavows patronizing pity. This is a book about some of the largest issues of our time—ethnic identity, national belonging, the psychological traumas of patriarchy and White supremacy, sexual ownership, feminist reckoning—but it is also, and perhaps primarily, a book about the intimacy between a character and a reader as one agrees to talk and the other agrees to listen.

A powerful debut that heralds a voice intent on being heard.

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**BLOODY MARTINI**

*Kotzwinkle, William*

Blackstone (350 pp.)  
$26.99 | Feb. 14, 2023  
9781094009261

A monk is called from his Mexican monastery back to his hometown, where he kicks major ass.

His mobbed-up relatives have sequestered Thomas Martini with the Benedictines in the Sonoran Desert ever since he punched Michael Muldoon to death in a barroom brawl. But his sheltered life ends with a phone message from his own school friend Finn Sweeney, who begs him with his dying breath to take care of Bridget, the wife who’s gone missing. Despite his current residency, Tommy—who confesses, “I like trouble”—never hesitates. Back in Coalville, Bridget Breen had wrapped Tommy and everyone else around her little finger before she settled down with Finn, who purchased TV station WVIM and started raking muck. Tommy finds Coalville much as he’d left it. Queenie O’Malley and Shirley Kaminski, who’d both caught his eye back in high school, are still in residence, Queenie as the WVIM receptionist, Shirley as a meth-addicted prostitute. Mike Muldoon’s brothers, Killian and Connor, are still on hand too, salivating at the chance to take down their brother’s killer. The town is honeycombed with gangsters, enforcers, sex workers, and drug addicts, some of them Tommy’s relatives. Tommy’s sadistic schoolmate Brian Fury, now the district attorney, has moved on from torturing animals to spending his nights with the 15-year-old prostitute Ruby the Forbidden Fruit. Tommy unleashes the muscle he’s been hiding under a bushel whenever necessary, and he himself is rescued by Queenie, who, much to her surprise, kills three men before they can kill him. Everything, in short, is over-the-top, which is just the way Kotzwinkle likes it.

A fitting memorial to the wisdom of the hero’s late grandfather: “I’m always angry. It saves time.”

---

**ON THE SAVAGE SIDE**

*McDaniel, Tiffany*

Knopf (464 pp.)  
$29.00 | Feb. 14, 2023  
9780593320709

More Midwestern gothic from the author of *Betty* (2020).

This story begins in 1979 in Chilli-cothe, Ohio, an industrial town on the decline. The story’s narrator is Arcade “Arc” Doggs, who’s looking back at a time when she was 6 years old. She has a twin sister called Daffy—or Daffodil Poet because she likes to rhyme. They live with their mother, Adelyn, and their Aunt Clover. Both women are heroin addicts and sex workers. When the twins’ grandmother Mamaw Milkweed dies, the girls are left to fend for themselves, and they
find community with other lost girls. This novel is inspired by the six women who disappeared from the area around Chilli-cothe between May and December 2015. But McDaniel moves her narrative back in time, and no one should mistake this novel for a mystery or thriller. This is, instead, an exploration of addiction and grief and an indictment of how we decide who deserves saving. As she did in *Betty*, McDaniel gives every character the voice of a poet. Everyone—*everyone*—in this novel speaks like a bard, an oracle, or both. It’s impossible to say much about this novel's ending without spoiling it, but it’s safe to say that it will be confounding—if not frustrating—for many readers.

McDaniel has attempted a lot here—maybe too much.
When they get to Jean’s, they find a broken-down neighbor—

TO BELIEVE IN SOLITUDE AND THE GLORY OF MY

Eventually, Devon gets involved with the drug trade—“no one

Kassandra, one of Harold and Camille’s children, attended her

James develops diabetes and Devon refuses to donate a kidney .

Coast family of being a dealer, much less a highly competent

drawback here, it’s that some of the Paynes feel underutilized

and the glass jars to best catch the sunlight moving through his

oddments trapped in little vitrines and quotes like “I WANT

living in the house she grew

of giant metal artworks by her long-

inspiring novel, spare yet packed with

plot and ideas, are from a tiny fictional

town in the southern Allegheny Mountains. Jean was married

to Leah’s father until Leah was 10, when their flourishing bond

was severed by divorce. In her 60s, living in the house she grew

up in, Jean taught herself welding from Y outube videos and

began making towers out of sheet metal, decorating them with

ers (“Oh no, evil flowers, I whispered to myself as I lay there”),

which they assure us are very real, though everything else is

such a divine way the marbles lit up from within.” “That’s Art,”

Jean tells him. “You made it happen, thank you.”

Transforming the odd and the homely into something

beautiful is both the subject and the accomplishment of this

book.

A collection of 25 formally diverse, wide-ranging short and very short stories

from the always surprising Norwegian author.

In her fourth book to be translated

into English, once more by Dickson—who handles its sly, fairy-
tale-infused, theory-laced trickery with aplomb—Øyehaug

gains her playfulness and attention to form, revealing

the literary scaffolding and ropes that support the scenery of

the often unstable narrative surface. Beginning the collection
(with a truly memorable opening line) is “Birds,” in which an

ornithologist who has been preparing to defend her thesis loses

the piece of her brain that contains all her knowledge of birds.

She embarks on a quest to piece back together her ornithologi-

cal expertise in time for her defense, though what she learns

about who she is—or perhaps was—in the process is the more

vital and wounding knowledge. In the title story, what begins as

a tale about a made-up bus driver and made-up passenger pro-

gresses to the “real” story, in which the narrator has broken the

sesamoid bones in their feet after, they realize, picking evil flow-

ers (“Oh no, evil flowers, I whispered to myself as I lay there”),

which they assure us are very real, though everything else is

made up, and though Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du mal, from which

the title is taken, were a metaphor. This leads into a description

of Etienne Carjat’s famous photograph of Baudelaire and

an extrapolation of how Baudelaire might feel about the title of

his work being appropriated for such a story. “A Bit Like This”

follows, a “story” that consists only of a copy of this photograph,

showing Baudelaire looking as described and seemingly dis-

pleased with the proceedings, with no caption, credit, or text

of any kind. Motifs, imagery, and forms pinball throughout the

rest of the collection, making a messily cohesive whole tied

together by anxieties, absurdities, and death—but in a fun way.

A fresh slice of Øyehaug’s work, ideal for seekers of spry

experimental short fiction.
The lives of a disparate group of people in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village unexpectedly become intertwined. A brownstone, a bar, and a baby—these create the sweet spot where the lives of a group of people intersect. In the brownstone are Lauren Shaw, a potter; her husband, Leo Aston, a professor; their three children, Charles, Harrell, and Waverly; Lauren’s mother, Evelyn; and Philip, an antiques expert and Leo’s gay biological father. Then there’s Olivia, the children’s nanny; Todd, a freelance sound engineer and Olivia’s former boyfriend; Melinda, a receptionist at the children’s school; Russell, Melinda’s ex-husband, philanderer, real estate lawyer, and father to the aforementioned baby; Felicity, a TV home-makeover expert and mother to said baby; and Dan, Olivia’s father and owner of the Sweet Spot—the bar below the brownstone. And, of course there’s the baby: formally Horatio, informally Hank. Melinda, enraged by how her husband of nearly 30 years has destroyed her life by having an affair and leaving her—although the resulting destruction of her career and possessions was all her own doing—is hellbent on revenge against Russell, Felicity, and Lauren (who she has been told convinced Russell to leave her). As Melinda wreaks havoc, she causes Olivia to be fired. The story follows Melinda’s efforts to destroy her realization that revenge is not as satisfying as she’d hoped, and the way most of the group comes together to take care of the innocent caught at the center of it all—Hank. There is an engaging whirlwind of characters, an exploration of unruly and conflicting emotions, and an investigation of whether a lifelong monogamous marriage or a heteronormative family unit are the only places familial happiness lies.

Staged much like a play or TV show, this is another enjoyable exploration of the messiness of life from Poeppel.
THE CABINET OF DR. LENG

Constance Greene, ageless protégé of FBI Special Agent Aloysius Pendergast, travels back to 1880s New York—the time and place of her childhood—to save the world from the evil Dr. Enoch Leng and prevent him from killing her two siblings.

Taken off the meanest streets of New York by Leng when she was 9, Constance was given an experimental elixir by him that succeeded in dramatically slowing down her aging process. More than a century later, now under Pendergast’s wing, she is only 20 in physical terms. After belatedly discovering that the essential ingredient of the elixir was taken from the spines of young women, including her older sister, she uses the time machine that appeared in Bloodless (2021) to return to old stomping grounds—where, bizarrely, she encounters her own 9-year-old self. Posing as an Eastern European aristocrat, she insinuates herself into New York society to get next to the falsely celebrated Leng—who has taken the elixir himself—with the aim of killing him. Meanwhile, desperate to protect her from harm—and prevent her from getting stuck in that alternative dimension—Pendergast has the one-use-only time machine retooled. In a largely unconnected plot, his Native American FBI colleague Armstrong Coldmoon investigates two murders connected to the theft of precious Lakota artifacts from a South Dakota reservation. Played as a straight mystery, this part of the novel is efficiently done, if not as much fun as the SF stuff, but it ultimately seems like a time-killing device for the authors. After more than 400 pages, they go the “To Be Continued” route, apologizing for the “inconclusive ending.” Now they tell us.

A mixed bag that leaves the reader hanging.

LYING BESIDE YOU

Twenty years after the brutal killing of his parents and little sisters, a forensic psychologist faces the prospect of welcoming home the schizophrenic brother who committed the crime—who is now being released from custody—while investigating a double murder that will imperil the lives of those closest to him.

At the outset of this expertly paced and psychologically acute novel, 33-year-old Cyrus introduces himself as “the boy who survived.” The killings that left him orphaned and that branded his older brother a monster belong, after all, to the distant past. But now Elias, age 39, is deemed cured and is about to reenter Cyrus’ life and disrupt a household that is a haven for Cyrus’ friend Evie, who has suffered more than most. “I’ve been beaten, starved, and denied affection,” the young Albanian woman explains, “...until each new bruise became another merit badge.” As tough as she is childlike, Evie also has an uncanny ability to tell when people are lying. And because lying is as common in Nottingham, England as it is anywhere else, Evie can be an uncomfortable presence. But when a double murder—of an elderly father and his daughter—draws Cyrus into a mystery that deepens as young women go missing, Evie’s intuitive skills prove invaluable. All of which might strain credulity were it not for the insightfully drawn characters and superb sense of place that the author conjures up with laconic ease, razor-sharp wit, and, above all, compassion. “Bare branches reach out across the drainage canal,” he writes of a farmland crime scene, “where the water looks black as sump oil...A shuffling figure...is moving gingerly through the mud and reeds towards a bundle of rags.” A police office is about to uncover a corpse—and as we read we smell the pre-dawn air and sense the imminent horror.

Gripping and insightful.

COLLECTED WORKS

A young man, longing to become a writer, comes of age.

As Martin Berg is growing up in Gothenburg, Sweden, he feels a certain restlessness. He is top of his class at school, but the other students bore him—that is, until he meets Gustav Becker, a precocious would-be artist with a similar taste for music and books. Together, they stay out all night, smoking cigarettes and drinking, while Martin dreams of becoming a writer. This debut novel by Sandgren is wonderfully evocative of late-1970s and early-’80s Sweden. The boys’ stomping grounds—and dissatisfactions—are rendered in exquisite detail. Sandgren alternates between Martin’s youth and his middle age. At 40, he co-owns a small, intellectual publishing house, and the promise of his youth seems to have been wasted: He spends almost every day counting down the hours. “And then came those hours,” Sandgren writes. “When all the chores of the day were done but it was too early to go to bed.” Martin’s wife, Cecilia, disappeared more than a decade ago, leaving Martin with two children. With no word from her since, Martin has been unable to move on. Cecilia’s disappearance makes this novel, in part, a mystery: Where has she gone, and why? Those questions provide the novel with a compelling throughline, but even without it, Sandgren’s descriptions of Martin’s earnest but slightly pretentious striving toward intellectual brilliance are witty, moving, and detailed enough on their own to carry the
story forward. If the novel has any faults, it is that Sandgren occasionally hits the same note more than once. There are more than a few descriptions of decrepit student flats, for example, with dirty, food-encrusted dishes piled in the sink. Descriptions like these could have been condensed, but even as they are, they don’t constitute a major flaw.

A richly evocative work from a major new talent.

ENDPAPERS
Savran Kelly, Jennifer
Algonquin (336 pp.)
$27.00 | Feb. 7, 2023
978-1-643-75184-9

Savran Kelly draws parallels between 20th- and 21st-century queer history in her first novel.

Dawn Levit is experiencing a quarter-life crisis. She moved to New York after graduating from college, but she arrived just a few months after 9/11, and the city has been transformed by wreckage, debris, and displays of xenophobia. She’s an aspiring artist, but she’s out of ideas. And her relationship with a musician named Lukas is foundering as their gender identities and physical desires are increasingly out of sync. He wants her to be more masculine than she feels; she wants penetrative sex he is unwilling to provide. Her job repairing rare books at the Met is the only aspect of her life that is uncomplicated—or mostly uncomplicated. It’s while she’s rebinding a water-damaged text that she finds a message written on the cover of a vintage lesbian pulp novel—a cover showing a woman holding up a mirror and seeing a man’s face. Her search for the woman who wrote this note leads her to Gertrude Kleber, who left Nazi Germany for New York, where her father worked as a bookbinder. There are parallels between the two women’s lives. In the 1950s, Gertrude had to hide her attraction to other women. As she comes to discover that she feels neither fully feminine nor fully masculine, Dawn finds herself shunned by both lesbians and gay men. And, just as Gertrude found a way to express herself, Dawn launches a
collaborative project that makes her feel like an artist again. Gertrude and her friends—the Sapphic Warriors—write and bind stories depicting “the joyful lives we wished we could live” and tucked them inside the dime-store novels that depicted lesbians as tragic deviants. Dawn creates a book-as-installation in which artists imagine a New York in which everyone is free to be their own unique gender. The narrative suffers from slow pacing, a protagonist who is spectacularly self-absorbed and kind of a jerk (she lies to Gertrude about why she tracked her down), and from the fact that Gertrude’s story is so much more interesting than Dawn’s. It is, nevertheless, a salient reminder that there was a time when the word nonbinary was virtually unknown.

An intriguing but uneven debut.

**PHÆDRA**
Shepperson, Laura
Alcove Press (304 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Jan. 10, 2023
978-1-63910-153-5

A princess is whisked away from home and into a dangerous new world in this reinterpretation of the Greek myth. Phaedra is the younger and plainer princess of Crete. As a teenager, she is witness to the arrival of Theseus and his slaying of her brother, the Minotaur, in the labyrinth. After losing her sister, Ariadne, she becomes Theseus’ bride and travels with him to Athens, intent on seeing the gods take revenge on him for the murder of her brother. But Athens is a different world, harsher and filled with men who have no time for the young princess, now queen. Her volatile relationship with her stepson, Hippolytus, who is roughly her age, and her nonexistent relationship with her husband boil over when the worst happens and all of Phaedra’s faith is tested. Shepperson has taken an old story and given it new life with her feminist framing. The point of view rotates among major players like Phaedra; her maid, Kandake; and the king’s adviser, Trypho, and minor players like Xenethippe, an Athenian peasant; and Helia, a bull leaper. Interjections from the Night Chorus, the unified voice of the women of Athens, set the scene, letting the reader know the truth of what is happening beyond Phaedra’s sight. The writing is evocative, crisp, and clear even when dealing with Greek customs, weapons, and traditions. The looming, ever present threat of sexual violence creates tension even in seemingly innocuous scenes, clear even to readers unfamiliar with the original story. This tale was always going to be a tragedy; but telling it almost entirely from the women’s points of view makes it both more modern and more eternal, the system of men protecting men never changing.

A breath of fresh air from an ancient tale.

**NIGHT LETTER**
Watson, Sterling
Akashic (304 pp.)
$28.95 | Jan. 3, 2023
978-1-63614-063-6

After six years in a Nebraska reform school, 18-year-old Travis Hollister heads south during the Lyndon Johnson era to get back with the illicit woman of his dreams only to become involved with another teenager.

When Travis was 12, he had a brief but intense romance with Delia—his 16-year-old aunt—before being sent up for a stabbing. In Florida, which “gets the crazies...because it’s the last place you can go in one direction and still be American,” he discovers that she has married an opportunistic Panama City lawyer but still is as obsessed with him as he is with her. While biding his time as a busboy, Travis encounters trouble in the form of Dawnell, a 16-year-old in a faded white party dress who “smokes like a thirty-year-old woman sitting on a barstool waiting for her future to walk in the door in a Palm Beach suit.” Between secret meetings with Delia, he becomes Dawnell’s protector and boyfriend-in-waiting, shaking off warnings about her from his seasoned co-worker Emil and hard-drinking, big-hearted landlady, the Widow. Dotted with AM hits by the likes of Otis Redding and the Isley Brothers, the book unfolds like a fever dream, marked by good memories (riding with Delia in her white ’54 Chevy with the radio on) and bad (the deaths of two boys she knew). “Like a rip current that takes your feet from under you and sweeps you out past the markers before you can wave at the shore, time comes to us again,” Watson writes. Ultimately, this book is about freedom: “What is America if not a place where you can write your own story?”

An atmospheric coming-of-age story equally touched by noir and Southern soul.
**Mystery**

**KILLER CUPID**

*Berenson, Laurien*

Kensington (208 pp.)
$22.95 | Dec. 27, 2022
978-1-4967-4103-5

A dog breeder with a nose for crime takes a break from her canine companions—but not from murder.

Life with two kids, five standard poodles, and one frisky mutt can get hectic. So Melanie Travis is thrilled when her Aunt Peg surprises her and her husband, Sam, with a romantic Valentine’s weekend getaway at the canine-friendly White Birch Inn in the Berkshires. Peg offers to take care of 5-year-old Kevin, teenage Davey, and five of the six dogs, knowing that Melanie would never leave Faith, her oldest poodle, behind. The first person Mel meets at the White Birch, as she and Sam and her brother, Frank, and sister-in-law, Bertie (invited to go along by Kevin and Davey), arrive, is owner Evelyn Barker, whose white Samoyed, Sammy, is an immediate hit with Faith. Unfortunately, that’s how the trouble starts. Mel takes Faith and Sammy for a late-night romp by the lake and sees events coordinator Belinda Rush locked in a tight embrace with an unknown man. The next morning Belinda’s body is found outdoors, and the police insist she died of exposure. The local sheriff isn’t impressed when Mel tells her about Belinda’s late-night assignation, but Evelyn, concerned with the inn’s reputation, asks Mel to investigate. Unmasking the killer proves to be fairly straightforward but somehow less fun without the poodle posse cavorting around and beneath Mel’s feet.

*Romance is no substitute for poodles.*

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***THE HUNTSMAN***

*Judith Sanders*

ISBN: 978-1-938573-02-6

“...an extraordinary thriller. More than that, it approaches its subject from a wholly unique perspective; one that is sure to keep the reader guessing until the story’s shocking conclusion.”

—Steven Jon Whitmer, Emmy-winning Writer & Producer

“This shrewd exploration of a killer’s mindset will unnerve and enthrall readers.”

—Kirkus Reviews

For Agent Representation or Information on Publishing and Film Rights, Email sanderspub@gmail.com • ironwordpress.com
THE AMBASSADOR
get, Peter
Severn House (272 pp.)
$29.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
9781448307678

A gritty whodunit that packs an unexpected punch.

A savvy sleuth learns that dark memories of the Vietnam War are slow to fade.

In mid-1980s Boston, private eye Andy Roark is summoned to the opulent Harvard Club to take a meeting with esteemed Ambassador Gordon R. Stevenson. Significantly, Andy is vetted by Stevenson’s wife, Honey, and Brad Lawrence, his brusque aide-de-camp, before he gets to meet the pompous windbag himself. Someone’s been sending the great man threatening letters. In light of the recent assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan, Stevenson’s camp is concerned. Can Andy identify the anonymous writer? The seriousness of the situation is underscored by the surprise arrival of FBI Special Agent Brenda Watts, who’s no fan of Andy’s. The roots of both the miscreant’s threats and Andy’s disdain for Stevenson date back to the Vietnam War, in which Andy and Stevenson served, Andy as a Green Beret and Stevenson as his son in command. But Andy shelves his feelings to befriend the ambassador, and they find common ground via shared reminis-
cences of Vietnam. Andy’s fourth caper harkens back to clas-sic gumshoe fiction, long on narrative aplomb and wisecracks, balanced between following a twisty trail of persons of interest and portraying Andy’s colorful loner life. The investigative path, which leads through a handful of vets struggling to recover from their war experiences, triggers uncomfortable memories for the usually unflappable Andy as well. Colorful characters and Andy’s banter go down easy; Colt’s trenchant depictions of vets haunted by their war experiences will stick with readers long afterward.

A good luck charm brings anything but to an anxious bride in the Scottish seaside town of Nairn.

MURDER AT A SCOTTISH WEDDING
Hall, Traci
Kensington (304 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Jan. 24, 2023
9781496739247

A good luck charm brings anything but to an anxious bride in the Scottish seaside town of Nairn.

Paislee Shaw’s best friend, Lydia Bar-ron, is at church, about to marry Corbin Smythe—until the disappearance of the Luckenbooth brooch, a Smythe family heirloom, throws everything into disarray. Corbin’s snobbish stepmother, Mary, already dislikes Lydia and has insisted that the marriage will bring bad luck. The brooch turns up in the hands of Corbin’s cousin Felice, but instead of exulting in the discovery, she says that she can’t see and falls down the church stairs, breaking her neck. Of course the wedding is postponed; of course Mary and her spoiled daughters use the time to drive a wedge between Lydia and Corbin; and of course Felice’s death turns out to be murder. Paislee has her hands full with her yarn shop and her grandpa Angus, who fears his son Craigh, who’s gone missing from an oil rig, may be in deep trouble. Despite all these commitments, Lydia begs Paislee, who’s had prior experience with murder, to help even as the police warn them to let the authorities handle the case. Handsome DI Zeffler, who’s worked with Paislee before, is more interested in finding Craigh even though the brooch was covered in strychnine apparently meant for Lydia. It turns out that Craigh had been getting himself out of trouble by working undercover for Scotland Yard, but now he’s stopped contacting them, and both Scotland Yard and some very nasty crooks are after him. Paislee does everything in her power to help Lydia, whose marital hopes are dimming.

Down-to-earth characters and two mysteries to solve add up to a solid read.

SIX SWEETS UNDER
Fox, Sarah
Berkley (304 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Feb. 7, 2023
9780593546611

A former actress returns to her small Vermont town intending to make choco-lates and solves a mystery on the side.

Can you ever really go home again? wonders Rebecca Ransom, who has traded her life as an actress for the simpler pleasures of Larch Haven. Becca thinks she’s found happiness in taking over chocolate-making responsibilities at True Confections, the little shop owned by her perfectly dubbed grandparents Lolly and Pops. She’s even developed her own creation, a chocolate gondola, in celebration of the town’s boats, which are used for transportation, just as in Venice. Not that Becca would ever want to steer one of the gondolas for herself; just the thought of it sends her into a panic. But she thinks she’s found her happy place even if her boyfriend, Justin, expresses his doubts during his visit from Hollywood. And Becca’s surrounded by other folks who think small-town life is bliss—all except for town curmudgeon Archie Smith, who never found a fight he couldn’t pick. His latest battle is with Pops over a vintage scooter, and even though Pops has 20 years on Archie, Archie still takes a swing at him. Unbelievable. When a body is found in a canal not too long after, Becca isn’t shocked to discover it’s Archie, though the fact that even a mean-spirited man like him has been murdered is a surprise in such a close-knit community. Did Archie simply choose the wrong enemy, or could his death have something to do with the disappearance 10 years ago of teen Lexi Derendorf, the only other mysterious event in Larch Haven history?

Like the included recipes, it’s all very simple and goes down easy.

“Becca’s surrounded by other folks who think small-town life is bliss—all except for town curmudgeon Archie Smith, who never found a fight he couldn’t pick. His latest battle is with Pops over a vintage scooter, and even though Pops has 20 years on Archie, Archie still takes a swing at him.”

MURDER AT A SCOTTISH WEDDING
Hall, Traci
Kensington (304 pp.)
$16.95 paper | Jan. 24, 2023
978-1-4967-3924-7

A good luck charm brings anything but to an anxious bride in the Scottish seaside town of Nairn.

Paislee Shaw’s best friend, Lydia Barron, is at church, about to marry Corbin Smythe—until the disappearance of the Luckenbooth brooch, a Smythe family heirloom, throws everything into disarray. Corbin’s snobbish stepmother, Mary, already dislikes Lydia and has insisted that the marriage will bring bad luck. The brooch turns up in the hands of Corbin’s cousin Felice, but instead of exulting in the discovery, she says that she can’t see and falls down the church stairs, breaking her neck. Of course the wedding is postponed; of course Mary and her spoiled daughters use the time to drive a wedge between Lydia and Corbin; and of course Felice’s death turns out to be murder. Paislee has her hands full with her yarn shop and her grandpa Angus, who fears his son Craigh, who’s gone missing from an oil rig, may be in deep trouble. Despite all these commitments, Lydia begs Paislee, who’s had prior experience with murder, to help even as the police warn them to let the authorities handle the case. Handsome DI Zeffler, who’s worked with Paislee before, is more interested in finding Craigh even though the brooch was covered in strychnine apparently meant for Lydia. It turns out that Craigh had been getting himself out of trouble by working undercover for Scotland Yard, but now he’s stopped contacting them, and both Scotland Yard and some very nasty crooks are after him. Paislee does everything in her power to help Lydia, whose marital hopes are dimming.

Down-to-earth characters and two mysteries to solve add up to a solid read.
DCI Bill Slider lands a case as puzzling as it is unwelcome.

Henry Holland’s wife has gone missing. Felicity Holland went out on her usual errands—a pottery class, lunch with some friends—and never came home. Since her husband is a historical novelist of some repute and an old schoolmate of Borough Commander Mike Carpenter, who admires his work, he phones him directly, and even though Felicity presumably disappeared from Notting Hill, not Shepherd’s Bush, Carpenter orders Slider to take on the investigation personally. The missing woman hasn’t left much of a trail, but the discovery of her handbag in Burnham Beeches, exactly the sort of venue that would be ideal for disposing of a body, turns up the heat, though not the light. The few leads Slider picks up point him toward Josh Milo, an old lover Felicity hadn’t seen in years; an unidentified, much younger man she repeatedly had lunch with; and her own father, Sir John Aubrey-Harris, Queen’s Counsel, a retired barrister so eminent that Slider dares not accuse him or even question him. To top it off, Holland keeps calling his higher-ups to complain about Slider’s lack of progress. “If ever he had been handed a poisoned chalice, this was it,” reflects Slider ruefully. The climactic developments in the case, when they arrive in good time, aren’t exactly surprising, but they’re highly satisfying. As a bonus, Slider gets something that might almost pass for an apology from one of the powerful people he’s been thrown up against.

A model British procedural with nary a wasted word, scene, or gesture.
An Oxfordshire family's sense of its comfortable place in the world is rocked by the apparent suicide of one of its members, then by the even more disturbing news that it wasn't suicide after all.

Get-togethers of the Surray family at Upwood House are almost like reciprocal book signings. Prof. John Surray writes academic treatises; his sons, Richard and Robert, maintain their professional standing by writing articles; his daughter Ruth is a successful novelist; and his daughter Naomi, who's just graduated with first-class honors in classics, will surely add to the pile. Prof. John Surray writes academic treatises; his sons, Richard and Robert, maintain their professional standing by writing articles; his daughter Ruth is a successful novelist; and his daughter Naomi, who's just graduated with first-class honors in classics, will surely add to the pile.

No wonder Judith Beech, his married daughter, has just burned her own manuscript, which would clearly face stiff competition. But not, as it happens, from Ruth, who's found dead in her bed from an overdose of thalmaine the morning after she hosts a dinner of fellow authors and publishers. Ruth's always kept everything professional and smartly paced, though she's so determined to make the guilty party appear innocent that she still has questions. Why does Callie want to write, or not write, a memoir? And what does she have to say about the car accident that killed his fiancee many years ago, and hope that one of the many guilty-looking suspects actually turns out to be guilty. Eventually one of them does, and no, it's not the one you thought.

Flaming piffle, like the baked Alaska that provides a distraction from the poisoning.

About average for the British Library Crime Classics series of reprints, which makes it well worth your attention.

INVITATION TO A KILLER
Malliet, G.M.
Severn House (240 pp.)
$29.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
9781448306640

A Fashionable Fatality
Maxwell, Alyssa
Kensington (304 pp.)
$26.00 | Jan. 24, 2023
978-1-4967-3491-4

In the 1920s, aristocrats meet the preeminent fashion designer of their day. Complications ensue.

Accepting an invitation to visit her sister, Julia, the Marchioness of Allerton, in the Cotswolds, Phoebe Renshaw discovers that a fellow houseguest is the famous Coco Chanel, who has rudely invited her crew of models, seamstresses, and a photographer to join her. Another guest is the Earl of Chesterhaven, horse breeder and lady's man, whom Coco has marked as her own. Phoebe's maid, Eva Huntford, has joined her in several murder investigations, but neither expects problems at Allerton Place, though there's clearly tension among Chanel's crew—especially between longtime model Suzette Villiers and young newcomer India Vale, who's not as naïve as she appears. Phoebe's delighted when her boyfriend, wealthy mill owner Lord Owen Seabright, appears but then becomes annoyed by his overprotectiveness. A morning ride almost brings disaster when the inexperienced Suzette tries to prove she's as good a rider as India, who takes a fall when Suzette crowds her at a jump. In the meantime, Coco presses Phoebe into service as a model for her new sportswear line and has many pictures taken of the stunning Julia in her designs, assuring them both that the photos will not be published. When a fire leaves Suzette dead of smoke inhalation, Phoebe and Eva find themselves once again in a murder hunt with a long list of suspects.

The addition of the notorious Chanel adds interest to a solid golden age–style mystery.
“Welcome to Three Pines, the idyllic-seeming Canadian capital of murder.”

A WORLD OF CURiosITIES

SEA CASTLE
Mayne, Andrew
Thomas & Mercer (315 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Feb. 21, 2023
9781662506413

A naked corpse that washes ashore proves to be just the tip of a homicidal iceberg.

The discovery of a dead girl with a rope around her neck on a Fort Lauderdale beach triggers a call to detective (and narrator) Sloan McPherson of the Underwater Investigation Unit. Medical examiner Josh Kaperman concludes that Nicole Donnelly was indeed strangled, but by hand, not a rope. This is the first of several inconsistencies that make Sloan suspect that the case will be complex, a hunch that’s confirmed with every new twist in her investigative path. Mayne’s fourth UIU thriller lands like an episode of a long-running forensic crime TV series, with a large cast of crisply depicted witnesses and supporting regulars who make cameo appearances every chapter or three. Although Scott Hughes, Sloan’s sidekick in previous installments, is away in training, she finds welcome support from gritty veteran detective Gwen Wylder, the perfect partner for a case focused on women at risk. Clues emerge at a truck station that may be the scene of unsavory sexual activity; in the ocean, courtesy of an Underwater Robotic Vehicle; through a trio of thugs Sloan nicknames Silver Teeth, Brio, and Half Face; and from a charismatic cult leader. The plot comes together like the proverbial puzzle, each juicy piece adding a bit to a disturbing big picture.

A savvy police procedural that executes a familiar formula with panache.

A WORLD OF CURiosITIES
Penny, Louise
Minotaur (400 pp.)
$28.00 | Nov. 29, 2022
978-1-2501-4529-1

Welcome to Three Pines, the idyllic-seeming Canadian capital of murder.

At the heart of Penny’s series of mysteries set in the tiny Quebec town of Three Pines is the relationship between Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, the empathetic and capable head of homicide for the Sûreté du Québec, and his headstrong second-in-command, Jean-Guy Beauvoir, now also his son-in-law. Gamache has a talent for finding officers who’ve been languishing in their previous jobs and turning them into trusted allies, and Penny has frequently mentioned the way Beauvoir had been “banished to the basement” in an out-of-the-way bureau and that there was something “lean and feral…something dangerous” about him before Gamache swooped in and brought him to the homicide squad. Now, in her 18th installment, Penny

flashes back to the case that brought the two men together. A woman named Clotilde Arsenault has been found dead in a remote lake, and Gamache shows up at the local detachment to investigate the case himself. Clotilde had two children, 13-year-old Fiona and Sam, 10, and it turns out she had been prostituting them. In the book’s present-day strand, Fiona is graduating from college after having served time in prison for killing her mother; Gamache and his wife, Reine-Marie, have supported her, almost folding her into their own family, but they’ve never trusted Sam, who will also be at the graduation ceremony. This chapter in Penny’s chronicle of Three Pines contains all the elements that she sometimes divides up between different books: There’s a cozy-feeling present-day mystery concerning a hidden room Fiona discovers by looking at the roofline of Myrna’s bookstore, and the strange painting found inside; the harrowing story of how Gamache and Beauvoir cracked the case of Clotilde’s murder; and a story of corruption within the institutions that are supposed to be protecting us. The plotting is complex and the characters as vivid as ever, but the opportunity to watch Gamache and Beauvoir’s relationship develop is what...
Hollywood ghost stories, feels delightfully unleashed from their grandiloquent actor Jack Fitzglen heads his adoring dresser, Augustus Pocket. In the early years of the 20th century, grandiloquent actor Jack Fitzglen heads his adoring dresser, Augustus Pocket. When theatrical engagements are meager, Mr. Jack likes to augment the family’s income with some artful thievery, a sideline that fills Gus with trepidation, though not enough to make him refuse to assist his idol. Impersonations are such a key component of Mr. Jack’s heists that they’re almost better described as performances. His latest felonious obsession is a priceless relic called the Talisman Chalice, which carries a curse and is reportedly hidden somewhere in a Northumberland estate called Valley Hall or in the ominous neighboring Bastele House. Rayne puts this plummy plot on a back burner to take the reader north and lay out complicated inheritance questions swirling around sincere, timorous Maude Vallow, who becomes the hapless heir to these properties. The discovery of the corpse of a servant thought to have decamped only increases Maude’s anxiety. It is in this forbidding atmosphere that the flamboyant Mr. Jack attempts to execute his plan. Rayne’s tale, a half-step away from the simmering suspense of her upscale Phineas Fox series and West/Flint ghost stories, feels delightfully unleashed from their milieu. She depicts hammy antihero Jack with relish, loads the last half of her bubbly, spooky yarn with lively set pieces like a suspicious fire, and ties her chalice to the dark fates of Richard II and Anne Boleyn.

Frightful fun with haunted history and a blustery thespian.

CHEDDAR LATE THAN DEAD
Reilly, Linda
Poisoned Pen (280 pp.)
$8.99 paper | Jan. 31, 2023
978-1-72823-838-8

The queen of grilled cheese proves for a third time that she’s also a pretty good detective.

Carly’s Grilled Cheese Eatery is the place where Carly Hale serves up delicious and exotic sandwiches. Her latest customers are Dawn Chapin and Klarissa Taddeo, whom she remembers from high school. Klarissa is about to marry Tony Manous, but not all is moonlight and roses. She blames Dawn, who’s not fond of Tony, feels underappreciated. The shower unfolds without incident until Tony shows up, has a fight with the videographer, and turns up dead at the bottom of a staircase. Neither Carly’s boyfriend, Ari Mitchell, nor Police Chief Fred Holloway, a family friend, is happy to see Carly, who’s been entangled in murder cases before, get involved in this one. But she can’t resist a little sleuthing, and she agrees to help Dawn, who’s naturally come under suspicion. For better or worse, there’s a lot of tension between the Manous and Taddeo families, so Dawn’s not the only suspect. When town manager Gretel Engstrom, who had problems with Tony, goes missing, the case becomes even more unnerving.

A complex mystery and yummy grilled cheese recipes. What’s not to like?

CHALICE OF DARKNESS
Rayne, Sarah
Severn House (288 pp.)
$29.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
9781448306404

Has an overconfident thief met his match in a haunted mansion?

In the early years of the 20th century, grandiloquent actor Jack Fitzglen heads a mediocre theatrical family, abetted by his adoring dresser, Augustus Pocket. When theatrical engagements are meager, Mr. Jack likes to augment the family’s income with some artful thievery, a sideline that fills Gus with trepidation, though not enough to make him refuse to assist his idol. Impersonations are such a key component of Mr. Jack’s heists that they’re almost better described as performances. His latest felonious obsession is a priceless relic called the Talisman Chalice, which carries a curse and is reportedly hidden somewhere in a Northumberland estate called Valley Hall or in the ominous neighboring Bastele House. Rayne puts this plummy plot on a back burner to take the reader north and lay out complicated inheritance questions swirling around sincere, timorous Maude Vallow, who becomes the hapless heir to these properties. The discovery of the corpse of a servant thought to have decamped only increases Maude’s anxiety. It is in this forbidding atmosphere that the flamboyant Mr. Jack attempts to execute his plan. Rayne’s tale, a half-step away from the simmering suspense of her upscale Phineas Fox series and West/Flint ghost stories, feels delightfully unleashed from their milieu. She depicts hammy antihero Jack with relish, loads the last half of her bubbly, spooky yarn with lively set pieces like a suspicious fire, and ties her chalice to the dark fates of Richard II and Anne Boleyn.

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978-1-72823-838-8

The queen of grilled cheese proves for a third time that she’s also a pretty good detective.

Carly’s Grilled Cheese Eatery is the place where Carly Hale serves up delicious and exotic sandwiches. Her latest customers are Dawn Chapin and Klarissa Taddeo, whom she remembers from high school. Klarissa is about to marry Tony Manous, but not all is moonlight and roses. She blames Dawn, who’s naturally come under suspicion. For better or worse, there’s a lot of tension between the Manous and Taddeo families, so Dawn’s not the only suspect. When town manager Gretel Engstrom, who had problems with Tony, goes missing, the case becomes even more unnerving.

A complex mystery and yummy grilled cheese recipes. What’s not to like?
A gentlewoman lives by her wits without losing her heart.
Rosalind Thorne treads a knife edge in Edwardian London. Working for pay would erase her claim to gentility. But, since her father left her penniless, she maintains her small household by helping more prosperous members of the haute ton solve their problems—domestic, romantic, and occasionally legal—and relying on their good breeding to reward her discretion with an appropriate sum. Her latest commission is no exception. Her old school friend Bethany Hodgeson, now Mrs. Gerald Douglas, implores Rosalind to discover who stole a valuable pearl necklace from her dressing room while pretending to help Bethany’s sister-in-law, Penelope, prepare for her London season. The Hodgeson family, including Bethany’s feckless father and malingering mother, moved to London when Gerald’s wealthy uncle, Sir Jasper, made Gerald his heir. Their situation is stressed not only by Sir Jasper’s demands for attention, but by the presence in the household of Bethany’s disgraced sister, Nora, who returned to her family after a failed elopement. Rosalind’s desire to earn the expected gift from Bethany is complicated by her pain at watching her friend struggle to adjust to a world more socially fraught than the one she grew up in. Wilde springs a series of surprises that prove that the planning of every successful fraud goes back far longer than the victims could ever suspect. The jolts provide a series of tests for Rosalind that are also opportunities for the reader to bond with her, hoping that she has the acuity to fit each piece of the puzzle into place, the heart to do right by her friend, and the strength to face down the tide of social convention.

A compelling lesson in manners and morals.
THE TYRANNY OF FAITH
Swan, Richard
Orbit (560 pp.)
$29.00 | Feb. 14, 2023
9780316361682

This grimdark political fantasy thriller is the second of a trilogy chronicling the fall of an empire.

Imperial Justice Sir Konrad Vonvalt; his clerk (and the novel’s narrator), Helena Sedanka; and their two companions have traveled to Sova, capital of the Empire of the Wolf. There they intend to confront the traitorous Justices of the Magistratum, who have been sharing their secret magical knowledge with zealous priest Patria Bartholomew Claver, and gain the emperor’s assistance in going after Claver, who is currently raising an army and may have designs on the throne. But their efforts are stymied by the suspiciously timed kidnapping of the Emperor’s grandson, which Sir Konrad is ordered to investigate, and the debilitating illness afflicting Sir Konrad, the result of a hex cast by Claver. As Sir Konrad and his compatriots seek to solve a mystery, discover a cure, and find allies against Claver in an increasingly complex and treacherous political landscape, Helena battles both her feelings for Sir Konrad and her repugnance for some of his recent ruthless actions, which suggest that he is more and more willing to ignore the letter of the law in his pursuit of both justice and vengeance. While the previous installment, The Justice of Kings (2022), was pretty dark, this volume gets even grittier, as the remaining scraps of Helena’s naïveté about Sir Konrad’s character and the nature of his work are brutally burned away and any faint hope that law might win out against might and self-serving politicking is crushed out in a fairly definitive way. It is now obvious that this empire of fractious, recently conquered nations is beyond saving, and all the characters can do is fight toward preserving whatever safety they can. This book travels even further beyond the traveling investigator/justice dealer mold of Tremayne’s Sister Fidelma and van Gulik’s Judge Dee series and more squarely into territory reminiscent of Andrzej Sapkowski’s Hussite trilogy, another complex and dark historical fantasy series inspired by medieval state-military-church political conflicts.

Doom is inevitable; it will be interesting (and no doubt, heart-wrenching) to see what form it will take.

CHICK MAGNET
Barry, Emma
Montlake Romance (301 pp.)
$16.99 paper | Jan. 24, 2023
978-1-6625-0501-0

A struggling veterinarian and a popular influencer nudge one another to redefine the parameters of success in life and love.

Armed with charm, skill, and a brood of entertaining chickens, Nicole Jones has amassed a large fan following on social media. So, when her YouTuber boyfriend decides to dump her while streaming live, Nicole—or Chick Nic, as she is popularly known—feels desperately cornered. Bruised and humiliated, Nic relocates with her overactive avian brood to Yagerstown, where her late grandmother was born. But another challenge awaits in the form of local vet Will Lund. The dedicated doctor is displeased with Nic for making chicken-rearing appear easier and more glamorous than it really is. Although he’s unsure of her dedication to her flock, Will has seen and admired Nic’s videos and finds himself nursing an uncomfortable attraction to his new neighbor. Several heated disagreements later, Nic and Will realize they share common ground: Both are dealing with life-altering difficulties. While Nic is nursing a broken heart, Will is forced to acknowledge that his vet practice has suffered irrecoverably in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. But it will take more than shared confidences for Will to finally believe that he is worthy of love and happiness. Nic and Will are instantly likable, and their search for steadiness and meaning—even roots and belonging, in Nic’s case—during a difficult phase feels particularly authentic. Barry is insightful when she hints at the painful social shifts initiated by the pandemic, infectiously cheerful while describing Nic’s interactions with her chicking comrades, and especially evocative when she tackles Will’s internal struggles. But this sometimes leads to abrupt and disorienting tonal shifts, from featherlight and airy to emotionally dense and weighty.

A comforting small-town romance, with chickens.
A one-night stand sparkles far beyond first impressions.

Ash Winters is trapped. His life has to be defined by his routines, which he clings to as his only hope as he recovers from severe depression and a suicide attempt. He avoids contact with friends, his sex life is unsatisfying, and his promising career as a writer has been derailed. But he feels obligated to make it from London to Brighton for his friend's stag party; and it's good that he does, because across the dance floor he sees Darian Taylor, a charming, baffling, "glittering pirate of a man," an aspiring model from Essex. They have an electric sexual encounter, but Ash runs away, a panic attack having been triggered when he wakes in a strange place. He's plunged into another depressive episode. When he reemerges, Darian finds him at a book signing, and despite his anger, they reconnect (quite intimately, over Ash's desk). As they continue to spend time together, Ash starts to think maybe he could build a new life with Darian—but eventually he pushes Darian away so cruelly that he might not return. This is a republication of Hall's first book, originally published in 2013, and this new edition has some changes but will be recognizable to readers of the original. Most importantly, it still includes the same extremely Essex voice ascribed to Darian with every sentence of dialogue; this isn't for all readers, but it is remarkably consistent ("hunjed pahcent" comes up a lot), and even when Darian borders on farce it can't dampen the clear passion the two men have for each other. Hall's command of tropes and ability to consistently deliver fantastically explicit writing remain top-notch, though fans will notice that while this book is solid, the writing is a bit clumsy compared to recent releases, with some confusing dialogue formatting that can detract from the story. Still, there's a reason this book, which is the first in the cult favorite Spires series, has had avid readers for years, and it's because it has the heady combination of red-hot sex scenes with genuine emotional connection that Hall does so well. The clear content guidance at the start of the book is a grace note that underscores the blunt but sensitive treatment of Ash's mental health and shouldn't be skipped.

A shimmery and sexy start to the reissuing of a beloved m/m contemporary romance series.
A comic describes his lifelong love affair with food.

“...a good meal gives me more happiness than almost anything in life, including sex, money, and sex,” Ahdoot writes in this collection of humorous essays. Later, he adds, “I’m probably the best comedian in the country with a deep obsession with food, so that’s something, right?” Much of the narrative describes how he got that way. Unfortunately, the book is like a restaurant that can’t keep good chefs because the offerings vary wildly in quality. As the middle of three boys, Ahdoot was the only child in their Iranian Jewish household who shared his father’s love of fine cuisine, a passion his father maintained until the oldest son died of cancer. Ahdoot’s parents then turned to religion and frequented “subpar kosher immigrant eateries...with fluorescent lighting, sticky menus, and the smell of ferment.” Nonetheless, the author’s passion for food intensified and led to the adventures chronicled here: his time as an intern at the Spotted Pig, a high-end restaurant for the “culinary daredevil, someone who chewed first and asked questions later”; breaking up with an actor because he couldn’t deal with her dietary restrictions; his experiences hunting, which he describes in a sequence about an elk hunt, where he reveled “in opening the eyes of lifelong hunters to the joys of the discarded bits,” including “the animal’s ultimate delectable—the heart.” Essays about Ahdoot’s family are pleasurable, but the rest are superficial and rely on painful attempts at humor. A reader’s appreciation of this book will depend on reactions to lines like, “If the Nazis could get used to mass murder, I could get used to hunting.” Attempts at memorable food descriptions fall flat, as when the author notes a “magical saffron panna cotta that coated and comforted my tongue like a dairy cashmere sweater, leaving wisps of the Orient in its wake.” However, readers who enjoy pagelong accounts of messy bowel movements won’t be disappointed.

Some chapters are well-prepared entrees. The others? Send them back.
“Who is in control of our massive social media networks? According to this thought-provoking book, no one.”

MEGANEWS

THE KING
The Life of Charles III
Andersen, Christopher
Gallery Books/Simon & Schuster
(480 pp.)
$29.99 | Nov. 8, 2022
9781501181597

A new biography of the monarch.
Andersen has written about the British royal family for 40 years. In his latest book, following Brothers and Wives: Inside the Private Lives of William, Kate, Harry, and Meghan, the author concentrates on the main protagonist in the family’s story after the death of Queen Elizabeth earlier this year. Having waited in the wings for decades to ascend to the throne, Charles promises to be an activist king at a time of enormous change in the U.K. He hopes to take the monarchy from an “enduring but politically toothless symbol of imperial grandeur and national unity” to one that is relevant, politically engaged, and even “dissident.” Among other issues, the author notes, Charles seeks to address “education, architecture, organic farming, wildlife preservation (from the Chatham albatross to the Patagonian toothfish), badger hunting, herbal medicines, and overseas funding to restore huts in the Antarctic used in the early twentieth century.”

MEGANEWS

THE BLACK ATHLETE REVOLT
The Sport Justice Movement in the Age of #BlackLivesMatter
Anderson, Shaun M.
Rowman & Littlefield (192 pp.)
$34.00 | Feb. 8, 2023
9781538153246

An overview of Black athletes’ recent history of protest.
The Trump era has been an especially divisive one for Black athletes speaking out on social justice issues. NBA players now have more opportunities to use their platform to protest police killings and vocally participate in the Black Lives Matter movement, but Colin Kaepernick remains frozen out of the NFL for kneeling during the national anthem. Meanwhile, Trump and his supporters have routinely strived to shout the athletes down. (“Shut up and dribble,” Fox News host Laura Ingraham famously chastised NBA star LeBron James.) Anderson, a business consultant and professor at Loyola Marymount University, recaps a half-century of shifts around Black athlete protests. Outspoken Black athletes weren’t hard to find before the 1980s, from Arthur Ashe to Muhammad Ali. But the arrival of superstars with hefty endorsement deals made apparel companies—and the athletes they sponsored—averse to social commentary, and some were bluntly punished for it. “Black athletes have expressed their discontent with issues such as police brutality, inequality, racism, lynching, and systematic oppression, only to be met with opposition,” writes the author. In 1996, NBA player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf was indefinitely suspended after sitting out the national anthem in protest. The mood shifted, Anderson explains, once the outrages became too big to ignore, such as Trayvon Martin’s murder in 2012 and virulently racist remarks caught on tape by LA Clippers owner Donald Sterling in 2014. The author’s discussion of how these incidents ushered in a new era of protest, accelerated further by the Black Lives Matter movement, is workmanlike, but his closing chapter thoughtfully explores how recent trends can fuel a “sport justice movement” that addresses pro teams’ relationships with police, equitable treatment of college players, and players’ deeper engagement with their communities. Former NBA veteran Len Elmore, also a longtime sportscaster and lawyer, provides the foreword.

A useful primer on the ever shifting playing field of sports and race.

MEGANEWS

How Digital Forces Beyond Our Control Commandeer Our Daily Lives and Inner Realities
Auerbach, David B.
PublicAffairs (352 pp.)
$29.00 | March 14, 2023
9781541774445

Who is in control of our massive social media networks? According to this thought-provoking book, no one.

For the many Americans who feel that the past 15 years have been an endless cascade of crises and confusion, Auerbach presents some interesting observations. The author worked as a software engineer at Microsoft and Google, so he provides expertise as well as an understanding of tech companies. The central cause of the chaos is the rise of the titular meganets. The author defines a meganet as a “persistent, evolving, and opaque data network joining humans and computers.” Facebook is...
If you read Kirkus Reviews, you likely enjoy that glorious niche genre of books about books. It’s certainly one of my favorites. And what could be more books-about-books than a book about a bookseller writing about books and the customers who buy those books? Books!

Coming this month is Remainders of the Day: A Bookshop Diary (Godine, Dec. 6) by Shaun Bythell, owner of The Bookshop in Wigtown, Scotland, the largest secondhand bookstore in the country. The author’s latest book is the third in an unofficial series based on his personal journals, following Diary of a Bookseller and Confessions of a Bookseller, which Kirkus called “irascibly droll and sometimes elegiac...an engaging account of bookstore life from the vanishing front lines of the brick-and-mortar retail industry.”

The drollery and thoughtful eccentricity continue unabated in the cleverly titled Remainders, in which Bythell regales us with further tales of life as the owner of an independent bookstore. It’s a refreshingly human narrative in the age of Amazon—about which the author offers a litany of cheekily potent complaints—and brings us directly into the cozy confines of his charming world. In addition to compelling tales of literary sleuthing, Bythell delivers poignant portraits of the colorful characters who populate the store, from clueless (and often rude) newcomers to reliable regulars like “Sandy the tattooed pagan,” who “rarely leaves empty-handed.”

While Bythell’s days “follow predictable patterns revolving around behind-the-counter sales to at times unusual patrons, order fulfillment for the Random Book Club, or acquisition hunts for tomes by obscure writers or on arcane—but surprisingly bestselling—topics like Freemasonry and heraldry,” the book is never boring. Any book lover knows that there’s always something fascinating to discover on every shelf, and Bythell is a knowledgeable, occasionally cranky, frequently hilarious guide through the stacks. As an editor friend of mine noted, “Don’t drink coffee (or tea) while reading Bythell, as you’re likely to choke or spit it out during a laughing fit; you’ve been warned.”

Some of the most interesting aspects of the author’s profession are the difficult decisions he has to make regarding the purchase of used books, whether in-store or at estate sales. It’s clear he doesn’t want to disappoint his customers, but he also must weigh important issues of demand and physical space. Here’s one pertinent example:

A tiny woman wearing patchwork trousers brought in ten boxes of books, mostly Victorian children’s novels, which look beautiful but for which there appears to be little or no demand. I gave her £80 for a couple of boxes of reasonably interesting titles. She asked if I could take the lot as she’s moving into a smaller house and doesn’t have enough space. The shop is now bursting with boxes of books that people have dumped here and I don’t want. I’ll have to head to the recycling plant in Glasgow soon.

Another example:

After lunch a man asked me if I’d consider selling volume VII of a set of the first Statistical Account of Scotland (twenty-one volumes in all, published between 1791 and 1799, and compiled by Church of Scotland ministers from various parishes). I told him that there was no way any bookseller would break a mint twenty-one-volume set unless the customer was prepared to pay the full price for the set for a single volume. For some reason customers seem to think that we’re happy to break sets to satisfy their demand for a single volume. This is a relatively new phenomenon.

If such minutiae sounds intriguing, you can’t go wrong with this book. Now that it’s gift-giving season, thrill the avid book lover in your house and buy all three of Bythell’s delightful chronicles.

Eric Liebetrau is the nonfiction and managing editor.
the best illustrative case, but there are others, and they share the characteristics of unprecedented growth in size and speed. Despite armies of programmers and incredibly complicated algorithms, as well as CEOs and governing boards, control remains elusive. The pace at which information is input, disseminated, and copied defies attempts to impose order. Even if Mark Zuckerberg and others wanted to prevent the spread of disruption, trolling, and disinformation, they are no longer capable of doing so. Determining which information is valid and useful is effectively impossible when every view has not only contrary data, but a slew of opposing opinions. The other side of this is the collection of huge amounts of data on individuals, with sorting and collation done by sophisticated AI technology. Auerbach takes the view that AI is not as reliable and unbiased as many want to believe, and he explores several instances where it has gone frighteningly wrong. Even more, it is a feature and not a glitch that the feedback process promotes extreme views and belligerent rhetoric. Auerbach proposes technical ideas to tame meganets, but they don’t sound persuasive. “We search for where the power really lies, when it does not lie anywhere,” he says. “Or else it lies everywhere at once, which is no more help.”

A disturbing examination of how social media technology spun out of control and what it means for the future.

CANCEL WARS
How Universities Can Foster Free Speech, Promote Inclusion, and Renew Democracy
Ben-Porath, Sigal R.
Univ. of Chicago (208 pp.)
$20.00 paper | Jan. 16, 2023
9780226823805

A guide to the issues surrounding free speech and censorship on college campuses as well as strategies for faculty and students to deal with them constructively.

“This book considers the struggles over the boundaries of speech in order to make the case for the active role that institutions of higher education can take in bridging political divides and helping reverse the process of democratic decline.” So writes Ben-Porath—a professor of education, philosophy, and political science at the University of Pennsylvania—at the beginning of a text in which the author examines “growing polarization in American society” specifically through the lens of post-secondary institutions, which she calls “laboratories in which democracy is learned, practiced, and enhanced.” Building on some of the topics she addressed in two previous books, Making Up Our Mind: What School Choice Is Really About (co-authored with Michael C. Johanek) and Free Speech on Campus, Ben-Porath begins by tracing the roots of America’s current political polarization back to a response to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s, when cultural and academic institutions were being reexamined for bias, prejudice, and other social ills. The author then investigates the often complex web of so-called experts, political leanings, and unique social environments that characterize the college experience. Although Ben-Porath mostly focuses on the big picture, her chapter on strategies for K-12 institutions makes clear, accessible arguments for educating students with “media literacy” and “open discussion of hard topics.” Clearly aimed at scholars and policymakers—the dry prose may lead some readers to skip certain sections—the book ends with solid advice for students, staff, and university boards to help deal with a host of issues, including contentious public speakers and hate speech.

Useful reading for college administrators and others involved in navigating thorny challenges facing colleges today.
While many current policy debates reward the loudest voice in the arena, this book sets out a different approach. Berman and Fox have both had impressive careers in legal reform, often solving problems that once seemed intractable. In this collaboration, they examine the methodology of incremental change, emphasizing that they are drawing on a long tradition of political thinking and policymaking. Most of the great reforms in American society have not been “big bang solutions” but rather well-considered plans implemented over years. In the past decade, activists have moved to positions of demanding radical solutions to social problems, but Berman and Fox provide numerous examples of sudden changes that have gone disastrously wrong, mainly because they failed to understand the real needs of the people affected. The ingredients for good policy are honesty, humility, nuance, and respect, which includes accepting when a policy is failing and being willing to change. Incremental policies, unlike radical upheavals, can be assessed and corrected, as long as administrators are willing to do so. Berman and Fox note that successful, gradual policies often go unnoticed, even when they attain their goals. They point to the media, which prefers splashy announcements to steady improvements, as a culprit. This may be why Americans are so gloomy these days according to opinion polls: The media likes easy stories about problems rather than complex stories about achievements. Activists often scream about the need for urgent action, which makes an entertaining headline, even when a more meticulous approach would be more effective. Berman and Fox also dispute the idea that gradualism inherently supports the status quo, arguing that it is just the opposite. “Incrementalist is nothing less than the endless, ongoing effort to alleviate injustices,” they conclude. “It is a mindset. And it is our best hope for continuing to improve the world even in an age of radical rhetoric.”

A calm, knowledgeable response to noisy radicalism.
Bernstein replies that the tobacco firms used to make the same argument, but eventually the dangers posed by their products became too obvious to ignore. She makes clear that her goal is not to ban social media but to see it used in a balanced, honest, and responsible way, and she presents several workable policy options. But it will be arduous. “The tech industry is unlikely to submit to change without a fight,” writes Bernstein. “But knowing all we know now, neither should we.”

Mixing expertise and passion, the author sets an agenda to rein in the tech behemoths that have run rampant for years.

CHASING ICEBERGS
How Frozen Freshwater Can Save the Planet
Birkhold, Matthew H.
Pegasus (336 pp.)
$28.95 | Feb. 7, 2023
9781639363438

A fascinating exploration of the potential use of icebergs to help solve the world’s fresh water crisis.

Law professor Birkhold examines the possibility of harvesting fresh water from icebergs, a process that could be game-changing as increasing numbers of people are unable to access clean water. According to a report by Water Resources Group, “by 2030 global demand for freshwater will exceed supply by 40 percent.” Furthermore, “107 countries will lack a sustainably managed water source, and two thirds of the world’s population will face regular water shortages.” Given that two-thirds of the world’s fresh water is locked in ice caps and glaciers, Birkhold began pondering the legalities and viability of harvesting this pure water. During the course of his research, the author traveled to meet with numerous experts, including the chief scientist at the International Ice Patrol, who stressed the dangers of moving icebergs; an iceberg “cowboy” who has been gathering iceberg water for breweries since the 1990s; workers on oil platforms, who must sometimes navigate dangerous encounters with icebergs; and a native Greenlander who helped the author “to understand how the deep cultural connection to icebergs resonates with the potential commoditization of the resource.” Birkhold also looks at the possibility of towing icebergs. While it may be feasible, doing so would also be expensive and would likely lead to further detrimental effects on the environment, including changing the natural course of ecosystems and releasing more carbon dioxide into the environment. “Just because humans can do great things,” he writes, “does not necessarily mean that we should…it is important to think critically about what we do with icebergs now, before we are enchanted by their charms and stunned by our own ingenuity.” While the benefits may outweigh the risks, Birkhold warns that harvesting icebergs should be approached with caution in order to avoid a “Cold Rush” free-for-all.

A simultaneously compelling and alarming examination of an important part of the Earth’s biosphere.

THE NO-STATE SOLUTION
A Jewish Manifesto
Boyarin, Daniel
Yale Univ. (200 pp.)
$30.00 | Jan. 31, 2023
9780300251289

A Talmudic scholar who is disenchanted with Israel’s current injustices against Palestinians vows to support Jewish identity and culture through diaspora.

Boyarin, who has authored many books about Judaism and comparative religion, believes that the Jewish identity is shaped less by ethnicity and nationality than by common narratives, languages, and practices. As a young man, the author was deeply engaged in the Zionist socialist youth movement, which imbued him with a deep sense of social justice for everyone. After serving in the Army Reserves in Israel, he lived and studied there for 20 years, raising a family. During that time, he began to realize that Israel
was not committed to social justice. Living in the U.S. for the past 30 years, he is ever dedicated to Talmudic study and Jewish culture. In this “manifesto,” the author looks at how two ideals—a prosperous nation-state and commitment to social justice for all—can be achieved. Probing thorny issues with aplomb, Boyarin questions a variety of concepts of Judaism as a religion and Jews as a people. Ultimately, he demonstrates the significance of what binds all Jews and makes them what they are: “shared trials and tribulations...shared practices, shared languages, and other cultural forms.” He emphasizes the importance of the Talmud and the lively dialogue that it has engendered across time and space. “Ideas are generated out of quotations, quotations contested, amended, emended, combined, and renewed.” The author draws insightful comparisons to Black learning, identity, and isolation. As jazz is to Black vernacular, so is Talmudic diaspora learning to Jewish sociality. Boyarin is clearly committed to eliminating labels about religion and state, and he will inspire like-minded readers with his focus on “just Jews, singing, dancing, speaking, and writing in Hebrew, Yiddish, Judezmo, learning the Talmud in all sorts of ways, fighting together for justice for Palestinians and Black Lives Matter.” A self-consciously radical statement that is both astute and joyous.

“I WANT A BETTER CATASTROPHE
Navigating the Climate Crisis With Grief, Hope, and Gallows Humor
Boyd, Andrew
New Society Publishers (416 pp.)
$24.99 paper | Feb. 14, 2023
9780865719835

Envisioning the planet’s dire future. Writer, humorist, and longtime activist Boyd describes himself as a “tragic optimist,” “can-do pessimist,” and “compassionate nihilist” when he considers efforts to reverse or mitigate environmental devastation. His “can-do” spirit led to his joining many activist groups and launching the Climate Clock, which “counts down the time remaining to prevent global warming rising above 1.5°C (currently six and a half years and closing), while simultaneously tracking our progress on key solution pathways (renewable energy, Indigenous land sovereignty, and others).” Realizing, though, that others may be so overcome with despair that activism seems futile, he offers this book as “a small head start on the grieving process—and some help answering the question, What is still worth doing?” An appendix lists nearly 40 organizations with which readers can engage. Boyd includes interviews with eight “hopers and doomers,” including Robin Wall Kimmerer, who explain their responses to the crisis. Climate scientist Guy McPherson predicts human extinction; eco-Buddhist Joanna Macy entitled her book *Active Hope*. Gopal Dayaneni, co-founder of the think tank Movement Generation, debunks the “Green scenario” because it “allows us to indulge the fiction that we can technologically innovate our way out of the crisis; that progress is inevitable.” Psychoanalyst Jamey Hecht believes it is possible “to know the worst and still be happy.” Boyd cautiously concurs: “While it’s too late to prevent catastrophe, if we step up our game, we can still build a new, more decent society on the ashes of the old.” All of the author’s evidence points to the inadequacy of capitalism and politics. Individual actions—recycling, a plant-based diet, biking and walking rather than driving—are not useless, but community is crucial for meaningful change. “We not only have the capacity to transform the world towards greater equity, justice, diversity, and integrity,” Gopal tells Boyd, “but ‘if you look around, you’ll see that we are actually exercising that capacity everywhere.”

Urgent, sobering reading.
Economist Chang takes an off-beat approach to the dismal—but delicious—science.

Born in Korea, the author studied in England at a time when the food was inarguably awful. Yet even in the land of toad in the hole and bubble and squeak, global trends began to break through. “With increase in international trade, international migration and international travel,” writes Chang, “people everywhere have become more curious about and open to foreign foods.” So it is that Britain became a multi-flavored nation even at a time when economics became monocultural. Using foodstuffs as metaphors as much as things in and of themselves, Chang examines them in the light of economic history. Okra, for example, came from Africa on the Middle Passage, affording the author an opportunity to reflect on the contributions of enslaved Africans not just to the antebellum economy, but also to present-day wealth. Without tobacco and cotton revenues, he writes, America would have never become an industrial marvel. The author also clearly enumerates how developing nations have been repeatedly victimized by colonialism and have an indolent if rapacious ruling class (“unproductive landlords, undynamic capitalist class, vision-less and corrupt political leaders”). Moreover, he adds, many key exports such as cochineal and indigo became valueless once European labs figured out how to make even less expensive synthetic versions. Switzerland is the site of many of these labs. However, in a chapter about chocolate, Chang notes that it’s incorrect to think it’s a service-based economy: “Switzerland is actually the most industrialized economy in the world, producing the largest amount of manufacturing output per person,” whether chocolate or machine parts. Writing gamely and with admirable lucidity, Chang concludes with another metaphor, urging that...
“A collection of perceptive, astute journalism from a master at the craft.”

AN AFFIRMING FLAME

Meditations on Life and Politics
Cohen, Roger
Knopf (464 pp.)
$30.00 | Feb. 21, 2023
9780593321522

The longtime New York Times writer chronicles two tumultuous decades through his columns.

Cohen, Paris bureau chief of the Times and formerly that paper’s op-ed columnist, gathers more than 100 pieces published from 2005 to 2020, creating a stirring collection of cultural critique, penetrating reportage, and candid autobiography. In an extensive introduction, he provides an overview of his life and work; a helpful headnote prefaces each selection. A naturalized American, Cohen was born in South Africa, which his parents left because of apartheid, and the Polish side of his family were victims of the Nazis. Cohen grew up in the U.K., where, in the 1960s, he encountered both latent and overt antisemitism and, at home, witnessed his mother’s descent into mental illness. As a young man, he traveled—one piece recounts his experiences “in Afghanistan as a seventeen-year-old hippie”—and he finally found a home in New York. His columns include dispatches from Tehran, China, Cairo, Libya, Vietnam, Gaza, Ukraine, Munich, Hungary, and Poland—as well as many cities in the U.S., where he has investigated Donald Trump’s hold on voters. A vociferous critic, he warned as early as 2015 to take the man seriously. Some pieces serve as memorials to family, friends, and public figures: among them, his beloved Uncle Bert, Israeli writer Amos Oz, Richard Holbrooke, and John McCain. Although Cohen defines himself as a stubborn optimist, the collection tells “a sobering story,” as he recounts injustice, racism, poverty, disease, nationalism deformed into fascism, and “an America where Americans have lost sight of one another.” His focus throughout his career has been to promote “freedom, decency, pluralism, the importance of dissent in an open society, above all.” Although he modestly describes the work of a journalist as “a life lived as an observer,” more than bearing witness to history, he has offered his readers shrewd analysis and often prescient insight.

A collection of perceptive, astute journalism from a master at the craft.

A MYSTERY OF MYSTERIES

The Death and Life of Edgar Allan Poe
Dawidziak, Mark
St. Martin’s (288 pp.)
$28.99 | Feb. 14, 2023
9781250792495

A new life of the enigmatic writer.

TV and film critic Dawidziak draws on published and archival sources, including more than 50 interviews with Edgar Allan Poe scholars and other experts, to create a colorful portrait of the poet, critic, and story writer. The author structures his biography as parallel timelines, interweaving a chronology of significant periods in Poe’s life with a close investigation of the mystery of his sudden death. Seeing his subject as “a creature of contradiction, duality, and ambiguity,” Dawidziak examines the myths that swirl around Poe’s career, reputation, and relationships. Orphaned as a young child, he was adopted by the “aloof and exacting” John Allan and his benevolent wife, Fanny, whose frequent illnesses made her inaccessible to her young ward. Although the couple provided a home, Edgar never felt truly loved; after Fanny’s death in 1829, his relationship with Allan grew increasingly contentious. At 17, Poe enrolled
at the University of Virginia, where a classmate found him to be “very excitable & restless, at times wayward, melancholic & morose, but again—in his better moods frolicsome, full of fun & a most attractive and agreeable companion.” He soon left college life for a stint at West Point, where his wayward-ness again got the better of him. A devotee of Lord Byron, Poe saw himself as a romantic, “separated from the masses not by class but by intellect, sensitivity, and genius. Yet, at the same time,” Dawidziak writes, “he craves a place in the august circles where he is granted admittance but never full acceptance.” He also craved love, which he found from his devoted aunt, Maria Clemm, and her daughter, Virginia, whom Poe married in 1836, when she was 13. Offering a sympathetic, if not revisionist, portrait, Dawidziak does rule out several theories about Poe’s death—rabies, carbon monoxide poisoning, a drug overdose, epilepsy, apoplexy; and liver disease, to name a few—to defend a well-grounded conclusion.

A brisk, satisfying biography of a literary icon who still fascinates.
“To Square,” and “The Final Value”); use of the present tense in the first two heightens their urgency. “Fractals” details the scars she bears from her fractured upbringing; “To Square” accounts for the pain borne out of her split with X, which relates to the former. “In some spirals, there is momentum and force, in others, just patterns,” she writes. “Maybe it’s an algorithm. Maybe it’s me.” Post-breakup, Felix returned to her adolescent habit of cutting herself. The final third unfolds in the past tense as the author reckons with lifelong pain. “Black girls get to write about benign heartbreak too,” she writes. Proud and saccharine and pathetic. When you’re healed you tell the story differently. The text is rendered in a millennial voice, evidenced, for instance, in the author’s description of herself (“Capricorn Sun, Gemini rising, Taurus Moon, Sagittarius Venus, INFP, Year of the Monkey”), and, while it may appeal mostly to 20- and 30-somethings, much of Felix’s prose, like her poetry, is carved out of granite. The only footnote ends, “What I don’t say in a project about truth is what gets in the way.”

A wildly smart, singular redemption story that is greater than the sum of its parts.

SCHOOL CLOTHES
A Collective Memoir of Black Student Witness
Givens, Jarvis R.
Beacon Press (240 pp.)
$25.95 | Feb. 7, 2023
978-0-807-05481-9

A sharp examination of how Black students have consistently overcome institutionalized racism.

As Givens, a Harvard professor of African and African American studies, notes, Black students, forever “picked at and prodded as specimens for study,” have never been treated as subjects of their own discourse. This book ends centuries of silence by piecing together more than 150 years of student eyewitness accounts found in everything from autobiographies to yearbook inscriptions. Givens begins with accounts from Alexander Crummell and Henry Garnet, two 19th-century New York teens who experienced “witnessing,” which “involves coming into awareness of how the violence and mistreatment of other individual black people could potentially be visited on oneself.” Though living in the “free” North, both boys saw—and recorded—their experiences with the hate crimes perpetrated against Blacks Americans seeking education. Like countless others after them, they survived a White supremacist system through ingenious means. When tight finances prohibited the purchase of new clothes, parents—e.g., those of late-19th-century student William Holtzclaw, whose mother cut up an old petticoat to sew him a white suit needed for a school performance—found ways to help their offspring “bear new marks” that repudiated myriad humiliations of slavery and enforced poverty. The young Richard Wright—who sought assistance from a sympathetic White man to help him check out library books in the Jim Crow South—routinely engaged in acts of “fugitive learning.” As Givens writes, eloquently, “beneath the veneer of compliance and deference to white authoritative power, the black school was always a singing school of protest and fugitive planning, where black students could dream up a world more beautiful and more just than the one around them.” Collectively, these young people helped create “a tradition that transmitted a sense of self-worth and respect” to the generations of Black youth that followed them. This book, which will appeal especially to educators and historians, triumphantly rewrites Black students into a history that has ignored them.

An eloquently necessary study.
A gripping account of Maryland’s Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Having spent 10 years as public information officer and executive assistant to the chief medical examiner at the OCME based in Baltimore, former paramedic Goldfarb, author of 18 Tiny Deaths, writes an expert combination of journalism, science, and personal experience. Modern medical examiners specialize in pathology and often hyperspecialize in forensic pathology. Not beholden to the criminal justice system, their sole responsibility is to the deceased. “The relationship between the medical examiner and the deceased is as sacred as any doctor-patient relationship, with the same ethical and legal obligations,” writes the author. Activists regularly accuse police of persuading examiners to fudge their reports (“do us a favor and overlook that broken neck”), but that would be a career-ending move. Forensic autopsies to determine the cause and manner of an unexpected death take place at 74 centers in the U.S., and only 55 are fully accredited. Everywhere else, examinations of varying quality are overseen by a coroner or an appointed or elected official who may not be a doctor. After a compelling history of Baltimore’s elite system, Goldfarb describes its operations, the many disturbing and often gruesome incidents that produce subjects for a forensic autopsy, and the problems of dealing with hostile activists and often uncomprehending media. In the epilogue, the author reveals that the nation’s forensic medical services are on life support. A combination of the massive increase in opioid deaths and stagnant budgets is overwhelming these chronically understaffed agencies. In Baltimore, bodies awaiting autopsy have been piling up in refrigerated trailers, delaying funerals, religious ceremonies,
and court cases. With the media and citizenry expressing outrage, morale has plummeted, and many experienced yet overworked staff members have resigned. In 2022, the state appealed to FEMA, which sent pathologists and technicians to temporarily relieve the backlog. Like its sister agencies around the U.S., a shrunken Baltimore OCME continues to do its best.

A brilliant insider’s view of a critical yet vulnerable government agency.

**THE CONFIDANTE**

The Untold Story of the Woman Who Helped Win WWII and Shape Modern America

Gorham, Christopher C.

Citadel/Kensington (352 pp.)

$28.00 | Feb. 21, 2023

9780806542003

An enthusiastic life of “the first person, man or woman, to be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.”

An adviser to presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson, Anna Rosenberg (1899-1983) was a prominent national figure whose present obscurity is perplexing. Gorham, a lawyer and American history teacher, doesn’t fully explain why she is often forgotten, but he delivers a vivid account of her eventful life. The daughter of Jewish immigrants, Rosenberg thrived in cutthroat Tammany Hall and, as a sideline, established one of America’s first public relations agencies, quickly acquiring the reputation as a problem solver. Still in her 20s, she caught the attention of Roosevelt, who was beginning his rise in New York politics. FDR loved workaholic loyalists who were also entertaining companions during his off hours. Even history buffs may be surprised as Gorham recounts the next 20 years, during which Rosenberg, a member of FDR’s inner circle, became a leading “fixer,” exerting more influence than Cabinet members (whom FDR tended to ignore). Her name appeared regularly in newspaper articles, editorials, and national magazine profiles. According to one journalist, “Mrs. Rosenberg was regarded in Washington as possibly the closest person to President Roosevelt with the exception of Harry Hopkins.” Other than John F. Kennedy, Roosevelt’s predecessors respected her talents, and Gen. George Marshall asked her personally to become assistant secretary of defense, his chief aide. Rosenberg’s sense of justice took precedence over political expediency, and Gorham chronicles her leading role in the creation of the GI Bill and desegregation of wartime industries, the armed forces, and schools. An unabashed liberal with no national constituency, she became a lightning rod for extremists during the McCarthy era. Readers may prefer to skim long sections devoted to attacks by right-wing columnists and congressmen during the 1950s, but they may be pleasantly surprised to learn that today’s extremists are hardly unique in their often baseless attacks.

A well-deserved first biography.
British journalist Harding offers a frontline view of the Russian-Ukrainian War.

Although previously bound up with the likes of Edward Snowden, now living in Russia, and Julian Assange, Harding himself is no friend of the Putin regime. Expelled from Russia a decade ago, he now lands on the opposing line, covering the events in Ukraine for the Guardian. Along his meandering course through the embattled country, the author examines rumor and fact. An example of the former was a supposed consultation between Putin and a Siberian shaman in support of his invasion; of the latter, the undeniable tensions that a Westward-turning Ukraine created in a theater of realpolitik that seems increasingly committed to Central Asian autocracy. The current war, Harding writes, is incontestably one of Putin’s choice, though he faults Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for discounting intelligence that suggested that Russia would actually invade: “It caused panic, depressed the economy, spooked foreign investors, and ran down the country’s currency and gold reserves. Why...should Ukraine suffer and its ‘ cynical’ neighbor be rewarded?” Even so, Zelenskyy recovered, and one of his “soft-power” tools was to insist on transparency and decentralization even as a secretive, top-heavy Russia tried to make further inroads. Harding, a knowledgeable student of history, is particularly good when he considers Russian errors in the field as near mirror-image re-creations of those errors during World War II, when Stalin’s Russia relied on sacrificing thousands of soldiers to overwhelm a less populous enemy. Indeed, Russia’s wartime state has been “moving even further in the direction of the 1930s, using mechanisms of coercion and intimidation”—even as Ukraine is comparatively free and is able to exercise a secret weapon that’s no secret at all: Russian command is vertical, “always looking feudally upward,” while Ukraine’s is horizontal, with a citizen army bent on remaining democratic.

On-the-ground reporting meets with strategic analysis to form a nuanced portrait of an ongoing conflict.
"A heartfelt, accessible story of a determined warrior for her oppressed people."

A Highly Readable Revisionist History of the Golden State, Sharply Argued and Well Researched.

The former head of Los Alamos National Laboratory, who visited North Korean nuclear sites over seven consecutive years, reflects on the series of missed opportunities by U.S. policymakers to thwart the nation's nuclear build-up.

The author proposes a program of divestiture and restitution, that is breathtaking in its audacity—and probably doesn't stand a chance of being put in place. An informed scientist effectively argues for diplomacy in nuclear armament talks with North Korea.

A Uyghur journalist from East Turkestan recounts her family's suffering at the hands of Chinese authorities.

In this moving, deeply personal account of a family's collective anguish, Hoja, a reporter for Radio Free Asia, re-creates in intimate detail her life story within the tight Uyghur community and their ultimate persecution and imprisonment in "reeducation camps." Once the thriving Uyghur capital of East Turkestan—designated by the Chinese Communist Party in the 1950s as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region—Ürümchi was gradually inundated in the early 1990s by the majority Han Chinese. CCP authorities sought to dilute the ethnic Uyghur population and "modernize" their cultural ways, which were deemed "backward" and "uncivilized." The Han were favored for jobs and extraction of natural resources, leaving the Uyghurs impoverished and marginalized. Hoja came from a remarkable lineage of scholars and musicians, and her own passion for dance helped propel her to prominence in both school and cultural performances. Outspoken about the repressive tactics of the Chinese government, the author landed a job producing an early program she helped create, Hoja writes, "we hadn't put in any political content, but at that point, in the mid-1990s, even existing as a Uyghur had begun to seem political....I was determined to counteract that as much as I could, while still remaining under the radar. After all, how much trouble could a children's program cause?" Gradually, as the author shows, the Chinese authorities began heavily censoring content related to the Uyghur experience. While visiting her estranged husband in Vienna, Hoja applied to Radio Free Asia and began working to expose the ongoing Chinese suppression of the Uyghurs from the field constantly questioning North Korea's sincerity, tensions ratcheted up between the countries and the diplomatic door closed. As a scientist, Hecker, now at Stanford, observed how North Korea had indeed shut down the main Yongbyon reactor until renewed enmity prompted a restart and acceleration of the nuclear weapons program, proudly vaunted by North Korean officials. Above all, Pyongyang sought normalization of relations and the lifting of sanctions for their economy. However, when it was discovered that North Korea abetted the creation of a reactor in Syria (subsequently bombed by Israel), U.S. officials balked. Later, Donald Trump's much-hyped summit in Singapore, ostensibly focused on the "denuclearization" of the entire Korean Peninsula, was not backed by any real substance. Furthermore, despite the subsequent "love letters" between Trump and Kim Jong Un, national security adviser John Bolton effectively stymied any accord before the Hanoi summit in 2019—another lost diplomatic opportunity, writes Hecker. Though the text may be overly technical for general readers, it's a valuable look at a shadowy regime.
the outside. The widespread effects on her family were devastating, but we are lucky to have this important historical record of what she—and so many others—endured.

A heartfelt, accessible story of a determined warrior for her oppressed people.

**UNTUCHABLE How Powerful People Get Away With It**
Honig, Elie
Harper/HarperCollins (288 pp.)
$28.99  Jan. 31, 2023
9780063241503

Cogent analysis of how privileged individuals skirt criminal prosecution.

After a frustrating attempt to bring a crime-syndicate kingpin to justice, CNN senior legal analyst and former federal prosecutor Honig began to delve into the too-common phenomenon of wealthy, influential people avoiding punishment. Some of this material he covered in his previous book, *Hatchet Man: How Bill Barr Broke the Prosecutor’s Code and Corrupted the Justice Department*. Here, the author assesses the ways that privilege and power are used to game the legal system, exploring the tactics used by savvy, ruthless individuals to exploit flaws in the prosecutorial and judicial processes. In clear, concisely written sections, Honig digs into the evasive tactics employed by the well connected, how jury service can be intimidating, and how human and institutional biases affect how the rules and procedures of a lawsuit are followed (or ignored). Michael Cohen, Donald Trump’s former personal attorney, is just one of many high-profile villains Honig spotlights. Examining cases involving Steven Bannon, Roger Stone, Jeffrey Epstein, Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, and, of course, Trump himself, the author notes the difficulties facing prosecuting attorneys in exacting justice amid a mountain of red tape, legal acrobatics, walls of financial blocks—and often despite smoking-gun evidence. Though Honig devotes attention to the executive privilege of a variety of nefarious billionaires and politicians, he focuses mostly on the bewildering acquittal record of Trump, a “lawless Houdini.” Despite multiple impeachments, damning congressional findings, and hush-money payments, miraculously, Trump has never been formally charged with a crime. He remains “unburdened by ethics, shame, or even a logical sense of self-preservation.” Outside of urging prosecutors to think more like their clients, using “creativity and aggression,” Honig doesn’t offer any solid solutions, but he does provide clarity about how the institutional justice system is “stacked in favor of powerful, wealthy, famous people,” most of whom avoid accountability for their crimes.

A distressing account of how power often trumps justice within the American criminal justice system.

**THE INFLUENCER INDUSTRY The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media**
Hund, Emily
Princeton Univ. (240 pp.)
$29.99  Feb. 14, 2023
9780691231020

How the influencer industry grew into a commercial behemoth.

One of the strangest aspects of the social media age is the rise of influencers, high-profile content creators who attract astonishing numbers of followers and who can make or break fashions, trends, and products. The value of this book is that it collects and analyzes a range of opinions about the industry, providing critical context as well as a glimpse of the future. Hund is a former journalist who moved into academic research, with a focus on digital culture, and she conducted dozens of interviews with influencers and other industry figures. She found that most influencers began as bloggers in the early days of social media, writing about their lives and opinions, especially in the fashion field. They leveraged their noncorporate status into a base of subscribers, and the emergence of Instagram added a critical visual element. Advertising companies saw the potential and started buying space on sites, and then retailers began to provide free product samples for review. The next step was to sponsor influencers for positive comments. This ran counter to the idea of independence, but the money was too good to ignore. Even when followers realized that influencers were being paid, they did not seem to mind. The role of the influencer, Hund believes, is to convert “uncertainty” into something more “manageable.” Most influencers study the metrics carefully and adjust their output accordingly. Indeed, as the author shows, “authenticity” has become something to be researched, designed, and manufactured. Hund is entirely aware of the paradoxes and ironies of the industry, but she also sees positives, especially as an alternative to corporate mass media. In one form or another, the business is likely to remain a key part of the techno-social landscape for a long time to come.

A penetrating, well-considered look behind the polished scenes of the influencer industry.

**BIBLIOMANIAC An Obsessive’s Tour of the Bookshops of Britain**
Ince, Robin
Atlantic Books (288 pp.)
$26.99  March 1, 2023
978158957698

A British bibliophile takes the occasion of the Covid-19 pandemic to fill his shelves even more.

While out shopping for books, BBC radio presenter and comedian Ince writes, he carries two bags,
A harrowing, culturally rich memoir.

RETURN TO LATVIA

Jarre, Marina

Trans. by Ann Goldstein

New Vessel Press (316 pp.)

$17.95 paper | Feb. 21, 2023

9781954404106

A writer uncovers the cruel reality of her family's past.

Following her first memoir, Distant Fathers, Jarre (1925-2016), haunted by her ancestors, revisits the past to reveal “the sound of countless voices, voices of those who’ve been dead now for many years.” Born in Riga to a Jewish father and Protestant mother, Jarre left when she was 10, spirited away by her mother who feared that, as the outcome of a contentious divorce, her husband would be awarded custody of their two daughters. She took them to Italy, where they grew up in their parents’ home, with only a fading memory of “that man,” as they referred to their father. Jarre knew that he was dead, exterminated, in 1941, along with countless other Jews. After consigning him to only a few pages of her previous memoir, and after her mother’s death, Jarre felt no nostalgia about returning—instead, she felt like a tourist—yet at many points, she was overcome with tears as she retraced her father’s life, discovered the deep-seated anti-Semitism of her ancestors’ world, and, by reading histories and memoirs, learned in vivid detail the Jews’ horrific fate at the hands of Nazis and their Latvian neighbors. “The perverse game of numbers continues to play out in every official Latvian declaration on the Shoah, almost always solicited, very rarely spontaneous,” she writes. “There’s no need to exaggerate; the total of those exterminated should be revised.” Translated by Goldstein, Jarre’s painful recounting of her journey into the past reflects the onerous task she took on: “to finally untangle the cruel knot of my personal history.”

JENNIE’S BOY

A Misfit Childhood on an Island of Eccentrics

Johnston, Wayne

Steerforth (320 pp.)

$19.95 paper | Feb. 7, 2023

9781844693468

An award-winning novelist recounts his sickly boyhood and other difficult early-life circumstances.

As a child, Johnston was beset by chronic illness: a persistent cough, insomnia, and a digestive problem so severe that he couldn’t keep food down—ailments that were exacerbated by his living conditions. He and his family moved 23 times by the time he was 7, running away when they couldn’t pay the rent. “We boys never knew when we were leaving or exactly where we were moving next,” he recalls, “just that we were always one car breakdown or appliance repair away from having an eviction notice slipped beneath our door in the middle of the night.” The author focuses on one precarious year when the family lived in an “old, small, rundown, drafty,” leaky house in the small town of Goulds, Newfoundland, where their mother had grown up and where her parents lived across the street. Although Johnston’s father was an inspector for the fisheries department, he flitted away his salary on drink. His mother, Jennie, felt mortified that her weak and skinny son seemed evidence of bad mothering. Too sick to go to school, he was cared for by his grandmother Lucy, a woman steeped in “ignorance and superstition, magic, black magic, ghosts and Holy Ghosts and archangels the size of galaxies, wart- and cancer-curing Holy Water, all mixed up with fairies and sprites and goblins.” Still, Lucy offered her grandson love and reassurance: “You were put on earth for a reason, although it wouldn’t surprise me if God himself can’t remember what it is.” Jennie and Lucy believed in the power of prayer, not medicine. Only after the author collapsed with a life-threatening fever did Jennie, reluctantly, take him to a doctor. That visit set him on a path to one specialist after another, all of whom came up with diagnoses—a heart murmur, pleurisy—and prescribed pills that the family couldn’t afford. Johnston recounts his childhood
with affection and humor. Happily, and somewhat miraculously, he grew up to be a healthy adult.

A tender memoir.

**CONFRONTING SADDAM HUSSEIN**

*George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq*

Leffler, Melvyn P.

Oxford Univ. (368 pp.)

$27.95 | Feb. 1, 2023

9780197610770

Sober overview of the complicated reasoning behind the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its disastrous ramifications, which still reverberate today.

Veteran historian Leffler, who won the Bancroft Prize for his 1993 book, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration and the Cold War*, builds his latest political study around interviews with participants designed “to supplement and complement the written record, not replace it.” He closely examines the actions and thinking of George W. Bush and his so-called Vulcans—as Condoleezza Rice’s group of foreign policy advisers were called—after the events of 9/11 prompted a “war of terror” that was conducted without adequate preparation and planning, especially in the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. While much of this territory has been covered before, Leffler adds useful contextual detail, beginning with a detailed biography of Saddam Hussein, who was especially brutal in his political and military tactics—e.g., gassing his own people. Because of Hussein’s known lying about his buildup of biological and chemical weapons, support of terrorism, hatred of Zionism, and general grandiose ambitions for a pan-Arab unity led by himself, the U.S. was already deeply wary of his regime before 9/11. The author asserts that paying close attention to Hussein’s possible possession of weapons of mass destruction was a fairly reasonable reaction to his proven heinous behavior, and the Americans, shaken by the inability to prevent 9/11, were keen to remove any chances another such attack could happen again. Leffler emphasizes Bush’s reliance on “coercive diplomacy” to pressure Hussein to destroy his weapons, and he shows that the president did not necessarily want to go to war. Ultimately, however, he was ill-served by his subordinates, especially Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who fostered a poisonous, backbiting atmosphere among colleagues.

Not groundbreaking but Leffler effectively demonstrates the nuances involved in the “dilemmas of statecraft.”
“In an era when shouting is the norm, this is a sage guide to a quieter, more considered, and more enjoyable life.”

STFU

THE DIRTY TRICKS DEPARTMENT
Stanley Lovell, the OSS, and the Masterminds of World War II Secret Warfare
Lisle, John
St. Martin’s (352 pp.)
$29.99 | March 7, 2023
9781250280244

An engaging study of a secretive government group created “to develop and deploy all of the dirty tricks that were needed to win the greatest war in history.”

Stories about spy agencies are always intriguing, and there is still much to be explored about the work of the Office of Strategic Services. Lisle, an academic historian of science and the intelligence community, delves into the work of the Research and Development Branch of the OSS, which was responsible for the invention of new weapons and techniques for the military as well as for the resistance movements fighting behind the enemy lines. The key figure is Stanley Lovell (1927-2010), who was recruited by OSS director William “Wild Bill” Donovan to head the branch. Lovell was an industrial chemist with a good eye for innovation, and he brought a number of colorful characters into the group. Even before the U.S. was formally at war, the R&D branch was developing weapons for sabotage, such as silenced guns, time-delay fuses for explosives, and magnetic mines. One of the most useful inventions was “Aunt Jemima,” an explosive compound that could be camouflaged as pancake flour. The branch also provided fake documents, disguises, and cover stories for spies. Some of the ideas that the branch explored were merely fanciful—e.g., the plan to use bats to deliver incendiary bombs. Studies on biological and chemical warfare were more serious but raised difficult moral questions. The war ended before research in these areas came to fruition. Lisle believes that the work of the R&D branch made a critical contribution to the war effort, but he acknowledges that there is still controversy about the overall effectiveness of the OSS. Regardless, it’s a fascinating story, and with the use of newly unearthed documents and interview material, the author tells it well. With careful research and a dry wit, Lisle finds much to say about the backroom war.

A page-turning account of the scientists, inventors, and eccentrics of the OSS in a critical period of conflict.

STFU

The Power of Keeping Your Mouth Shut in an Endlessly Noisy World
Lyons, Dan
Henry Holt (272 pp.)
$26.99 | March 7, 2023
9781250850348

A recovering talkaholic urges us to stop talking constantly and learn to appreciate reticence.

“We live in a world that doesn’t just encourage overtalking but practically demands it, where success is measured by how much attention we attract,” writes tech journalist Lyons, who notes that these circumstances are turning all interactions into pointless shouting matches and creating an epidemic of anxiety and depression. The author admits that, for many years, he was one of the main offenders, prone to “going off the rails, monologuing like Hamlet on crystal meth.” After damaging his personal and professional lives, he realized that his chattering had become an addiction, and he set out to change. He tells his own story as well as looking at the bigger picture, drawing on the expertise of therapists and offering a series of self-assessment tests and exercises. He devotes several chapters to social media, which he sees as one of the primary causes of the problem. Think before you tweet or post, he suggests. Does the world really want your opinion on everything? Do you really need to argue with strangers who disagree with you? Intense use of social media underlies the sociopolitical polarization that is gripping the U.S., notes the author, so turn it off or turn it down. At the very least, disconnect your phone from social media platforms. Do some meditation or take a walk in a forest to recapture the beauty of silence. In conversations, be willing to accept pauses for reflection, avoid interrupting others, and listen more than you speak. A less noisy life is not easy to achieve, Lyons advises, but improvements can be made with small, gradual steps. Think of it as a workout for your mind. Take it easy, let yourself relax, and, most of all, STFU.

In an era when shouting is the norm, this is a sage guide to a quieter, more considered, and more enjoyable life.

INCARNATION & METAMORPHOSIS
Can Literature Change Us?
Mason, David
Paul Dry Books (240 pp.)
$19.95 paper | March 7, 2023
9781589881723

An ardent cultural observer covers a wide range of topics.

As Mason writes early on, this ambitious collection is about “living with literature.” A few pages later, the enthusiastic author, an American poet currently living in Tasmania, writes, “we have enough
orthodoxy in this world. Let’s try to shake it up a little.” In “At Home in the Imaginal,” Mason combines personal memoir with the magic of storytelling, Irish history, and an insightful analysis of a Yeats poem. In a piece on identity, he argues that “literature invites us into a third dimension where we might meet in our effort to understand not just ourselves but others.” Claudia Rankine “seems to have invented her own extra-literary discourse,” and Kay Ryan “comes across with transcendent delight.” The essay titled “Beloved Immoralist” includes fond memories of Robert Stone and poets Dana Gioia and Michael Donaghy. Burnside. The collection ends with considerations of novelist Flannery O’Connor, which wasn’t published until 130 years after it was written. “I am haunted by gaps in family memories, nebulous responses and twisted behavior that must be examined within the context of history—not to uncover excuses but rather reveal family baggage we all must carry and learn to live with,” writes Masumoto near the beginning of this memoir. The central California farm, a place jeopardized by water shortages and a warming climate. “We live in a constant blur,” he writes, revealing bizarre causes of death. Rather, he writes about deciding to give voice to the unspoken. “I am haunted by gaps in family memories, nebulous responses and twisted behavior that must be examined within the context of history—not to uncover excuses but rather reveal family baggage we all must carry and learn to live with,” writes Masumoto near the beginning of this memoir. The author looks forward to a country whose fourth-generation Japanese American children, the yonsei, are incontestably Japanese. Unlike the nisei who were interned during World War II, the author’s ancestors among them. Masumoto, a sansei, finds himself conflicted by the transformative power of his mother’s love for the artist rebel Gulley Jimson in Joyce Cary’s The Horse’s Mouth. Cary, notes Mason, was a “marvelous writer whose career sits uncomfortably among the tastes and demands of our own time.” The freethinking Diderot’s Rameau’s Nephew, which wasn’t published until 130 years after it was written, “reads like the love child of Socrates and Samuel Beckett with a dash of Mozartian élan,” while Jacques Rameau reminds Mason of both Candida and the work of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Discussing his specialty, the author shows how Neruda’s poetry “still has the power to astonish and appall, awaken, and chill us and leave us shaking our heads in bafflement or respect,” and he nicely juxtaposes Sylvia Plath and Seamus Heaney in an essay about fame. Mason is effusive about Hermione Lee’s biography of T. S. Eliot, “who suffered a disease-wrought intellectual disability, still living in an institution long after her contemporaries had been released from their wartime concentration camps. Masumoto is a collector of ghosts, and he listens to them as he explores the Gila River Indian Community of Arizona, where his family was detained, and the hospital where his aunt was locked away. He even finds ghosts among the orchards and garden beds of his central California farm, a place jeopardized by water shortages and a warming climate. “We live in a constant blur,” he writes, joining themes of past and present. “It’s easy to forget the past and instead only strive to move forward. Clinging to yesterday is perceived as a disability. Innovation and change rule. Historical amnesia is rewarded. Commerce and business drive life.” As a farmer, of course, Masumoto has to look forward, reckoning with risk and loss, but though his meditations are pensive and sometimes melancholic, it’s a pleasure to see him joining his place to the generations that came before him.

A simultaneously elegant and sharp-edged exploration of the hidden past.

SECRET HARVESTS
A Hidden Story of Separation and the Resilience of a Family Farm
Masumoto, David Mas
Illus. by Patricia Wakida
Red Hen Press (232 pp.)
$26.00 | Feb. 7, 2023
9781636280776

The noted writer and organic farmer looks deep inside his family history to give voice to the unsaid.

“...I am haunted by gaps in family memories, nebulous responses and twisted behavior that must be examined within the context of history—not to uncover excuses but rather reveal family baggage we all must carry and learn to live with,” writes Masumoto near the beginning of this memoir. The author looks forward to a country whose fourth-generation Japanese American children, the yonsei, are incontestably American, unlike the nisei who were interned during World War II, the author’s ancestors among them. Masumoto, a sansei in the middle, finds himself conflicted by the transformative power of his mother’s love for the artist rebel Gulley Jimson in Joyce Cary’s The Horse’s Mouth. Cary, notes Mason, was a “marvelous writer whose career sits uncomfortably among the tastes and demands of our own time.” The freethinking Diderot’s Rameau’s Nephew, which wasn’t published until 130 years after it was written, “reads like the love child of Socrates and Samuel Beckett with a dash of Mozartian élan,” while Jacques Rameau reminds Mason of both Candida and the work of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Discussing his specialty, the author shows how Neruda’s poetry “still has the power to astonish and appall, awaken, and chill us and leave us shaking our heads in bafflement or respect,” and he nicely juxtaposes Sylvia Plath and Seamus Heaney in an essay about fame. Mason is effusive about Hermione Lee’s biography of T. S. Eliot, “who suffered a disease-wrought intellectual disability, still living in an institution long after her contemporaries had been released from their wartime concentration camps. Masumoto is a collector of ghosts, and he listens to them as he explores the Gila River Indian Community of Arizona, where his family was detained, and the hospital where his aunt was locked away. He even finds ghosts among the orchards and garden beds of his central California farm, a place jeopardized by water shortages and a warming climate. “We live in a constant blur,” he writes, joining themes of past and present. “It’s easy to forget the past and instead only strive to move forward. Clinging to yesterday is perceived as a disability. Innovation and change rule. Historical amnesia is rewarded. Commerce and business drive life.” As a farmer, of course, Masumoto has to look forward, reckoning with risk and loss, but though his meditations are pensive and sometimes melancholic, it’s a pleasure to see him joining his place to the generations that came before him.

A simultaneously elegant and sharp-edged exploration of the hidden past.

CODE GRAY
Death, Life, and Uncertainty in the ER
Nahvi, Farzon A.
Simon & Schuster (256 pp.)
$27.99  |  Feb. 21, 2023
9781982160296

A memoir from an emergency room physician and professor of emergency medicine at the school of medicine at Dartmouth.

ER memoirs have become a reliable genre, delivering vivid accounts of tragedies, deaths, lifesaving heroics, wacky anecdotes, and social commentary, but this addition is a cut above many of them. Nahvi begins in 2020 with the Covid-19 pandemic, which decimated hospitals and emergency departments. Medical personnel died along with civilians, and ignorance ruled. For example, when effective N95 masks were in short supply, the CDC changed their guidelines to approve ineffectual masks as an “acceptable alternative,” which was like “redefining a baseball cap as an acceptable alternative to a hard hat.” Readers settling in for the usual entertaining, gruesome ER fireworks may be unsettled at the end of the first chapter when Nahvi calls a halt. He writes that Covid-19, however extreme, forced him to see life not as newly strange and challenging, but for the strange and challenging reality it always was. He then proceeds to describe his experiences as an emergency physician in a pre-pandemic world; as he shows, the job often lacks the adrenaline rush, the quick fixes, and a warming climate. “We live in a constant blur,” he writes, revealing bizarre causes of death. Rather, he writes about deciding what to say to the husband who has witnessed everything. The author is clear that paramedics and ER personnel do their best, but his text is not focused on stories of dramatic rescues or revealing bizarre causes of death. Rather, he writes about deciding what to say to the husband who has witnessed everything. He also describes how he reassured a woman who arrived with
severe chest pain. All tests are normal, but she showed no pleasure at news that her heart and lungs appeared healthy because her life was miserable in other ways. Nahvi is a capable, compassionate guide to these difficult moments.

A moving, thoughtful memoir of life in the medical trenches.

**THE LIGHT WE CARRY**
*Overcoming in Uncertain Times*

Obama, Michelle
Crown (316 pp.)
$32.50 | Nov. 15, 2022
9780593237465

A heartening pep talk from the former first lady.

Obama’s previous book, *Becoming,* was the bestselling book of 2018, translated into 24 languages and embraced around the world—not only because the author was already beloved and admired, but because the memoir shared the details of a unique, impressive life story. This follow-up is the kind of book that gets published because everyone wants more, whether or not there actually is any more to say. Inspired by roundtable discussions with young women and college students—and by questions asked on her arena book tour—Obama recapitulates and expands her guiding beliefs, giving us “a glimpse inside my personal toolbox...what I use professionally and personally to help me stay balanced and confident, what keeps me moving forward even during times of high anxiety and stress.” We’ve heard before about the author’s experiences as a Black woman at Princeton; the inspiring example of her father; the importance of friendship in her life; the details of her relationship with her husband; and the decision to move her down-to-earth mother to the White House. She returns to those topics here, this time focusing less on storytelling than on crystallizing advice for those dealing with experiences of otherness, prejudice, “not-mattering,” and loneliness (12% of Americans say they have no friends at all). The author strongly believes our weaknesses can fuel our strengths, offering the example of inaugural poet Amanda Gorman’s overcoming her speech impediment. Toward the end of the book, Obama addresses the idea she’s become most famous for “going high,” first articulated at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. “But have you seen the world lately?” people ask her, after all the miseries and outrages of the last several years. “Are we still supposed to be going high?” Read the book to find out.

No surprises or reveals but plenty of warmth and encouragement, particularly for young people. A good holiday gift.

**EMPRESS OF THE NILE**
*The Daredevil Archaeologist Who Saved Egypt’s Ancient Temples From Destruction*

Olson, Lynne
Random House (448 pp.)
$32.00 | Feb. 28, 2023
9780525509479

The life of an archaeologist who deserves to be better known.

In her latest, bestselling historian Olson, who specializes in World War II–era politics (*Citizens of London, Last Hope Island, Those Angry Days*), turns her attention to archaeologist Christiane Desroches-Noblecourt (1913-2011). The book’s first third is a delightful account of the career of an intelligent woman in early-20th-century France. Curious and self-confident, Desroches-Noblecourt became fascinated by ancient Egypt and excelled at the elite École du Louvre. “While most of her professors thought highly of her,” writes Olson, “she was treated like a pariah by several of her fellow Egyptology students, all of whom were male.” She shattered the myth that women could not tolerate the miseries of the Egyptian desert, and, unlike many of her colleagues, she treated Egyptian laborers with respect, a behavior that bore impressive fruit later. At age 21, Desroches-Noblecourt became project manager in the Louvre department of Egyptian antiquities, “the only woman at the time to hold a professional position in the department.” Olson recounts Egyptian history culminating in the 1952 military coup, which brought Abdel Nasser to power. Infuriated at losing their colonial privileges, Britain and France, with Israel’s cooperation, invaded Egypt in 1956, failing but poisoning relations with those two nations. This was the situation in 1960 when construction began on the massive Aswan Dam, built across the Nile. Its reservoir, notes the author, would destroy “hundreds of temples, tombs, churches, fortresses, inscriptions, and carvings—the fruit of half a dozen cultures and civilizations.” At this point, Desroches-Noblecourt went into action. In the middle third, Olson describes her dogged but successful efforts to convince individuals and governments (including Egypt’s) to preserve these priceless structures. The U.S. refused to participate until Jacqueline Kennedy persuaded her newly elected husband. Olson’s conclusion digresses into other archaeological controversies and Jackie Kennedy’s life, but readers will not complain. The author provides a fine account of Desroches-Noblecourt’s long, distinguished career.

An expert biography of the most prestigious Egyptologist of her time.
A Cambodian refugee to America reflects on his arduous journey to freedom and job as a Secret Service officer.

In this harrowing yet inspiring and upbeat survival story, Oun (b. 1966), writing with Starnes, chronicles his upbringing in a poor, close-knit community in Battambang City, in northwest Cambodia. The author’s father was a lieutenant in the army, and his mother worked as a seamstress and cigarette roller. In April 1975, the Khmer Rouge seized control of the country, and Oun’s father was taken away and vanished. Soon, destitute families were herded out of their homes and marched into the “Killing Fields,” where they endured awful conditions working in the rice paddies with little food or shelter. Oun writes poignantly about how he had his beloved dog with him until the soldiers shot him “because they could”—an episode that was indicative of the senseless violence perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, which the author captures vividly. Suspected by others because of his soldier father, Oun had to change his name and is trying to do the best job he or she can.

A truly heartening story of sheer determination and the will to survive and thrive.

WALK THE BLUE LINE
True Stories From Officers Who Protect and Serve
Patterson, James & Matt Eversmann
Little, Brown (512 pp.)
$30.00 | Feb. 6, 2023
9780316406604

Real-life stories about one of the toughest jobs in the world.

Police work is grindingly difficult, an ongoing struggle of finding the right course through a maze of bad alternatives. Patterson has done extensive research about police for his many successful novels, and Eversmann is a former Army Ranger who worked with the author on two previous collections, E.R. Nurses and Walk in My Combat Boots. As in those books, the authors allow theirprotagonists to recount their experiences for themselves. The stories cover many different types of police work, from SWAT teams to cold case investigators. There are 20-year veterans and recruits fresh out of training. A recurring theme is that they joined the police force to make a positive difference in their communities. Several of the accounts deal with small victories, recounting lives that could have turned bad but were set on a better path by making a personal connection. In a few cases, officers express feeling overwhelmed by a rising tide of gangs, guns, and drugs. Other stories deal with violent cases that defy explanation and are heart-rending in their pointlessness. It is no surprise that many officers experience post-trauma stress, although most police forces have recognized the problem and provide specialist help. The rhetoric of anti-police activists has added a sour note, and accusations of racism are especially painful for officers who are themselves from a minority. Nevertheless, the desire to protect, serve, and defend remains strong. “Like many in law enforcement, I’ve gone through traumatic events that, at times, turned me hard,” says one officer. “Made me rough around the edges and, at times, unapproachable. Behind every badge is a human being who has flaws and problems and suffers and is trying to do the best job he or she can.”

A notable collection of heartfelt stories from the front line told with honesty and compassion.

SO HELP ME GOD
Pence, Mike
Simon & Schuster (560 pp.)
$35.00 | Nov. 15, 2022
9781982190330

The former vice president reflects warmly on the president whose followers were encouraged to hang him.

Pence’s calm during the Trump years has been a source of bemusement, especially during the administration’s calamitous demise. In this bulky, oddly uncurious political memoir, Pence suggests the source of his composure is simple: frequent prayer and bottomless patience for politicking. After a relatively speedy recap of his personal and political history in Indiana—born-again Christian, conservative radio host, congressman, governor—he remembers greeting the prospect of serving under Trump with enthusiasm. He “was giving voice to the desperation and frustration caused by decades of government mismanagement,” he writes. Recounting how the Trump-Pence ticket won the White House in 2016, he recalls Trump as a fundamentally hardworking president, albeit one who often shot from the hip. Yet Pence finds Trump’s impulsivity an asset, setting contentious foreign leaders and Democrats off-balance. Soon they settled into good cop–bad cop roles; he was “the gentler voice,” while “it was Trump’s job to bring the thunder.”
Throughout, Pence rationalizes and forgives all sorts of thundering. Sniping at John McCain? McCain never really took the time to understand him! Revolving-door staffers? He’s running government like a business! That phone call with Ukraine’s president? Overblown! Downplaying the threat Covid-19 presented in early 2020? Evidence, somehow, of “the leadership that President Trump showed in the early, harrowing days of the pandemic.” But for a second-in-command to such a disruptive figure, Pence dwells little on Trump’s motivations, which makes the story’s climax—Trump’s 2020 election denials and the Jan. 6, 2021 insurrection—impossible for him to reconcile. How could such a selfless patriot fall under the sway of bad lawyers and conspiracy theorists? God only knows. Chalk it up to Pence’s forgiving nature. In the lengthy acknowledgments he thanks seemingly everybody he’s known personally or politically; but one name’s missing. Disingenuous when not willfully oblivious.

Feral
Losing Myself and Finding My Way in America’s National Parks
Pennington, Emily
Little A (268 pp.)
$28.99 | Feb. 1, 2023
9781542039710

A freelance travel journalist drops out of the rat race to spend a year visiting every national park in the US.

At 32, Pennington walked away from an unfulfilling job as an assistant to Los Angeles executives to embark on the wilderness tour of her dreams. “I had grown weary of spending my waking hours managing the lives of other, more successful people,” she writes. The author outfitted a minivan with a mattress and all the “creature comforts” she could cram inside and headed to her first stop in Joshua Tree National Park. There she encountered her first obstacles: worries over personal safety and her ability to handle the adventure she had chosen. Gradually, deeper anxieties involving the inner “feral child” who had felt abandoned by her parents began to emerge. Pennington believed that the natural world that had saved her from despair once before would help her find balance, but her obsession with pushing limits and the unexpected onset of the Covid-19 pandemic weeks after she started left her feeling more vulnerable than she expected. The journey—which took her all over the continental U.S., Hawaii, Alaska, and the Virgin Islands—revealed that a relationship she thought would lead to marriage had been a union of incompatible opposites. Forced to confront the loneliness she feared, Pennington continued her travels to the end despite the mounting personal uncertainties, the risks posed by the pandemic, and the emotional health that made her feel like she could “no longer trust the narrative of [her] own mind.” The author’s unflinching honesty and the boldness of her inner and outer journeys are the two great strengths of a book that sometimes overreaches with too-florid natural descriptions. Despite this flaw, the memoir still succeeds in offering a moving portrait of a woman who came into her own by learning to let go. Fierce, candid reading.

The Strangers’ House
Writing Northern Ireland
Poots, Alexander
Twelve (256 pp.)
$30.00 | March 14, 2023
9781538701577

A highly learned but lightly worn literary history of Northern Ireland that reaches beyond books into political and cultural turmoil.

Belfast bookseller Poots opens his brightly opinionated study with the titular Strangers’ House, a long-ago London hostel for foreign sailors. In a poem by Tom Paulin, an Ulster Unionist—a supporter of a Northern Ireland joined to the U.K.—ended up there with “the terrible suspicion that they are mired between Catholic Ireland and indifferent Britain, foreigners everywhere.” Stressing that the divisions in Northern Ireland center on “access to good land and decent employment, combined with competing ideas of what and where home is” more than on religion or ethnicity, Poots draws on literature, beginning in the early 20th century, to examine responses to such matters. It’s often forgotten, for instance, that C.S. Lewis, though a renowned Oxford don, was from Northern Ireland. Writing to an Irish friend in England, he lamented that as much as he loved his home, he despaired of “the invincible flippancy and dullness of the Anglo-Saxon race.” It took Ireland decades to admit that Oscar Wilde was one of its own, and Poots does admirable detective work. He recounts how the lawyer who brought about Wilde’s downfall by exposing still-illegal homosexuality went on to found the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force but, on the Republic of Ireland’s achieving independence in 1920, “found that he had presided over the creation of a strange new country, a Protestant statelet that no one could have envisioned at the turn of the century.” Louis MacNeice, Paul Muldoon, Medbh McCguckian, and many other writers figure in the narrative before Poots arrives at the modern triumvirate of Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon, who created a literature that, while Irish, was also universal and nonsectarian—and thankfully so, for, as Poots writes, “In the hundred years of Northern Ireland’s existence, there has not been a single poet or novelist of any worth who has succumbed to the cosy certainties of the tribe.”

An essential guide to contemporary Irish letters.
A wide-ranging examination of cultural convergences throughout human history.

Puchner, a Harvard literature professor and editor of The Norton Anthology of World Literature, takes a capacious view of cultural objects and practices, from cave drawings to TikTok, that form our shared human inheritance. His project, he writes, was inspired by a need to define for himself the meaning of his own scholarly field, the humanities, which he understands as an engagement with the cultural past “for the purpose of redefining the present.” In each of 15 chapters, Puchner pleasingly investigates ways that cultures have redefined themselves, often through cross-fertilization. When ancient Greece adopted an alphabet from Egyptians, a largely oral tradition faded in favor of writing. However, libraries proved to be a vulnerable form of cultural storage. Plato, who gave up a career as a playwright to follow Socrates, understood the power of dialogue to teach, though he rejected invented dialogue to create the simulated reality of theater—a critique revived in dystopian tales such as the 1999 film The Matrix. The Romans proved adept at grafting Greek culture onto their own. Many centuries after Mount Vesuvius erupted, the discovery of the sculpture of a South Asian goddess was proof of cultural influences from India as well. Puchner underscores the enriching potential of cultural importation. For example, when a seventh-century Chinese pilgrim traveled to India, he returned with religious texts that he went on to translate, leading to the flourishing of Buddhism in China just as it was diminishing in India. The invention of museums as well as exploration, colonization, and global trade all have inspired artists’ imaginations. German artist Albrecht Dürer was astonished by the gold objects he saw displayed in Brussels, gifts from Moctezuma to Spanish explorers, meant to warn them of the Aztec’s power and resources. Instead, they incited greed and destruction. Looking at recent phenomena such as K-pop, Puchner is sanguine. “The arc of cultural history,” he concludes optimistically, “bends toward circulation and mixture.”

A thoughtful, generous vision of human creativity across centuries of culture.

A true-crime book that creates a distressing portrayal of gendered violence in Mexico.

In her latest book, MacArthur fellow Rivera Garza, a professor of Hispanic studies and creative writing at the University of Houston, delivers a clear-eyed portrait of her sister, who was murdered in Azcapotzalco, Mexico, on July 16, 1990. The author chronicles how she visited Mexico in 2019 in search of her sister’s unresolved criminal file, and she brings us into her world with accounts of Liliana’s summer, including letters, notebooks, and personal narratives from family and friends. In one brief passage, Rivera Garza provides revealing insight into the gender dynamics of her sister’s life. A friend recalls: “Lili wanted out of this relationship, but couldn’t. The guy was very persistent. She was, or seemed to be, going steady with Manolo, but Ángel still insisted that she was his girlfriend. I never witnessed any violence between them.” As the author shows, many of the men in Liliana’s orbit considered women mere possessions. The narrative is full of a wide variety of characters whose common tie is Liliana, and the author knits all of the stories together with aplomb. Her skilled storytelling movingly depicts the last days of her sister’s life within the context of the continued plague of femicide. “With the care of the archaeologist who touches without damaging, who dusts without breaking, my intention is to open and preserve [my sister’s writing] at the same time: de- and recon textualize it in a reading from the present,” writes the author. “Neither Liliana nor those of us who loved her had at our disposal the insight, the language, that would allow us to identify the signs of danger. This blindness, which was never voluntary but social, has contributed to the murder of hundreds of thousands of women in Mexico and beyond.”

A moving, heart-wrenching memoir as well as an unflinching appraisal of the widespread violence against women in Mexico.

A revealing exploration of the current state of the teaching profession.

In her latest, Robbins, bestselling author of The Nurses, The Overachievers, Pledged, Fraternity, and
other behind-the-scenes examinations, takes us into schools in America. The author followed three teachers from various regions of the country over the course of a school year, and she interviewed hundreds of others, providing an intimate view into the daily lives of educators. Even before the pandemic, writes Robbins, “the education landscape had already darkened considerably.” The rapidly deteriorating conditions at schools during the pandemic led to an exodus of many well-qualified educators from the profession as well as a shortage of substitute teachers. The pandemic also “further exposed the nation’s shameful mistreatment of teachers, which remains under-addressed.” According to the research that Robbins presents in this book, teachers are often subjected to toxic working conditions while they struggle to educate our nation’s children and are not offered the same respect as people in other professions.

Teachers often face outrageous and overwhelming demands from parents and administrators as well as hostile cliques and bullying from co-workers. In addition to violence in schools, they now must contend with the growing movements to ban books and censor classroom material. Despite the increased demands and responsibilities placed on teachers, including the pressures of standardized testing and larger class sizes, they continue to remain underpaid. Refreshingly, the author also spotlights teachers who have chosen to remain in the profession despite the myriad challenges, sharing inspiring stories from the teachers she interviewed as well as tips and suggestions regarding how to better interact with students, parents, and colleagues. Some of the stories contain harsh language and very personal details about the lives of the teachers, but these narratives help illustrate her point that teachers deserve far more respect—and compensation—than they currently receive.

An important and eye-opening book that all parents, teachers, and educational administrators should read.

**HITLER’S ARISTOCRATS**

*The Secret Power Players in Britain and America Who Supported the Nazis, 1923-1941*

Ronald, Susan

St. Martin’s (464 pp.)

$29.99 | March 14, 2023

9781250276551

A character-driven chronicle of the numerous British and American elites who abetted Hitler’s efforts to seize and maintain power.

Many of these names (the Mitford sisters, Sir Oswald Mosley) will be well known to students of fascist history. However, British American biographer Ronald, author of *Hitler’s Art Thief*, among other books, capably unearths the efforts of dozens of others who helped pave the way for getting Hitler’s “big lie” accepted by so many. The inability to accept Germany’s defeat in World War I and the ramifications of the punitive Treaty of Versailles fed the fantasy that the old order of ruptured aristocracies could be restored. Shady characters with aristocratic ties—e.g., Ernst “Putzi” Sedgwick von Hanstaengl, a German American businessman and “Nazi English-speaking foreign press service,” and Princess Stephanie zu Hohenlohe-Waldenburg-Schillingsfürst, a wily spy and monarchist—acted as Hitler’s go-betweens in wooing the British and American upper crust to advocate for the Nazi regime, write favorable stories about Hitler, and infiltrate the embassies. Putzi coached Hitler on his rhetoric, while Princess Stephanie enlisted the favors of Harold Harmsworth, Lord Rothermere, the British press baron, and got Hitler to appoint Joachim von Ribbentrop as head of the German foreign office in England. In this keen study, Ronald emphasizes the shocking extent to which American corporations like Du Pont and General Motors supported the pro-German fascist groups in the U.S., not to mention the behind-the-scenes support of Hitler’s own “alchemists” like I.G. Farben. The biggest-name sympathizers were, of course, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, ultimately exiled by Churchill to govern the Bahamas to keep them out of mischief. Even Martha Dodd, the daughter of William Dodd, the fervently anti-Nazi American ambassador to Germany, was seduced by the Nazi machine, and she went on to become an unrepentant spy.

Highly readable drama of highbrow traitors who enthusiastically aided the Nazi ascent to power.

**TELL ME GOOD THINGS**

*On Love, Death, and Marriage*

Runcie, James

Bloomsbury (224 pp.)

$27.00 | Feb. 21, 2023

9781639731527

A husband mourns his late wife.

British novelist, TV producer, and playwright Runcie, whose books include the Grantchester Mysteries series, pays homage to his wife, Scottish producer and director Marilyn Imrie (1947-2020), who died of motor neuron disease, with a deeply emotional memoir of their 35-year marriage and a moving meditation on grief. Imrie was a warm, vibrant woman, as devoted to her husband and daughters as she was to her thriving career. Their life was filled with “Hospitality, Elegance, Literature and Friendship.” The diagnosis, which came after protracted waiting and visits to specialists, was devastating. The disease, Runcie explains, “is the degeneration and death of the specialised nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord (motor neurones) which transmit the electrical signals to muscles for the generation of movement. It is a form of slow and inexorable paralysis.” The progression of symptoms is unpredictable, but the prognosis is inevitable. The Covid-19 pandemic added to their problems: Renovating their flat to adapt to Imrie’s care proved difficult when a lockdown limited access for builders, carpenters, and electricians. Runcie recounts his mounting frustration as he watched her become weaker and weaker, losing the ability to walk, speak, and swallow. “She hated everything that was happening to her,” he writes. “I couldn’t foist my opinions and expectations upon her or help her to come to
terms with what was happening.” He hated what was happening, too. “I could not stand it.” Overwhelmed with loss after her death and angry at facile remarks that some people offered as consolation, Runcie took to writing as a way to keep her close: “I thought of what it might be like not to be haunted, but to be accompanied. To have a happy ghost as it were, a blessed ghost, someone who was there and not there.” They had worked together on so many projects that, he says, “it was almost as if we were writing it together.”

Sorrow imbues a tender, intimate memoir.

**WITHOUT A DOUBT**

*How To Go From Underrated to Unbeatable*

Sarna, Surbhi

Simon & Schuster (224 pp.)

$27.99 | March 7, 2023

9781982147907

An Indian American entrepreneur describes how her harrowing medical history spurred a lifelong obsession with advancing the field of women’s health.

When Sarna was 13, she went to the emergency room with an agonizingly painful ovarian cyst—a diagnosis she would receive 24 hours after a doctor recommended that she should go home and take some Tylenol. Although her cysts disappeared after puberty, her determination to improve care for uterine-related conditions lasted a lifetime. Sarna has based nearly every decision in her adult life—applying to Berkeley’s biology program; taking an entry-level engineering position at a medical device company; starting her own organization after being laid off—on her desire to make women’s health care better. As she demonstrates in her lively text, she pursued this goal through years of being underestimated, taken for granted, and ignored. Eventually, Sarna formed a research-and-development team whose closeness led them to call themselves “La Familia.” That team developed a diagnostic medical device that Boston Scientific eventually acquired for $275 million. The author is now a partner at the innovative venture capital firm Y Combinator. Throughout this frank, vulnerable, and fast-paced memoir, Sarna returns to the central theme of the consequences of being “underrated and doubted.” She realized that “the single most important decision I made in my career was to push forward even while being doubted by so many. Doubted by the famous inventor who fell asleep while I was speaking to him….Doubted by the guy who came to my booth during a trade show, looked over my shoulder, and asked to speak with the CEO of the company.” Perhaps as a result of the ways in which she was underestimated, Sarna’s approach to entrepreneurship, which she articulates through warm and humorous advice embedded in her life story, is profoundly empathetic, both for her co-workers and community and for herself.

A wise, practical, and compassionate guide to startup success from a determined woman.

**WHO DOES THAT BITCH THINK SHE IS?**

*Doris Fish and the Rise of Drag*

Seligman, Craig

Public Affairs (352 pp.)

$29.00 | Feb. 28, 2023

9781541702165

The life story of iconic drag queen Doris Fish (1952–1991) and a broader examination of post-Stonewall gay life.

Philip Clargo Mills, born in Manly Vale, a suburb of Sydney, grew up as a “placid young introvert,” and “when he came out to the family, at around eighteen, no one was remotely surprised.” By that time, writes Seligman, author of *Sonntag and Kael*, he had already discovered Sydney’s drag scene. Nightclub fame with his group Sylvia & the Synthetics brought him to San Francisco, which became his second home. Good looks and a voracious sexual appetite made him a “natural” prostitute, which gave him the funds and freedom to fully become Doris. Sporting a distinctive look—“beehive, short, thick lashes, and very pale mod-style lips—Doris led a trio called Sluts-A-Go-Go, which helped make her a star of the Sydney Gay Mardi Gras. Her métier was makeup (“I’d paint my eyeballs if I could!”), and the raison d’être of her shows was their costume changes. Extravaganzas such as the “Nightclub of the Living Dead” and the film *Vegas in Space* featured plots that were “just a rack to hang the drag on.” Ultimately, writes the author, Doris’ “bad-girl drag” and “aggressive glamour” helped to define an era in which drag queens were evolving “from social lepers to culture heroes” and the world was reeling from the AIDS epidemic. By the time of Doris’ death from AIDS in 1991, drag had transformed from insider entertainment into popular culture and “homosexuality went from being regarded as disgraceful and revolting to not a big deal.” The book benefits from the author’s friendships and frank interviews with many of its principal players. Many scenes from Doris’ later life read like compiled oral histories, which gives an intimate feel to a lively read.

Drag culture and camp humor hit it big in the life of Doris Fish.

**A DARKER WILDERNESS**

*Black Nature Writing From Soil to Stars*

Ed. by Sharkey, Erin

Milkweed (312 pp.)

$20.00 paper | Feb. 14, 2023

9781571313904

A unique collection of nature writing focused on Black experience and memory. This book is a response to the absence of Black literature about attachment to the American landscape, a multigenerational dwelling place that is both
“Heartfelt and richly passionate impressions from a creative writer gone too soon.”

YOUR HEARTS, YOUR SCARS

A heart-transplant recipient shares her personal journey.

In this posthumously published essay collection, Talve-Goodman (1986-2018) openly shares the history of her body. Born with a congenital heart condition, she chronicles her medical experiences, ranging from an 11-hour marathon back surgery that untethered her spinal cord to the implantation of her new heart in 2006 when she was 19. A collaborative effort “made out of love and grief,” the text, edited by the author’s sister and novelist Tinti, mixes creative nonfiction, memoir, and critical theory. In the opening essay, the author recalls a night as a 20-year-old college student when she exposed her chest to a boyfriend and admitted to having had a heart transplant just one year prior. In another impassioned story, she recounts a memorable trip to San Diego with a group of other teens with organ transplants, noting the solidarity of people with “displaced” kidneys, livers, and hearts and how the identities of their donors can become a vexing mystery. Talve-Goodman candidly reflects on her own physical self-consciousness, graphically describing squirming biopsy procedures. After a two-year wait for a new heart and countless surgeries, she admits, “I wasn’t good at much, but I was good at waiting.” The daughter of two rabbis, the author’s pride in her Jewish heritage infuses many essays, most of which read like nimble coming-of-age diary entries. Other pieces find her trying to harmonize with the “dead person’s heart” beating rapidly in her chest (a transplant typically takes a year to “thaw and reach its capacity”) or offering panicked discourse on organ donors and their correlation to “zombies.” While crafting...
her essays, Talve-Goodman became unexpectedly ill and succumbed to lymphoma in 2018 at age 31. Never maudlin or overly sympathetic, the book shows how she transformed her physical limitations into an outward source of strength, and her vividly drawn essays effectively enlighten and educate.

Heartfelt and richly passionate impressions from a creative writer gone too soon.

**REVOLUTIONARY ROADS**
*Searching for the War That Made America Independent... and All the Places It Could Have Gone Terribly Wrong*

Thompson, Bob
Twelve (432 pp.)
$32.00 | Feb. 7, 2023
9781455565153

A spirited tour of the landscapes of the American Revolution and the panoply of characters who figured in them.

Thompson opens with a set piece from the Battle of Cowpens. Fought on Jan. 17, 1781, “on the South Carolina frontier,” the battle promised to be a decisive victory for the British under the dreaded Banastre Tarleton. Instead, the American soldiers wheeled from retreat and destroyed 80% of Tarleton’s forces, sending the British reeling out of the South to Yorktown.

“We almost never think about what would have happened if neither the rebels nor the British had won the war,” Thompson muses, conjuring up an uneasy status quo. While what made the difference were the late battles in the Revolution, early victories at Lexington and Bunker Hill played their parts, too. The author turns up a number of lesser-known incidents such as the “Powder Alarm,” which subverted post-Tea Party efforts on the part of Britain to clamp down on the Colonies; and Benedict Arnold’s ill-fated attempt to invade Quebec and turn its French inhabitants against the British—an attempt that surely figured in Arnold’s later turn away from the revolutionary cause. Thompson is knowledgeable on both the purely military aspects of the war and the alliances it engendered—for example, dividing Native peoples into pro- and anti-British or American factions that would later play out in the postwar history of westward expansion. There are some memorable scenes throughout, including the rather horrible image of the British at Yorktown slitting the throats of the horses they could no longer feed. One demerit is Thompson’s fondness for flippant asides—e.g., “If you’re feeling snarky, you could call Hamilton the 10-Minute War Hero”; “Among South Carolina’s partisans, the Swamp Fox, Francis Marion, got his own Disney TV series; Andrew Pickens got the shaft, immortality-wise”—that add little to the narrative.

Good reading for Revolutionary War aficionados and maybe Banastre Tarleton fans as well.

**THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE**
*A Biography of America’s Peculiar Creation Through the Eyes of the People Who Shaped It*

Weaver, Thomas E.
Post Hill Press (288 pp.)
$30.00 | March 28, 2023
9781637585849

A study of a much-criticized but remarkably resilient American institution.

Those who think that throwing stones at political institutions is the same as reasoned debate should take some lessons from this carefully researched book. Weaver, a veteran attorney, examines the Electoral College, which usually stays in the background of American political life but occasionally bursts into public consciousness. The EC is the body that actually “elects” the president and vice president, and the number of electors from each state is the same as the number of its House members and its two senators. The “plus two” idea was originally meant to prevent larger states from dominating smaller ones, but the emergence of a stable party system undermined the concept. The founders envisioned that the EC would be composed of worthy candidates selected by the state legislatures, but this quickly evolved into an electoral system, with EC electors appointed to ratify the public choice. The system operates on a winner-takes-all basis, with the candidate who wins the most votes in a state receiving all the votes from the electors in that state (although Maine and Nevada use a proportional system). It is this rule, rather than the college itself, that can allow candidates with fewer popular votes to win the EC vote. Electors are usually entrenched party figures, but only a very few have failed to adhere to the evidence of the public vote. With a cast of colorful characters in tow, Weaver examines the long-standing controversies surrounding the EC and sets out numerous proposals for reform, which range from outright abolition to removing the “plus two” clause. The author believes that the EC is here to stay, and it (usually) has the advantages of ensuring stability, providing uniformity, and encouraging candidates to pay attention to smaller states. It is a fair-minded conclusion to a comprehensive study.

Weaver brings a wealth of historical research to the task, writing with authority and clarity.
Richly rewarding survey of the history of the frontier West.

“It is always easy to miss the obvious,” writes prolific historian West of what he considers to be its defining characteristic—namely, “its sheer energy and fluidity, movement and change of a degree that set it apart at the time and, arguably, from any time before or since.” As the author shows, the acquisition of the West, from the Texas Revolution to the w remindings of the North and Southwest from Britain and Mexico, brought so much territory to the U.S. that, if the same bonanza were to happen today, the nation would extend deep into South America. The American population tripled between 1800 and 1840, and a significant number headed west only to find that, even then, the myths of rugged individualism were thoroughly compromised by a cabal of corporatists and politicians. As he did in The Last Indian War and other books, West writes with an eye to irony and telling details. He notes, for instance, that John Wesley Powell's groundbreaking classification of Native American nations and languages was but one more instrument of their captivity on reservations. While life for non-Whites was exceedingly difficult, White Americans could readily reinvent themselves. Among the greatest ironies the author uncovers is the fact that by the mid-1880s, ranching was “one of the most corporatized businesses in the nation,” with investment pouring in from the East and Europe. Though the Homestead Act—bitterly opposed by the South—did offer land to individual farmers and “enshrined an agrarian version of the ideal of free labor,” its success was mixed. Of lasting effect, in West's view, is that where the disunion that led to civil war was furthered by lack of interregional communications, the postwar expansion of railroads, fast ships, and telegraphy created a superpower.

A comprehensive, lucid, and often surprising history of western settlement in America.

A tightly focused examination of the civil rights movement that engenders new insights and understanding.

In the pivotal year of 1966, Stokely Carmichael first made Black Power a rallying cry in the civil rights movement, transforming it from the inside out. Following this, writes veteran journalist Whitaker, there occurred “the most dramatic shift in the long struggle for racial justice in America since the dawn of the modern civil rights era in the 1950s.” This book thoroughly reveals the significance and complexities of the political changes of 1966, and the author follows the story up to the present-day work of such groups as Black Lives Matter. The cry to embrace Black culture in America born on the Black Arts Movement, deeper interest in the holiday Kwanzaa, increased popularity of natural hairstyles like the Afro, a newfound appreciation for African textiles, and the establishment of university-level Black studies programs. It also saw the rise of the Black Panthers and other Black militias as many Black communities became frustrated with the persistent police violence that continued in the wake of nonviolent protest. Furthermore, activists registered an impressive number of Black voters despite hostile White opposition. Whitaker also effectively traces the challenges of the movement: Some Black organizations turned against integration, and consequently, White America’s support for the movement fell. “One major disparity [between races] was over the pace of progress,” writes the author. Following increasing riots, “by a margin of 64 to 24 percent, the whites interviewed said they now opposed even peaceful Black demonstrations.” This growing disparity, with the largest disagreements involving policing and housing issues, had ramifications for decades to come. Throughout this important, well-researched historical study, Whitaker makes a convincing case for 1966 as one of the most important years in the history of Black liberation. The author expertly examines the roots and resistance to the advancement of Black Americans, which are as relevant as ever.

An essential volume in the history of Black liberation movements.

A compelling account of the iconic civil rights leader’s effort to make sense of World War I and its meaning for racial equality and democracy.

Williams, a professor of African and African American studies at Brandeis and author of Torchbearers of Democracy, details W.E.B. Du Bois’ middecade struggle to research, write, and publish a comprehensive history of African American participation in World War I. Lacking Du Bois’ fully realized history, Williams presents readers with the next best thing, incorporating his subject's research, chapter outlines, and excerpts to provide a more accurate and expansive account of the war. The author drives the narrative forward by showing readers how the stakes of the project evolved over time. What began as a narrow history expanded to include documentation of the pervasive, overt, and
institutionalized racism within the Army, the violence against Black citizens at home that exploded after the war, and the war’s origins in the European colonization of Africa. This was no mere academic exercise for Du Bois, who was haunted by his own role encouraging Black Americans to “close ranks” and set aside “personal grievances” in support of the war effort, anticipating that service would translate into a closer approximation of equality in the U.S. The history would be, in part, a means of ensuring that others did not make the same mistake. The Du Bois that emerges from this illuminating book is fully human. He fails, he resists, but he never stops fighting for justice and equality. His insights are as timely today as they were a century ago. In an otherwise thoughtful and nuanced book, the women in Du Bois’ life are less fully fleshed. Shirley Graham, Du Bois’ second wife and a writer, composer, and activist in her own right, merits a more thorough discussion. Nevertheless, Williams, like Du Bois before him, has done the important work of making sure that history is recorded and remembered.

A solid bulwark against efforts to simplify and sanitize history.

**URBAN JUNGLE**

_The History and Future of Nature in the City_

*Wilson, Ben*

 Doubleday (304 pp.)

$30.00 | March 7, 2023

9780385548113

Historical survey of the damage that cities have done to nature and the possibilities for mutually beneficial coexistence. Early on in his latest book, Wilson, British author of such popular histories as _Metropolis and Empire of the Deep_, reminds us that without nature, cities are unsustainable. “The veneer of civilization is paper-thin,” he writes. “Scratch at the carapace and you discover a world teeming with wildlife.” Despite this fact, cities are only beginning to learn how to live with the increasing numbers of living things that are attracted to and thrive on the biodiversity to which they give rise. Drawing examples from around the world, Wilson illustrates the interdependencies that cities have with plants, trees, water, food sources, and birds and animals. In each chapter, he discusses the accommodations struck when cities first emerged, the later destruction brought on by industrialization, and current attempts to reconnect around ecological and human resilience. As he points out, technological solutions that attempt to dominate nature — e.g., the concrete channeling of streams and canals — no longer make sense. Also insufficient are parks, tree-lined boulevards, private gardens, and low-density suburbs. Instead, we need green and blue (water) infrastructure and ecological buffer zones that engage with the natural processes essential to a city’s ecosystem. If contemporary cities are not to suffer the fate of the Mayan city of Tikal or the Cambodian city of Angkor Wat, “both devoured by rainforests,” they will have to follow the leads of Amsterdam, Singapore, and Berlin in attempting to live proactively with nature. The title of the book is unfortunate given that public debate in the U.S. regarding cities has used the phrase not to allude to nature but to speak with disdain and alarm about race and crime. Nonetheless, Wilson is a helpful guide to the intersection of nature and city life.

A sharp, dispassionate plea to recognize our dependence on nature and mitigate the dire consequences of climate change.

**THE EXCEPTIONS**

_Nancy Hopkins, MIT, and the Fight for Women in Science_

*Zernike, Kate*

Scribner (416 pp.)

$30.00 | Feb. 28, 2023

9781982131838

A powerful story of 16 women who “upset the usual assumptions about why there were so few women in science and math” in the U.S.

In 1999, _New York Times_ journalist Zernike broke the story for the _Boston Globe_. As she recalls, the president of MIT admitted, “I have always believed that contemporary gender discrimination within universities is part reality and part perception... but I now understand that reality is by far the greater part of the balance.” The author chronicles the events through the lives of several MIT scientists, mostly Nancy Hopkins (b. 1943), a brilliant student who fell in love with biology, obtained a doctorate, and published groundbreaking research. Recruited by MIT at the dawn of affirmative action in the 1970s, she rose to become a tenured professor. Zernike writes that early-career women scientists have relatively few complaints, but they understandably chafe as they reach the top to discover that senior scientists compete viciously for status, grants, salary, publication, lab space, and assistants. The author demonstrates how the university system has always favored men. Much of the book recounts quarrels among professors and staff and the rampant sexism within the university system. Frustrated with the way she was treated, Hopkins discussed matters with other female colleagues and discovered that they were also fuming. As scientists, they gathered evidence showing how women professors had lower salaries and were promoted more slowly, given smaller laboratory space, omitted from important committees, and overlooked by the informal, male-dominated networks essential for career advancement. Perhaps surprisingly, most university officials agreed that the evidence revealed a problem and began making corrections even before the media took notice, producing front-page stories nationwide, with most praising MIT for admitting its error so quickly. “Practically overnight,” writes Zernike, “MIT became the pacesetter for promoting gender equality in higher education.” Since then, matters have improved.

A fascinating, heartening account of successful advocacy in the scientific and academic communities.
CHILDREN’S

These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

THE ENCHANTED LIFE OF VALENTINA MEJÍA
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RABBIT, DUCK, AND BIG BEAR by Nadine Brun-Cosme; illus. by Olivier Tallec .......................................................... 136

QUIET TIME WITH MY SEEYA by Dinalie Dabarera .................. 140

NOT AN EASY WIN by Chrystal D. Giles ................................ 144

UNSTOPPABLE US, VOLUME 1 by Yuval Noah Harari; illus. by Ricard Zaplana Ruiz ......................................................... 146

REMEMBER by Joy Harjo; illus. by Michaela Goade ............... 146

LASAGNA MEANS I LOVE YOU by Kate O’Shaugnessy .......... 153

HIDDEN CREATURE FEATURES by Jane Park .......................... 154

A FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING by Dan Santat ................... 156

A BEAUTIFUL HOUSE FOR BIRDS by Grace Lin ................... 161

BANANA
Abbott, Zoey
Tundra Books (40 pp.) $18.99 | March 7, 2023 978-0735271418

What to do when a fancy new object intrudes on family time? A child and their father are a perfect pair: “I love my dad. He’s the best at the pool. He rates my handstands. I rate his dives. We play shark games. When it’s time to go home, I do Dad’s hair.” But things change when the pair walk by a Banana store. Dad is transfixed by his new, seemingly magical Banana (the artwork shows the two riding a flying Banana, using it as a saw, and more). The acquisition changes the father, taking up more of his time. Finally frustrated, the child acts...by eating the banana. Dad throws a bit of a fit, but after some family time, the duo get back to the important things in life, like going to the pool. As an allegory for modern technology, the story is strong, reminding readers of all ages that useful electronic gadgets shouldn’t take priority over daily social interactions. While the book’s solution might be an oversimplification, it should still spark healthy conversations in families about when it’s time to unplug. Rendered in pencil and risograph, the soft illustrations have a classic yet modern feeling. Both parent and child have dark hair and skin the white of the page; background characters are diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.) A cautionary tale about overreliance on devices that’s sure to be the apple of many readers’ eyes. (Picture book. 5-8)

THE ENCHANTED LIFE OF VALENTINA MEJÍA
Alessandri, Alexandra
Atheneum (224 pp.) $17.99 | Feb. 21, 2023 978-1-66591-705-6

Valentina has grown up with Papi’s fantastical stories of Colombian monsters and magic. Now she’s 12, she thinks the stories are a bit outlandish. When she and her brother, Julián, accompany their dad on a hunt in the Colombian Andes for la patasola—a vampiric demon woman with one leg—the siblings become separated from their dad by a sudden earthquake that leaves him gravely injured. They find themselves in a world beneath their own, one that’s similar to Colombia but filled with the mythical creatures from the stories they
grew up with. This world is unwelcoming to humans, and they must travel to find Madremonte, the ruler of the land, to convince her to help them before it’s too late. In this story skillfully infused with Colombian folklore, Julián and Valentina encounter a variety of beings, including la mano peluda, a hairy hand that lurks beneath children's beds; duendes, or trickster elves; and el mohán, who has the power to bewitch you. A terrifying encounter with el silbón, a harbinger of death, has Valentina running for her life, and she'll need all the bravery she can muster to save her captured brother, reunite her family, and unravel the mystery of Madremonte's discontent. With the action beginning on the first page, this fast-paced adventure set in a well-realized world will keep readers on their toes.

Modern kids meet traditional tales with thrilling results. (Adventure. 8-12)

Ready for adventure? Egg-cellent!
Returning from a shopping trip, a tan-skinned family of four brings home Humphrey Dumpty, an egg whose “greatest dream is to become an egg-splorer, just like my grandfather,” the legendary Humpty Dumpty. But Humphrey is fragile and well aware of that fact, despite attempts to toughen up by sword fighting with a spoon and testing their mettle by spending time in the freezer. Sadly, neither exercise proves fruitful. When Humphrey tries to find a quiet space to think of a new plan, their wanderings lead them to a bath—one that most readers will identify as a pot of water on the stove. Soaking for a bit, Humphrey emerges triumphant—as a hard-boiled egg! With this new, slightly stronger form (as the other eggs note, “You are still easy to crack. So please be careful”), Humphrey can finally set out to explore...just as the book ends. Readers may be frustrated with the meandering plot that comes to a stop just as the real action seems ready to begin. The loose, colorful illustrations, reminiscent of Chris Raschka’s art, try to lift the plot but can only do so much. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Appealing visuals can’t make up for a less egg-citing storyline. (Picture book. 4-8)
In anticipation of Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Year’s, I’ve been revisiting some of my favorites from our roundup of holiday books, among them Latkes and Applesauce: A Hanukkah Story (Charlesbridge, Sept. 27) by Fran Manushkin, illustrated by Kris Ensler. This cozy tale follows a family who finds joy on Hanukkah despite heavy snows that prevent them from eating the culinary treats traditionally shared during this holiday. I adore this book and hope families read it together this season, but an insightful Twitter thread from author and librarian Susan Kusel has me considering the imbalance when it comes to books on Jewish holidays: There are comparatively so many more books on Hanukkah, a relatively minor holiday, and so few on the more significant Jewish holidays.

Kusel, author of The Passover Guest (2021) and a librarian at Temple Rodef Shalom Library, in Falls Church, Virginia, would like to see more books spotlighting Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day in Judaism. In that Twitter thread, she invited readers to “consider what it would be like if every year, every publisher released dozens of new books on President’s Day. While there were only three out-of-print books in existence on Christmas. While your patrons kept asking for Christmas books.”

Kusel recently gave me a virtual tour of her library via Zoom. In the sections devoted to holidays, Hanukkah books dominated, followed by Passover books—both holidays are often lumped in with, respectively, Christmas and Easter. By contrast, her library has far fewer books on Yom Kippur—as well as other holidays such as Rosh Hashana, Sukkot, and Purim. Kusel emphasizes that there are books about these holidays—indeed, she buys every book she can find on them—but not as many as there could be. Looking over the library’s catalog of Yom Kippur books, for instance, she pulled up just 13 offerings, many of them 20 or 30 years old. Meanwhile, she has more than 200 titles on Hanukkah.

Kusel has over 30 Purim-related books and wishes for many more, as parents often reject some of them. Because the story of Purim involves a character being hanged, it can be difficult to find titles appropriate for young children. “The parents will go through these and [say], ‘Have you seen what’s in these books?’ I know there’s got to be a little more child-friendly way to tell the story.”

The lack of books, Kusel says, has an impact on perceptions of Jewish holidays. “What happens is, one, a lot of people reading these books think that Hanukkah is incredibly significant. And two, they end up not knowing anything about the other Jewish holidays.”

Though there are exceptions, many of the existing books on major Jewish holidays are from small or Jewish-focused presses. But, Kusel says, big publishers, with their larger budgets for distribution and marketing, are especially well positioned to release these titles—and it’s more likely books from larger presses will find an audience, she adds.

However, it can be difficult for authors to sell books on other Jewish holidays. Kusel’s agent, Rena Rossner, never knows for sure why a book is rejected by a publisher. But, she tells me, “I have tried to sell three picture books about Rosh Hashana and a few others that centered other Jewish holidays (like Purim, Shavuot, Sukkot) and was also unsuccessful with those. But I did recently sell both Hanukkah and Passover projects.”

While Kusel believes it’s crucial for Jewish children to see their holidays reflected in their literature, she wants to move away from the assumption that books on Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashana would be niche titles, of interest only to a Jewish audience. Public and school librarian friends have approached her asking for recommendations of books on Yom Kippur because their non-Jewish patrons and students are curious about the holiday.
Nayra’s world starts to shift. Presenting a slice of life with a tinge of magic, the story’s overall mellow tone is heightened by the color palette’s deep jewel tones. The images are simple and attractive and represent aspects of Nayra’s identity, such as praying with Marjan. Nayra makes decisions that are frustrating but relatable, as her focus on wanting something new leads her to neglect the good parts of her life. Marjan represents all the things Nayra wishes her life could be—mythical and larger than life—at a time when she can’t seem to control anything around her. Nayra has light brown skin and dark hair; Rami is blond with light skin.

Fresh and interesting. (Graphic fantasy. 10-14)

BE HAPPY
A Little Book of Mindfulness
Bard, Maddy
Illus. by Emma Dodd
Templar/Candlewick (24 pp.)
$14.99 | March 7, 2023
978-1-5362-2976-9

Two adorable pups have much to teach, if we listen.

Fluffy, white Hucky and squat little nugget Buzz are best friends who spend their days filled with contemplative, deliberate actions in order to be more present. Fourteen bolded suggestions throughout the book (“Be Thankful,” “Show Love,” “Talk to Someone”) gently walk readers through the basics of mindfulness. On a page labeled “Be Happy,” for instance, we’re told that the canines “love to run in the park and feel the grass under their paws.” On another spread, readers learn that Hucky and Buzz also like to breathe deeply. We see each doggo lying on the grass with a paw on their stomach, feeling the slow rise and fall of their breath. The canines encourage readers to notice what is happening around them and listen to their emotions. They also cheer readers on; a double-page spread shows the two friends intrepidly crossing a rope bridge (“With self-confidence, you can do amazing things!”). Questions posed to readers offer an extra layer of engagement (“What do you like to do?” “What are you thankful for?” “What are some of the ways you keep busy?”). Dodd’s signature illustrations, outlined in thick black lines, are set against simple, uncluttered backgrounds and bring the pups to vivid, endearing life. (This book was reviewed digitally)

An appealing primer on mindfulness for the youngest set. (Picture book. 3-6)

Indeed, several of the books I’ve seen this year on Jewish holidays are brimming with appeal whether readers view them as mirrors or windows, to borrow Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop’s phrasing. Jen Halpern’s The Stars Will Be My Nightlight: A Sukkot Story, illustrated by Chiara Fedele (Kar-Ben, Aug. 1), is both a story rooted in cultural traditions and a reassuring tale of familial bonding as a boy and his mother spend the night in their sukkah. Measuring a Year: A Rosh Hashanah Story by Linda Elovitz Marshall, illustrated by Zara González Hoang (Abrams Applesauce, Aug. 16), gently helps young readers conceptualize both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, while Awe-Some Days: Poems About the Jewish Holidays by Marilyn Singer, illustrated by Dana Wulfeckitte (Dial Books, Sept. 6), deftly blends verse with informational text for an insightful look at the Jewish calendar.

Kusel notes that she is part of an interfaith family and reads Chris Van Allsburg’s The Polar Express (1985) with her children each year. She believes that books on Jewish holidays may well resonate with kids of other cultures, too, and hopes that publishers will begin to take a chance on them. “The thing that we hear a lot is that the only people who are going to buy these books are Jews,” she says. “And Jews do not make up a huge number of the population. But, on the other hand, if we had amazing, beautifully produced, terrific books, how do we know that no one’s going to buy them?”

Mahnaz Dar is a young readers’ editor.
TWENTY QUESTIONS
Barnett, Mac
Illus. by Christian Robinson
Candlewick (40 pp.)
$17.99 | March 14, 2023
978-1-5362-1513-7

Broad questions will spark discussion among readers.

Barnett opens with a question common to children’s books: “How many animals can you see in this picture?” The charming, bright green tree, surrounded by drawn, painted, and collaged animals, might be the only reason a child obediently gives a bored answer and turns the page. The next spread stumbles with its abrupt, sinister humor: “As an orange beast with sharp fangs and claws prowls among large green leaves, the text asks, “How many animals can you not see in this one, because they’re hiding from the tiger?” Each succeeding page is totally independent from the others, with a fresh new question or questions presented in large, bold, black print and vibrant artwork. Each spread creates its own world, inviting readers to discuss—either orally or in writing—their own answers. A humorous vein runs through the book, but other emotions are also evoked, including poignancy. One off note: The absurdity of pressuring readers to decide which of two men has “a better singing voice” by seeing them—not hearing them—may be lost behind the racial overtones, as one man is decidedly pink-faced and the other brown-faced. The clever, attractive final spread—poster-worthy—manages to be both open-ended and final. Humans depicted are diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Quirky entertainment to jump-start creativity. (Picture book. 4-8)

BUSY FEET
Berneger, Marcia
Illus. by Susanna Chapman
Starry Forest (24 pp.)
$14.99 | Feb. 14, 2023
978-1-951784-10-2

A day in the life of several active kids as told through their tireless feet.

Little ones are shown climbing and sliding on the playground, visiting the beach, and scrubbing up in the tub, all through images that focus on their active, busy legs, feet, and toes. Berneger’s rhyming text makes for a fun, buoyant read-aloud. There is a reference to a classic nursery rhyme with the phrase “Dizzy feet all fall down!” along with repetitive opposites like in and out and hot and cold, making it a perfect fit for toddler and preschool readers. Chapman’s illustrations capture joyful, childlike movement. One particularly beautiful spread shows two children on a tire swing, gleefully midtwirl. There are bright, eye-catching colors on every page, from bold reds and oranges to pinks and vibrant blues. Polka dots, plaid, and stripes appear on clothing and in the background, adding to the story’s sense of movement. There are two children who anchor the images, one with dark brown skin, the other pale and freckled. The story celebrates movement of all kinds, including through an illustration of a child using a wheelchair who is shown zipping along, ball in lap. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A bouncy, exuberant read as playful as its target audience. (Picture book 2-4)

THE NIGHT FROLIC
Berry, Julie
Illus. by Jaime Zollars
Little, Brown (48 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 28, 2023
978-0-316-59183-6

A fantasy answering the question of where kids go when they sleep.

Pajama-clad children ride ribbons of wispy night breezes to the “high den of the Night Tiger,” a large, Cheshire cat-like creature (who has proportions more akin to a plump house cat than a threatening tiger), before beginning their journey through the night world. The Night Tiger is just the first of the fantastical, oversized animals—who have rounded bodies and luminescent eyes—with which the sleeping children dance and play across full-page spreads in twilight and jewel tones. Finally, at the height of the merriment, the frolic wakes “the Old Serpent that encircles the world,” who gently sends the children and creatures alike to bed, so as to wake them again in the golden morning. Readers will enjoy spotting the protagonists’ little white dog in the scenes. Spare text allows illustrations to take center stage. The high level of detail begs readers to study each image. Although sometimes crowded with characters, the art is composed with sizes and proportions in mind, using spacing to maintain clarity, and an awareness of the book’s gutter so as to make sure no delicious detail is lost. The many children depicted are diverse, pajamas helping to identify reoccurring children; the characters most closely followed have brown skin and brown curls. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A dream come true for readers seeking a new bedtime story. (Picture book 4-9)

RABBIT, DUCK, AND BIG BEAR
Brun-Cosme, Nadine
Illus. by Olivier Tallec
Random House Studio (40 pp.)
978-0-593-48698-6

A trio of friends are inseparable mostly.

Rabbit, Duck, and Big Bear do everything together, from dancing and singing to playing and celebrating. But for all their fun activities, they always avoid the “long, winding path” that
snakes off into a darker part of the woods. There’s always a reason not to go down the path: It’s too narrow for them to walk together; they’re too tired; the path is too muddy in the autumn. This tactic works well until one day, while ice skating, Rabbit overshoots her stop and goes skating down the path alone. When she finally stops, she’s at the base of a gigantic fir tree. Duck and Big Bear run after her, and some secrets about the tree and its peaceful aura are revealed to both Rabbit and readers. This winning story about the importance of quiet places to reflect on life is enhanced greatly by pencil and acrylic illustrations that capture movement and expression in every stroke. Storytellers looking to introduce concepts of meditation or the need for alone time will make the most of this, but the narrative’s humor and heart will appeal to anyone simply looking for an engaging tale. (This book was reviewed digitally)

As sublime as sitting under a magnificent fir tree in quiet contemplation. (Picture book. 4-8)

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**GALÁPAGOS**

**Islands of Change**

Bulion, Leslie

Illus. by Becca Stadtlander

Peachtree (48 pp.)

$18.99 | March 21, 2023

9781682634967

The creators of *Serengeti: Plains of Grass* (2022) profile another distinctive locale and its unique wildlife in poems and pictures.

In a prose introduction to the archipelago’s origins and ecosystem, Bulion refers to “challenges” caused by the arrival of humans and picks up the theme with closing observations, also in prose, about climate change. In between, she devotes verses in a range of forms and comments in smaller type to natural creatures and features, from quiet “La garúa,” the sea mist that “sifts across the islands’ highlands, / catching tip-top branches of giant daisy trees,” to lively “Galápagos Penguins”: “With upward chase, they make a pass / at picking from the twisting mass / of
rich sardines or tasty mullets, / open bills, then (gulp) down gullets!” Along with giant tortoises and tiny phytoplankton, both marine and land iguanas pose fetchingly in Stadtlander’s rocky, unspoiled settings, while blue-footed, red-footed, and Nazca boobies turn out their webbed toes for examination, and six types of the finches that Darwin observed parade past, displaying their distinctively shaped beaks. Each animal is identified in the backmatter, and, in a set of analytical appended notes, so is the form of each poem. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An amiable excursion, literary as well as scientific. (glossary, map, organizations devoted to the Galápagos, further reading, websites, species list) (Informational poetry. 7-11)
to life as they honor ancestors who have made significant contributions to the world. Bold phrases appear throughout, encouraging young readers to “WALK TALL” or “SPEAK PEACE AND SEEK JUSTICE.” The historical figures are named on the page they appear on, and the book concludes with further information on these individuals, each accompanied by a joyful portrait. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

A reminder to Black children that they are capable of greatness. *(Informational picture book. 4-7)*

**YOU BE GRANDMA**

*Clark, Karla*  
*Illus. by Addy Rivera Sonda*  
*Feiwel & Friends (32 pp.)*  
*$18.99 | March 14, 2023*  
*9781250814364*

Sometimes even adults need a little extra bedtime spoiling.

Today was a busy day for this very active grandmother. She taught yoga and Pilates, returned books, shopped, cleaned, and spent time with her grandchild: playing cards, supervising violin practice, singing karaoke, dancing...the list goes on and on! Grandma is yawning and starting to pout from fatigue. Her hip aches, and she hopes her grandchild can “be Grandma” by taking charge of their bedtime rituals: massaging Grandma’s neck, scratching her back, giving her a hug, preparing a bedtime snack, making shadow puppets on the wall, reading “a story—not once, but twice,” and wishing on the stars for sweet dreams. Though Grandma asks the little one to assume the adult role, illustrations show Grandma guiding the activities and the child initiating age-appropriate actions like turning off the lights. When the child is too tired to be the grandmother, Grandma stretches and puts the little one to bed with a kiss and a promise to “love you wherever you are.” Rhyming couplets create a soothing bedtime story accompanied by detailed illustrations in soft colors that exude calm as they capture the pair’s joyful relationship. Grandma wears large blue glasses and has short curly gray hair, and the child has dark brown hair cut in a chin-length bob. Both are brown-skinned. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

A reassuring nighttime read featuring a playful role reversal. *(Picture book. 3-6)*

**THE TOWN WITH NO MIRRORS**

*Collins, Christina*  
*Sourcebooks Young Readers (304 pp.)*  
*$16.99 | Feb. 21, 2023*  
*978-1-4926-5535-0*

Twelve-year-old Zailey is curious about the world outside her town. At a very young age, Zailey moved with her grandmother to Gladder Hill, an experimental community that demonizes the Superficial: Children are told tales about the mirror demon, words relating to physical appearance are banned, and authorities go to extreme lengths to keep all reflective surfaces out, even pumping oxygen into the water to keep it cloudy. As an artist with an eidetic memory and a fascination with drawing faces, Zailey feels guilty over her secret sketchbook of portraits and fears it could get her and her grandmother evicted. When a classmate discovers it and confesses that he too wonders what his face looks like, they bond over

**AMANI**

*Collins, Christina*  
*Sourcebooks Young Readers*  
*$16.99 | Feb. 21, 2023*  
*978-1-4926-5537-4*

“The New York-based co-authors do an excellent job of casting Amani as a hero who learns about keeping his teeth clean in order to defeat monsters...”

“Dr. Kersh’s patient approach, focusing on clarity, setting expectations, and navigating Amani’s sensory sensitivities may comfort children afraid of visiting the dentist for the first time.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

For Agent Representation and Information on Film Rights, Email jamiylsamuels775@gmail.com • tjsamuels775@gmail.com  
TheAmazinglySensationalKids.com
their shared curiosity about the rest of the world. The first half of the book plods along, slowly showing life in the community. In the second act, an accident gives Zailey a chance to escape and chase after a personal mystery of her own. On one hand, the second story arc is far more compelling, with greater tension. However, it’s built upon distracting implausibilities. Regrettably, the body image themes go underexplored and are never fully integrated into the plot. The conclusion relies on a deus ex machina that undermines the stakes. The town’s rules create a race-blind default (Zailey and her classmates don’t appear to know about the concept of race, although they notice one another’s physical differences).

Don’t go beyond face value. (author’s note, resources) (Speculative fiction. 9-14)

**FISH AND CRAB**

Coppo, Marianna

Chronicle Books (48 pp.)

$17.99 | March 14, 2023

978-1-79720-443-7

Fish’s fretting keeps roommate Crab up at night.

Crab and Fish live together in their cozy aquarium home. Crab is happy to sleep, turning off the light (resulting in a desaturated overlay) only for Fish, unable to sleep because of worries, to pipe up. Fish’s concerns range from the relatable (strange noises, unexpected animals, and contagious illness) to the outlandish (alien abduction, oversleeping into the future, and winding up in a parallel universe); the book even takes a dip into metafiction with the characters staring at readers as Fish asks, “WHAT IF WE ARE CHARACTERS IN A BOOK?” Finally, having voiced their anxieties, Fish relaxes and falls asleep, though these worries now keep Crab awake. This tale is told through minimalistic text, primarily dialogue. Things said by Crab are in bold. While the story, especially the twist at the end, isn’t terribly unexpected, the predictability that will inhibit rereadability for some will reassure others. The art is lineless, with colorful (excepting the lights-off pages) shapes, as the clean, sans-serif font, resulting in a cohesive feel (though some stark-white backgrounds undermine the nighttime premise). (This book was reviewed digitally)

Silly what-if questions arranged into a light but visually appealing bedtime story. (Picture book. 4-7)

**SOMETHING**

One Small Thing Can Make a Difference

Creech, Natalie

Illus. by Pablo Pino

WorthyKids/Ideals (32 pp.)

$17.99 | Feb. 7, 2023

978-1-5460-0287-1

Children are natural helpers. Told in bouncy rhymes, this upbeat book urges readers to do *something*—well, various somethings—to demonstrate kindness, helpfulness, compassion, and neighborliness. “Others,” the book suggests, include relatives, friends, neighbors, members of one’s community, and animals. Kids are reminded that tuning in to one’s “kindness radar” doesn’t require being an adult or having money; children can display empathy and goodwill in simple, no-cost ways and by being observant and creative. The old adage “it’s the thought that counts” is the point—provided the empathic thought is backed up with generosity. Easy, doable examples include helping “an older person water plants or get the mail,” welcoming newcomers to the neighborhood, raking leaves, and washing someone’s car. Some examples of kindness aren’t so easy—or credibly—accomplished by children, however: e.g., setting up a sidewalk adoption station for abandoned pets. Adults sharing this cheery volume should encourage youngsters to volunteer ideas for ways they can be helpful. There’s a Christian slant here: An excerpt from the book of Matthew precedes the opening spread, and references to God and Jesus appear within the text, so this title will be welcome in Christian and Sunday school libraries. The colorful, lively illustrations and occasional, playful variations in font are appealing; background characters demonstrate diversity in skin tone, age, and body shape. (This book was reviewed digitally)

A chipper reminder that something can add up to a whole lot. (Picture book. 4-8)

**QUIET TIME WITH MY SEEYA**

Dabarera, Dinalie

Roaring Brook Press (40 pp.)

$18.99 | March 7, 2023

9781250824271

When it comes to grandparents and their grandchildren, love transcends language.

A child of Sri Lankan descent explains that the time they spend with their seeya (the Sinhalese word for grandfather) is “quiet,” primarily because the two speak different languages. Luckily, the pair’s commonalities more than make up for this difference. Together, they play dress-up, water the flowers in the garden, and cook traditional Sri Lankan food. Things aren’t perfect: Seeya isn’t great at video games, and when the two cook and then eat together, they always make a mess. When each character reads aloud in their own language, it’s clear that

“The story’s specificity imbues it with an intimate authenticity that immigrant families in particular will appreciate.”

QUIET TIME WITH MY SEEYA
NEVER GIVE UP

Dr. Kati Karikó and the Race for the Future of Vaccines

Dadey, Debbie
Illus. by Juliana Oakley
Millbrook/Lerner (40 pp.)
$21.99 | March 7, 2023
978-1-72845-633-1

The inspiring story of a passionate scientist whose persistence pays off.

A childhood on a farm in a Hungarian village might not seem a promising path to immunological fame, but Kati Karikó (b. 1955) strides undeterred toward her dreams. Her curiosity is empowering, and she knows that discipline (like choosing the Science Olympics over a vacation) is nonnegotiable. Asking unexpected questions, she embarks on a long-shot quest: enabling bodies to heal themselves via messenger RNA. Other (male) scientists deride the goal, but she is not discouraged, even when it means personal sacrifice. A chance meeting suggests a new approach, and it works. Karikó takes her research to BionTech. Then Covid-19 breaks out, but Pfizer/BioNTech are able to quickly make millions of doses of reliable vaccine thanks to Karikó’s unswerving focus: “Making one small change could have a huge impact.” The restrained but realistic illustrations use lots of matte color, subtle linework, changes of perspective, and clever layout to provide visual interest and convey complex information. Quotes from Karikó and others in her field—including Anthony Fauci—are interspersed throughout. Karikó is White; background characters are diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An engaging look at scientific dedication and the timely development of effective vaccines. (timeline, vaccine-development stages, author’s note, glossary, source notes, further study) (Informational picture book. 6-10)
life more challenging for these animals, and as the youngsters return home, they travel “over ocean, where plastic clogs the waves; back over land...where fires burn and, everywhere, signs show the world is getting warmer.” The lesson on time zones and how the world’s animals spend their time becomes an ode to Earth Day, complete with protest signs, which muddies the book’s sense of exploration. It’s hard to argue with the message, but the wondrous sights, depicted in Desmond’s enchanting mixed-media illustrations with colors that pop, seem dulled by the environmental pitch. Wordy backmatter—including notes from the author and artist and information on climate change—tells rather than shows. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Beautifully illustrated and well meaning, if a bit heavy-handed. (Informational picture book: 6-9)

NO ONE OWNS THE COLORS

Darcy, Gianna
Illus. by Brenda Rodriguez
The Collective Book Studio (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Feb. 7, 2023
978-1-951412-96-8

A rhyming text about colors and genders.

“If pink is for girls,” this book begins, “then it’s also for squirrels, because no one owns the colors.” The following assertion, “They say blue is for boys? / Well that just annoys, / because no one owns the colors,” sets up 28 similar pages, explaining how colors ranging from chartreuse to mocha to fuchsia all exist in nature but not within strict human gender binaries. Children are provided with scripts for how to respond if anyone tries to convince them otherwise, but it’s cringe-inducing to imagine a young person responding to a bully with “Do ocean waves argue / with sky over blue? Do chameleons / then it’s also for squirrels, because no one owns the colors.” The unceasingly chipper tone, faulty meter, and relentless march of colors make this an exhausting read-aloud and, if shared among children with no preconceived notions about colors and gender, might even introduce bias rather than remove it. Rodriguez’s illustrations center on a tan-skinned child; other characters are diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A less than successful effort to get readers rethinking assumptions about colors; look at a nice rainbow instead. (Picture book: 3-7)

BIRDS EVERYWHERE

de la Bedoyere, Camilla
Illus. by Britta Teckentrup
Big Picture Press (32 pp.)
$17.99 | March 7, 2023
978-1-5362-2973-8

There are birds everywhere, but what’s a bird?

Defining birds as creatures that have beaks, two wings, and feathers, this colorful collection is the fourth of an ongoing series; bugs, fish, and reptiles came before, and mammals are on the way. The format is appealing. Each spread covers a distinct topic, sometimes with a large variety of differing examples, sometimes focusing on one species or activity. The author focuses on the barn owl to describe the habits of raptors, penguins for child rearing, and Arctic terns for migration. (The clever design emphasizes the tern’s long-distance voyage by requiring the reader to turn the book vertically to read that spread.) Besides the interesting facts, most spreads include an invitation to take a more careful look, with a seek-and-find puzzle or guessing game. Informative text appears in short blocks printed on an illustrative background, sometimes with lines or arrows to help readers figure out what to read next. Topics include bird anatomy, descent from dinosaurs, habitats, feathers and flight, courtship, nesting, migration, and the relationship between birds and humans. Unusually, the author distinguishes possible prehistoric ancestors of songbirds, waterbirds, and raptors. In conclusion, she tells readers how to do some bird-watching themselves. There are no sources or suggestions for further research, but the writer’s many previous natural history titles show her longtime engagement with the subject. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An inviting, accessible, information-filled package. (Informational picture book: 7-10)

THE BIG STING

Delaney, Rachelle
Tundra Books (224 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
9780735269309

A story full of mystery, adventure, and personal challenges that will have readers buzzing.

Eleven-year-old Leo and his younger sister, Lizzie, are staying with their maternal grandfather on Heron Island, British Columbia, after the recent passing of their grandmother. Originally Leo’s parents were also staying there, but when a booking opens at an exclusive nearby spa, Leo’s city-loving father seizes the opportunity to go somewhere with reliable Wi-Fi under the pretense that the kids’ mom needs to unwind from her stressful job. Leo and Lizzie stay with their grandfather, a choice that ultimately proves to be vital when the farm’s 12 beehives are stolen. The hives originally belonged to Grandma, but after
“A dog and a girl add up to a warm story that all humans will appreciate.”

A HUMAN FOR KINGSLEY

THE NO-DIG CHILDREN’S GARDENING BOOK
Easy and Fun Family Gardening
Dowding, Charles
Illus. by Kristyna Litten
Welbeck Children’s (64 pp.)
$16.95 | Jan. 17, 2023
9781783129195

A call to action for young readers to be allies and enact change.

The unrelenting news cycle can negatively impact youngsters, as shown by diverse children responding with fear and sadness on the first pages of this book. But activism starts early, and, together and individually, they find ways to push back. By looking out for each other, attending rallies, sharing resources, and creating artwork, these children learn how to be allies—defined in various ways, including “standing up if you see someone being treated unfairly.” Books that convey strong messages of solidarity and social justice are important, but this title is hampered by rather simplistic illustrations that depict actions without fully explaining the meanings or purposes behind them. On one spread, a brown-skinned child is seen dropping money into a box on a table with a “Donate here” sign, but there is no indication of what they’re donating to or how they’re helping to effect change. Another scene shows a brown-skinned child comforting a brown-skinned hijabi who has experienced bullying (portrayed as a group of unspecified hands pointing at the youngster)—an underdeveloped moment that doesn’t convey how challenging it can be to stand up in the face of oppression. An array of people who represent intersecting areas of diversity, including disability, are depicted. (This book was reviewed digitally)

An introduction to activism and allyship that falls short of inspiring. (author’s note) (Picture book. 5-7)

When mulch and compost replace digging, gardening becomes easier for kids and better for the soil.

This ambitious, attractively presented book encourages children to become not only gardeners, but also nature observers, scientists, and data collectors. Comprehensible and enthusiastically but very briefly presented information is sometimes inadequate. We aren’t told exactly how to build compost enclosures from old pallets, how deep compost in a garden bed needs to be, how to tell when compost is mature, or how far apart to space zucchini and tomato plants (the same spacing is used for all the vegetables in the demo bed). The book is U.K.-centric, and some advice needs checking. Frost dates will vary, and composting bones is discouraged by the Environmental Protection Agency and might attract rats. Little help for the urbanite can be found. Purchased compost and mulch can be costly. Still, there is a lot of cheering-on and an upbeat, can-do tone throughout. The book advocates for school gardening, market gardening, and gardening as a family and offers suggestions for encouraging children with ADHD or who are autistic to garden. A sensory garden, “easy flowers,” and ways to attract wildlife are described. Abundant color photos brighten every page, and the layout is chock-full but clear. Individuals in the photos are mostly White-presenting; those in the illustrations are diverse.

Adults with the resources and climate to use this book can glean ideas for engaging children. (websites, index) (Nonfiction. 7-10)

A HUMAN FOR KINGSLEY

Evans, Gabriel
Little Hare/Trafalgar (32 pp.)
$17.99 | March 14, 2023
978-1-76050-691-9

A dog wants to own a human.

Kingsley, a large, brown, bushy-faced pooch, discovers that this isn’t an easy goal to accomplish. There are so many humans to choose from, and they’re all different. He finds some who seem compatible, but they’re just not quite right. Then he spots a tan-skinned, curly-haired girl. He follows her home, and the girl lets him in. Kingsley observes her “perplexing habits” closely, and while she’s not overly enthused about him, she begins to thaw. In time, Kingsley realizes he likes this human but is unsure if she’s the right one. He goes off to think about what he really wants in a human—and to consider whether he wants a human at all. In the end, the girl helps Kingsley decide. Children will be gratified by the touching conclusion to this Australian import that explores feelings and relationships. Grown-ups sharing this tender story might help children volunteer their own experiences making new friends. Personalities are elicited well: An unseen narrator

her death, Grandpa learned how to keep bees, and he is desperate to get them back. The trio embark on an adventure to discover the culprit, learning more about each other along the way. A subplot in which Leo is distressed about his results from an online personality test matching users with career paths that his father constantly talks about is nicely woven into the story, demonstrating how labels can limit people as well as define them. Readers who love adventure will enjoy the overall plot, but while the mystery is solved—and Delaney plays fair with the clues—the pacing will make it difficult for armchair sleuths to discover who stole the hives before the grand denouement. The overall story makes up for this minor shortcoming, however. Main characters read White.

A sweetly engaging novel exploring family relationships. (Fiction. 8-12)
“Three toots for an intrepid hero who conquers embarrassment with aplomb.”

**TOBY TOOTLES**

“The pancake problem.”

**THE PANCAKE PROBLEM**

Fergus, Maureen

Illus. by Alexandra Bye

Tundra Books (48 pp.)

$12.99 | Jan. 24, 2023

9780735267947

Series: Weenie Featuring Frank and Beans, 2

Slow-witted but sweet Weenie the dachshund’s hunger creates chaos for him and his pals, sarcastic Frank the cat and gentle Beans the guinea pig.

Weenie is hungry (actually, he’s famished), but his owner Bob’s No. 1 rule is “Never, ever, ever wake Bob up early on the weekend.” (Bob’s No. 2 rule is “Always follow Bob’s number one rule.”) Confused, Weenie decides to wake Bob to explain the rules, except…Bob isn’t in his bed. There’s just a Bob-shaped lump that sounds and smells like their owner. Weenie is positive the lump is a monster that has eaten Bob. Fortunately, it turns out the lump is Bob…but after a rude awakening, he’s unwilling to make Weenie pancakes, so Weenie turns to his invention, the Supersonic Pancake Maker. However, the machine makes Brussel sprouts instead, and Weenie, Frank, and Beans are barded by the veggies—unfortunately, Weenie didn’t invent an off switch. The trio’s efforts to dispose of the smelly sprouts fail hilariously, but all’s well that ends well. Ideal for budding readers, this quick-moving, action-packed graphic novel features exaggerated cartoonish illustrations. Text density varies (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Three toots for an intrepid hero who conquers embarrassment with aplomb. (Picture book. 3-7)

**Toby tootles**

Gibault, Stephanie

Illus. by Mary Sullivan

Sleeping Bear Press (32 pp.)

$18.99 | March 15, 2023

9781534111790

“Gas happens!”

Birthday boy Toby, a white rabbit, is in full celebration mode and ready to blow out his candles when something happens: He blows from the wrong end. His friends—a menagerie of animals—laugh and his sister calls him Toby Tootles. Humiliated, Toby spends time with his grandmother, a gray and white rabbit, and observes her having a few gassy gaffes herself. Unlike Toby, Grandma isn’t concerned and tells him that “gas happens.” When the pair are eating out at the end of the day, Toby needs to break wind once again and, remembering Grandma’s advice, takes it in stride this time. A note from the author reminds readers that embarrassing moments happen to everyone and what matters is how we respond to them. Etiquette-minded caregivers and educators may be annoyed that Toby and Grandma don’t excuse themselves when passing gas, but even the most adamant advocates for proper manners will have to agree that the story is pretty darn cute. The illustrations are largely to thank for this, as the round-bodied characters have expressive faces that perfectly capture their emotions, especially Toby’s self-consciousness when toots are fired. The simple message is one that readers of all ages should embrace. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Three toots for an intrepid hero who conquers embarrassment with aplomb. (Picture book. 3-7)

**Not an easy win**

Giles, Chrystal D.

Random House (256 pp.)

$16.99 | $19.99 PLB | Feb. 28, 2023

978-0-593-17521-7

978-0-593-17522-4 PLB

After getting expelled from Andrew Jackson Middle School after getting in another fight with his bullies, 12-year-old Lawrence finds friendship, community, and healing in an unexpected space.

Lawrence’s family has had a “double dose of hard lately.” Pop is in jail again, and Lawrence, his mother, and his little sister have left Charlotte to move in with their no-nonsense Granny in her small North Carolina town to make ends meet. Lawrence feels that everything going wrong is his fault. Granny has made it clear that he can’t just sit around in front of the TV, so he ends up helping out at a local recreation center and spending time in an after-school program run by Mr. Dennis, Granny’s neighbor. There, Lawrence finally meets other kids who are Black, just like him, including Twyla and Deuce, a boy who doesn’t seem to want Lawrence around, though Mr. Dennis says they are very much alike. At the center, Lawrence is introduced to chess, “a game for thinkers,” and it helps him develop tools for mastering his emotions and a framework for considering how he’s been reacting to bullying and other events in his life. The characters are multidimensional and authentic: Complex issues, including poverty, parental incarceration, and racism, are explored with sensitivity, offering readers opportunities for reflection. Giles skillfully illustrates the nuances and cultural tensions that arise in multigenerational homes and masterfully captures the origins, cadences, and mannerisms common to many African American elders with compassion.

Stellar. (author’s note) (Fiction. 10-13)
The illustrations, however, all double-page spreads in rather wishy-washy illustrations. (information on supernovas, photo) (Informational picture book. 3-8)

The supernova of 1054 C.E. is illuminated.

In 1054 C.E., a light brighter than any star was seen. The book implies that we know about this phenomenon today because it was noted and recorded in China (though this isn't explicitly stated in the text). The light from the supernova eventually faded from sight. Centuries later, the telescope was invented, allowing astronomers to extend their vision into deep space. And what they saw was a large mass of gas and dust that they named the Crab Nebula for its resemblance to the crustacean. Turns out, the Crab Nebula consists of the remains of the supernova of 1054. Using simple language, Gladstone competently explains this phenomenon—from its sighting nearly 1,000 years ago to its rediscovery as a nebula—although inquisitive readers may be left with unanswered questions: Why don't all stars end up as supernovas? How do elements in the exploding stars contribute to life? This is not necessarily an omission, since the wonder and awe inspired by the supernova may spur children to further explore the topic.

The illustrations, however, all double-page spreads in rather unexciting colors, have a mostly unvaried, straight-on perspective that doesn't do much to enhance the narrative. Though characters in earlier scenes are Chinese, those in later ones are diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A simple introduction to a fascinating topic but with rather wishy-washy illustrations. (information on supernovas, photo) (Informational picture book. 3-8)

A STAR EXPLODES
The Story of Supernova 1054
Gladstone, James
Illus. by Yasara Eshet
Owlkids Books (32 pp.)
$18.95 | March 14, 2023
978-1-77147-498-6

The story peppered with insightful and funny commentary. (Fiction. 7-10)

HOW TO HANDLE STRESS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL SUCCESS
Guerra, Silvi
Illus. by DeAndra Hodge
Magination/American Psychological Association (304 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 21, 2023
978-1-4338-3816-3
Series: Kid Confident, 3

A relatable young hero returns with another winsome story peppered with insightful and funny commentary. (Fiction. 7-10)

SEASON TWO
Grose, Miles
Illus. by Shaz Lym
Scholastic (160 pp.)
$17.99 paper | Jan. 3, 2023
978-1-338-76723-0
Series: The Tyrell Show, 2

Who should narrate your life story? As Tyrell Edwards makes his way through the world, he pretends to host a podcast in his head; he proves a delightful narrator as he shares the meandering, poignant, and sometimes irreverent thoughts that cascade through his mind. This tale finds Tyrell mulling the absence of his best friend, Boogie, who moved away a few months ago. But after serving his parents breakfast in bed and slipping them a couple fivers for their anniversary, Tyrell receives a surprise—over the break, he'll get to travel by airplane to spend a week with Boogie! Elated, Tyrell can't wait to have Boogie as a co-host on his “brain cast.” However, Boogie is less than enthusiastic about the upcoming trip, but Tyrell can’t figure out why—until the boys are reunited and Boogie eventually opens up about the difficulties he’s been having in his new neighborhood. This second book in the series charms, once more breaking up prose passages with expressive, comic-strip-style panels that show Tyrell imagining improbable scenarios, such as wishing he could frighten his big sister with the vacuum the same way he can scare his dog, Monty. Tyrell is everybody’s annoying younger brother but a lovable kid in spite of himself. Tyrell, his family, and Boogie all present as Black.

A relatable young hero returns with another winsome story peppered with insightful and funny commentary. (Fiction. 7-10)

KIRKUS.COM | CHILDREN’S | 15 DECEMBER 2022 | 145
Further difficulties ensued as Josephine attempted to start a washing stacks of dishes. Josephine’s mantra became “There must be a better way!” and, stirred to create a device that would end this onerous task, she studied past attempts, sketched, measured, calculated, tinkered, and designed, and began building the hand-cranked machine with the aid of George Butters, a mechanic and, later, her business partner. Her husband’s death called a halt for a long time as she slowly paid off debts. She then returned to her efforts and finally received a patent in 1886. Further difficulties ensued as Josephine attempted to start a manufacturing business, as investors would not back a woman. But when her dishwashing machine won first prize at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, she was on her way to great success and enhance the text with diagrams, sketches, and charming illustrations capture Josephine’s determination and emotions and enhance the text with diagrams, sketches, and charming homey details, including dishes and tools floating by. Cochrane was White; some background characters are diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A wonderfully realized introduction to a fascinating, long-overlooked woman. (author’s note, copy of patent, notable women inventors, photos, timeline of fascinating inventions, sources, picture credits) (Informational picture book. 8-11)

JOSEPHINE AND HER DISHWASHING MACHINE
Josephine Cochrane’s Bright Invention Makes a Splash
Hanigan, Kate
Illus. by Sarah Green
Calkins Creek/Astra Books for Young Readers (40 pp.)
$18.99 | March 14, 2023
978-1-63592-621-7

Josephine Cochrane saw a need and overcame obstacles to find a solution. She resented the time that was taken by the job of hand-washing stacks of dishes. Josephine’s mantra became “There must be a better way!” and, stirred to create a device that would end this onerous task, she studied past attempts, sketched, measured, calculated, tinkered, and designed, and began building the hand-cranked machine with the aid of George Butters, a mechanic and, later, her business partner. Her husband’s death called a halt for a long time as she slowly paid off debts. She then returned to her efforts and finally received a patent in 1886. Further difficulties ensued as Josephine attempted to start a manufacturing business, as investors would not back a woman. But when her dishwashing machine won first prize at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893, she was on her way to great success and enhance the text with diagrams, sketches, and charming illustrations capture Josephine’s determination and emotions and enhance the text with diagrams, sketches, and charming homey details, including dishes and tools floating by. Cochrane was White; some background characters are diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A wonderfully realized introduction to a fascinating, long-overlooked woman. (author’s note, copy of patent, notable women inventors, photos, timeline of fascinating inventions, sources, picture credits) (Informational picture book. 8-11)

UNSTOPPABLE US, VOLUME 1
How Humans Took Over the World
Harari, Yuval Noah
Illus. by Ricard Zaplana Ruiz
Bright Matter Books (208 pp.)
$24.99 | $27.99 PLB | Oct. 18, 2022
978-0-593-64346-4
978-0-593-64352-5 PLB

From the author of the adult title Sapiens (2015), an explanation of how physically weak humans came to dominate other animals.

Spoiler alert: It was through human inventiveness and storytelling. Harari’s lively, reader-directed prose and Ruiz’s expressive graphics will help young readers grasp an almost-unimaginably distant past, from the start of toolmaking up to (in this volume) Homo sapiens’ collaborative extinction of mammoths. The text is dramatically punctuated by large and small illustrations. Ingenious use of perspective, imaginative details, and relevance to the text make the artwork integral to this book’s appeal. Most of the illustrations depict cheerful, brown-skinned humans. Bolded sentences in different colors break up text blocks and point to big ideas and questions. Humor is effectively deployed, and concepts like evolution, DNA, and religion are compared to kid-adjacent phenomena (to help kids grapple with the idea of human cooperation, for instance, the author asks readers to imagine all the people, from students to teachers to cafeteria workers to the people who create textbooks, who make a school possible), connected to the next topic, and paced to appeal to middle-grade readers. When an answer isn’t known, Harari admits, “We don’t know.”

An enticingly depicted intro to human history and archaeology, simply expressed but extensive and engaging. (timeline, map, resources, index) (Nonfiction. 10-13)
“Hilarity and heart center this quirky story about a young hero quietly taking a stand.”

THE VERY DANGEROUS SISTERS OF INDIGO MCCLOUD

Indigo knows what it’s like to be the target of his older sister Peaches’ bullying, and when she victimizes their schoolmates, he must act.

Peaches is a master manipulator. With her younger sisters, Su, Root, and Berry, as henchmen, Peaches exploits her preys’ greatest fears unless they give her what she wants. In her underground lair, she cooks up retribution that involves dastardly accidents with geese, a venomous spider, and more. Their bizarre town with its oddball businesses, like Auntie Maggie’s Big Hairy Spider Emporium, provides Peaches with plenty of ammunition. Meanwhile, due to her cunning, the town’s inept adults believe Peaches is charming. It’s all comically over-the-top, but what rings most true are Indigo’s responses to the abuse. He can’t stand to see one more child reduced to a quivering shell. When Peaches threatens newcomer Mandy, Indigo resolves to help. Not by confronting Peaches—he’s too afraid for that. But from the rooftops where, with parkourlike agility, he can sabotage any trap. Well, almost any trap. Indigo hadn’t anticipated that Peaches would convince their father to send him away to be rehabilitated at the Blunt Home for Nasty Little Liars. A reckoning is overdue, and when it comes, readers will be cheering. The main cast reads White.

Hilarity and heart center this quirky story about a young hero quietly taking a stand. (Fiction. 8-12)

DEAR YESTERYEAR

Henderson opens by directly addressing “my dear yester-years whose presence never fades” in text rendered in a beautiful Cortford font next to an adorned frame highlighting a portrait of a Black couple circa 1865. That spread also features photos of a formerly enslaved man and a Black family on vacation in South Cheyenne Canyon, Colorado, as the author mentions how a once “stony...road” has now “paved the way I now call home.” The following spreads continue in that manner, with the author deftly pairing visuals with her carefully crafted text. As her letter delves into the past she’s imagined based on these photos, readers witness history through images that highlight Black achievements, joy, and resiliency. Henderson’s exploratory narration breathes new life into pictures from long ago that may inspire readers to delve into their own histories and discover more about who paved the way for them. The images take center stage, set against a dark background and often accented with frames, resulting in a book reminiscent of a photo album. An author’s note describing Henderson’s inspiration and her journey is included, followed by source information on the photographs. (This book was reviewed digitally)

An open letter to those who paved the way to a better future, featuring archival photos of Black Americans through history,

A heartfelt narrative that pays homage to the past. (Historical picture book. 6-10)

IN A PATCH OF GRASS

Director Steven Spielbug’s attempt to film a nature documentary goes badly awry.

Not even unflappable, six-limbed commentator David Antenborough can rescue the ground-level shoot as a fly nearly
"Sure to encourage budding young business owners to follow the protagonist’s example.”

COOLER THAN LEMONADE

interrupts Spielbug’s shot of the orb-weaver spider, the slug goes off script, the grasshopper hastily objects to being billed as “Nature’s great show-off,” the earthworm misses a cue, the robin calls in sick, and then, to top it all off, a looming canine nose (with dog attached) “wufff[es]” into view—sending the entire invertebrate cast and crew into panicked flight. But if, among all the chaos, observations about not only webs, legs, diets, and relatives of the bugs, spiders, and other wildlife typically seen in low, grassy habitats (“When this spider is ready to make a new web, it will eat this one and reuse the silk proteins”), but dogs, too, get delivered (with further detail provided in the closing credits), who’s to complain? And if Tavis equips his multispecies cartoon figures with bits of clothing and anthropomorphic features, the setting and its residents are still close enough to natural to be recognizable. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Slapstick science, anyone? It’s a wrap! (Informational picture book. 6-8)

NO NO, BABY!
Hunter, Anne
Tundra Books (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
9780735269118
Series: Baby Animals

Exuberance can’t be tamed for long. Baby Squirrel awakens each day full of vim and vigor. The little one loves greeting the other forest animals, eating, and leaping through the air—often to the other creatures’ chagrin. Baby Squirrel is undeterred by Bear’s “No no, Baby!” when they try to eat a mushroom and by the bird’s “No, no!” when Baby Squirrel hungrily eyes a nest full of eggs. When Baby Squirrel attempts to visit Owl’s tree-trunk home, an exhausted Owl yells, “No no, Baby! Go away!” Chastened, Baby Squirrel retreats to their hole and stays away the entire next day. When the animals seek out Baby Squirrel, they tell the little one how much they’ve been missed, and Baby Squirrel promises to see them in the morning. The day resumes, and so do all of Baby Squirrel’s joyful leaps. It’s a gentle story—one that’s greatly enhanced by the ballpoint pen and colored pencil illustrations—but perhaps one whose message may be too soft. While Owl hands Baby Squirrel a flower when they visit, there’s no apology, nor is there a discussion of respecting boundaries and personal spaces. It’s a shame because both are important lessons that need to be reinforced in young readers to help them learn and grow. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Beautiful but shaky. (Picture book. 4-6)

THE TREASURE TEST
Jagger, T.P.
Random House (336 pp.)
978-0-593-37797-0
978-0-593-37798-7 PLB
Series: Hide and Geek, 2

The GEEKs are back to solve an even harder puzzle. Sixth graders Gina, Edgar, Elena, and Kevin, or the GEEKs as they’ve been affectionately dubbed, are still riding high six months after they nabbed a criminal and discovered stolen treasure at Bamboozeland, an abandoned amusement park. Now plans are underway to restore and reopen the park, bringing visitors to their economically depressed town. The GEEKs are dumbfounded when the development company spearheading the renovation abruptly pulls the plug on the project, however, and they soon discover that a nasty rumor about the GEEKs is to blame. Nobody seems to care that the anonymous allegation that the GEEKs lied about finding the hidden loot is fake news. Kevin reminds the GEEKs, along with readers, “You know how powerful misinformation can be.” Now the team must use their considerable brain power to solve a new puzzle challenge in hopes that they can clear their names and discover the source of the false, mean-spirited rumors. Gina uses strategies like tracing a social media post back to the original source to help expose their nemesis. Along with a fast-paced plot and good-natured characters, an information literacy focus brings timely relevance to the story. Contextual clues point to ethnic diversity in the cast.

Friends work to unravel an entertaining mystery and prove that critical thinking wins the day. (Mystery. 9-13)

COOLER THAN LEMONADE
A Story About Great Ideas and How They Happen
Jethur, Harshita
Illus. by Chloe Burgett
Sourcebooks Jabberwocky (40 pp.)
$17.99 | March 7, 2023
978-1-72825-429-6

An entrepreneurial young girl of South Asian descent draws inspiration from her cultural heritage.

It’s summer, so Eva decides to set up a lemonade stand. After all, her head is always “swirling with ideas.” But competition arrives in the form of her neighbor Jake. Resourceful Eva comes up with new ideas (special flavors, flyers to spread the word), but nothing seems to work—Jake is always one step ahead of her. Despondent, Eva gives up, but when her little sibling, Aru, asks her to make kulfi, a frozen, milk-based treat, she’s struck once more by inspiration…and, this time, moved by the collaborative spirit. The text makes heavy use of repetition (each idea “snaps,” “sizzles,” and “sprouts!”). The digital illustrations are engaging.
especially the little details scattered around Eva's household and neighborhood, and the layout is reader-friendly; this one should make for an immersive read-aloud that will have readers impressed by Eva's perseverance and can-do spirit. A note from Jerath explains that kulfi is often sold by street vendors in India during the summer; an appended recipe lets intrepid readers try their own hand at whipping it up. Jake is light-skinned; the neighborhood is diverse. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Sure to encourage budding young business owners to follow the protagonist's example. (Picture book. 4-6)

OPEN FOR BUSINESS
Johnson, Janet Sumner
Illus. by Stacy Ebert
Pixel+Ink (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
978-1-6595-138-4
Series: The Recess Genius, 1

Balancing a desire to read with sudden popularity can be tough.

Regina Grey is used to not being noticed. In fact, it means she can do more of what she loves: read, which she's very good at, unlike the many things she doesn't excel at: math, spelling, gym. But her invisibility disappears when she solves a few problems for other kids on the playground. Suddenly, she's the much-sought-after Recess Genius. But while it feels nice to be good at something, she no longer has time to pore over her books, and that's a problem for Regina. Giving bad advice backfires, and closing her business and reverting to invisibility fails to make her happy. Introverts and those who love them may be unsatisfied by Regina's solution, an all-or-nothing one with no nuances or room for Regina to choose daily what she will do. Blond pigtailed Regina sports a black bow in her hair, making her easy to spot in the illustrations, but it's not always easy to parse what's going on in them. An overhead view of a baseball game in gym class may be unrecognizable to young readers. And a tiny vignette of Regina seemingly poking a child with a stick may also puzzle those who fail to recognize the cast on their arm (the stick is Regina's clever way of helping the kid scratch an itch). The schoolchildren are diverse in skin tone but otherwise homogeneous. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A disappointing bookworm/introvert–turned–problem-solver/extrovert tale. (Picture book. 4-8)

THE MOON TONIGHT
Our Moon’s Journey Around Earth
Jung Chang-boon
Illus. by Jung Ho
Trans. by Paige Morris
Blue Dot Kids Press (36 pp.)
$18.95 | Jan. 24, 2023
978-1-73760-325-2

Wonder at the changes in the moon's appearance over the course of a month.

In this welcome title, a Korean astronomer who also writes for young readers offers a comprehensive explanation of the changing phases of the moon. In clear, relatively simple words, he begins by describing the moon's light as a reflection from the sun. He goes on to show that the moon's waxing, waning, and apparent disappearance depend on how much of the sun-lit side of the moon can be seen from Earth. In smaller print below the main text, the author offers more detailed information about when the moon rises and sets for each phase, accompanied by illustrations. Jung then invites readers to experiment with a flashlight and a ball to see how this works. He shows how the gravity of the sun and moon affect Earth's tides and briefly touches on lunar calendars. The text, translated from Korean by Morris, is smooth, but at one point the waxing crescent moon "rises in the early evening" — technically an incorrect statement, as moonrise refers to when the moon rises over the horizon, not when it becomes visible in the sky. The smaller print correctly states that the moon follows the sun to rise in the early morning but, hard to see in the sunlight, becomes visible only after dark. Lovely sepia night scenes, instructive thumbnail images of each phase of the moon at different times of the day and night, and helpful diagrams add to the package. An Asian-presenting adult and child can be seen throughout observing the moon.

Beautifully illustrated and carefully explained, this is an attractive, helpful addition to the science shelf. (information on the moon, photos, Korean proverb) (Informational picture book. 4-9)

A CROWN FOR CORINA
Kemp, Laekan Zea
Illus. by Elisa Chavarri
Little, Brown (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
978-0-7595-5684-3

It’s Corina’s birthday, which means the biggest and most beautiful crown is hers.

The corona that Corina will be wearing won’t be silver or gold, though—it will be made from the loveliest flowers picked from Abuela’s garden. The garden explodes with colorful blossoms, and Corina spends time with her grandmother selecting the best flowers for the birthday crown. Abuela reminds her that “every flower in your crown must tell your story, Corina.
Who you are and where you come from.” Taking this charge to heart, Corina carefully chooses blooms with special meaning. Bluebonnets remind Corina of her beloved pet rabbit’s tail, and sunflowers and sword lilies remind her of her parents. A walk through the garden weaves together past, present, and future as Corina and Abuela construct her corona. Corina’s smile shines as bright as her floral birthday crown, and even after the flowers fade, her memories of a very special day stay strong. Lush botanical illustrations are paired with a timeless message about the importance of family. Corina’s memories of time spent with loved ones are set against a rich garden tapestry of vibrant colors, enhancing this sincere story. Corina and her family members are Latine, with brown skin and black or gray straight hair. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**GOODNIGHT LOVE**

**A Bedtime Meditation Story**

Kim, Sumi Loundon
Illus. by Laura Watkins
Bala Kids/Shambhala (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Feb. 21, 2023
978-1-61180-944-2

Prepare for bedtime with soothing meditative rituals. This affirming picture book teaches parents and children how to carry out simple, step-by-step pre-bedtime routines based on Buddhist mindfulness principles. As depicted in the warm,cozy illustrations, a cuddly, smiling sloth parent and child “send [their] love into the world” and perform refreshing body- and mind-relaxing deep-breathing exercises before they settle down. Afterward, they proceed with “metta meditation,” which an author’s note defines as “ ‘lovingkindness,’ ‘kindness,’ or ‘friendliness’ ” and “a partner to mindfulness.” An easy-to-understand “How to Practice” guide instructs adults how to help children follow it. It consists of three basic phrases, clearly presented and repeated textually and highlighted throughout in meditative rituals. The phrases are, in turn, applied to four categories: oneself, a relationship, nature, and “all beings everywhere.” At the book’s conclusion, the sloth parent is shown tenderly embracing the child and sharing their love by repeating the phrases and adding the coda “always and forever.” (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**WINSTON CHU VS. THE WHIMSY**

Lee, Stacey
Rick Riordan Presents/Disney (368 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
978-1-368-07480-3

Eighth grader Winston Chu and his family are still processing the friendly fire death of his father who was serving in Iraq. On the eve of the third anniversary of losing his dad, Winston, along with trusted soccer mates May, Bijal, and Cassa, stumble across Mr. Pang’s Whimsies, a store of magical knickknacks in San Francisco’s Chinatown that Winston had never noticed before. Winston, armed with a pie, inadvertently helps Mr. Pang by scaring away some Hawaiian shirt–clad troublemakers, but he disappointingly ends up with just an old broom and dustpan as tokens of the shop owner’s gratitude. What Winston does not know is that these objects are possessed by the spirits of the cloud weaver and the cowherd, star-crossed lovers from Chinese folklore. Things only get more complicated when Winston’s younger sister, Coco, gets swapped with
“A mystery that, as it is uncovered, becomes something much more profound.”

WHEN SEA BECOMES SKY

a changeling from the shop. The friends must figure out how to get her back using clues from Winston’s family’s beloved collection of traditional Chinese stories, Tales From the Middle Kingdom. Lee deftly crafts an adventure that strings together seemingly random clues only to have them fall satisfyingly into place in the end. Themes of friendship, grief, and family love are explored throughout. A few lingering questions hint at a sequel. Cassa reads White; Mav has some Senegalese ancestry, and Bijal’s name cues him as South Asian.

There’s plenty of magic, healing, and love to enjoy on this roller-coaster ride. (Fantasy. 8-12)

ELMER AND THE GIFT
McKee, David
Andersen Press USA (32 pp.)
$18.99 | March 7, 2023
978-1-72849-205-6

The late McKee’s vibrantly hued pachyderm returns for another adventure.

Elmer’s friend Rose, a young pink elephant, relays a message that his Aunt Zelda is looking for him. Elmer sets out to find her, worried because “she’s a bit deaf” and forgetful. Other friends tell Elmer that Zelda has something to give him. When he locates her, she can’t remember what it is. She does recall a meeting with Grandpa Eldo, so they look for its story with growing excitement. The statue could be a way to stop developers from destroying their beloved marshlands with a new bridge, after all. This layered mystery is crafted with an eye on the statue and its heart focused on Bex as she navigates this special summer when she is in charge of her 9-year-old brother. Lately Davey doesn’t speak to anyone but her, and he speaks most freely when they are at The Thumb, their special place on a far corner of their island. The two race to uncover information about the sculptor with- out adult interference, culminating in a surreptitious ferry ride to an art museum on the mainland. McDunn has created strong supporting characters, like Bex’s former best friend, who speak truth and demonstrate kindness. The rainless skies stand for suppressed emotions, with the otters, crabs, and buzzing insects creating a timeless, swampy backdrop. The pages shine with love, loss, and a sense of place; autobiographical ties to the story are explained in the author’s note. Atmospheric illustrations help bring to life the island setting.

A mystery that, as it is uncovered, becomes something much more profound. (Fiction. 8-12)

EVEN EVERYONE LOVES LUNCHTIME BUT ZIA
Liao, Jenny
Illus. by Dream Chen
Knopf (40 pp.)
978-0-593-42543-5 PLB

Zia loves her family’s Cantonese dishes at home, but school is a different story.

When her classmates make fun of the sweet, sour, crispy, and slippery lunches Zia brings from home, she asks her parents to pack her sandwiches instead. But they suggest a special menu for the week, where each lunch will have a special meaning and cultural significance. On Monday, Zia gets tong yun, which represent treasure. Then the school librarian appears, letting her know that the book she was waiting for is here. A treasure! Each day, when she eats her special lunch, something wonderful related to the food in question happens, including making a new friend to share her cheung fun (meaning: heartwarming) with on Thursday. By Friday, she brings to life the island setting.

A delicious take on a familiar trope. (recipe for Zia’s Lucky Yi Mein, author’s note, list of foods, glossary) (Picture book. 4-8)

WHEN SEA BECOMES SKY
McDunn, Gillian
Illus. by Yooyao Ma Van As
Bloomsbury (224 pp.)
$16.99 | Feb. 28, 2023
978-1-5476-1085-3

A summer mystery on their island home illuminates the special bond between siblings.

Bex and Davey live on Pelican Island, where a drought is lowering the water in the salt marsh. When a formerly submerged statue appears, the siblings, who are cued White, search for its story with growing excitement. The statue could be a way to stop developers from destroying their beloved marshlands with a new bridge, after all. This layered mystery is crafted with an eye on the statue and its heart focused on Bex as she navigates this special summer when she is in charge of her 9-year-old brother. Lately Davey doesn’t speak to anyone but her, and he speaks most freely when they are at The Thumb, their special place on a far corner of their island. The two race to uncover information about the sculptor without adult interference, culminating in a surreptitious ferry ride to an art museum on the mainland. McDunn has created strong supporting characters, like Bex’s former best friend, who speak truth and demonstrate kindness. The rainless skies stand for suppressed emotions, with the otters, crabs, and buzzing insects creating a timeless, swampy backdrop. The pages shine with love, loss, and a sense of place; autobiographical ties to the story are explained in the author’s note. Atmospheric illustrations help bring to life the island setting.

A mystery that, as it is uncovered, becomes something much more profound. (Fiction. 8-12)
designs; Aunt Zelda is purple with turquoise diamonds, while Grandpa Eldo is yellow and covered with triangles. Elmer treats Aunt Zelda with patience and acceptance—a gently conveyed and strong message for young readers with elderly family members of their own. Fans of the series will be heartened. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A tender tale featuring a beloved hero. (Picture book, 3-9)

PAWS UP FOR JOY!
Mericle Harper, Charise
Little, Brown (64 pp.)
$12.99 | February 21, 2023
978-0-7595-5509-9
Series: Pepper & Boo, 3

Two playful pups and their cat companion step outside for a fun-filled romp. Poor Pepper, Boo, and the Cat—they’ve been trapped inside for five rainy days. But it’s sunny at last! And there’s a giant box wrapped in polka-dot paper with a big purple bow. Twelve paws are ready to celebrate, but readers learn that what sparks joy for each critter is very different. The Cat is excited for a sunny day outside. Pepper and Boo know they could celebrate a day without the fiery orb. Though she tries hard to please her family, she can’t even hide the fact that she’s a born swimmer (the endpapers explain how the dragon feels amazing in the water. It is even better than flying, and she discovers “other dragons in the water and not one of them [has] wings!” After being fished out of the water by her father, the little dragon apologizes for her lack of dragon abilities, but her father showers her with love and encourages her to embrace her skills—turns out, she’s a crocodile....and a born swimmer (the endpapers explain how this uniquely blended family came to be). Rich, full-color illustrations include both spreads and vignettes. Consistent eye contact between the parent and child dragons shows their strong emotional connection. There’s plenty of humor, too, such as the catastrophic cannon-powered flying experiment. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An affirming tale that will inspire readers to embrace their unique selves. (Picture book, 4-7)

SOMEDAY, MAYBE
Murray, Diama
Illus. by Jessica Gibson
Henry Holt (40 pp.)
$18.99 | March 14, 2023
9781250782755

Dream on, young inventors! There’s lots of work in your future. Upbeat, rhyming verse helps readers explore the imaginations and dreams of several young inventors as they create plans for flying cars, self-cleaning houses, and alternate food sources (for instance, earthworms). Perhaps they will sing with a robotic backup band that they’ve built and programmed, use “X-ray specs / to scan for broken bones,” or deliver packages with hypersonic drones. Maybe space will call and they will work in the first town on the moon, study lunar mold in a lab and find the cure for the common cold, or send rovers to Mars and beyond. Someday, they might create a hortographic crew to explore the “volcanoes of / a strange, uncharted land.” But inventing and exploring can leave young dreamers a bit homesick, and that’s how families can help—with tight hugs and praise that encourage more dreaming of what might be. Detailed illustrations, often in rich jewel tones, show diverse young inventors. A tan-skinned child uses a wheelchair. The children’s families are diverse as well, with a one-parent family and what appears to be a same-sex family represented. Backmatter explains that many of the inventions mentioned already exist, though some aren’t quite ready to be used by the public. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Will spur children to “keep on dreaming... / of what, someday, may be.” (Picture book, 4-8)
A WITCH’S LAST RESORT
Nichols, Travis
Random House (224 pp.)
$13.99 | $16.99 PLB | Feb. 28, 2023
978-0-593-42575-6
978-0-593-42576-3 PLB
Series: The Terribles, 2

A new witch comes to Stubtoe Elementary.

Readers return to Creep’s Cove in this second installment in the series following 2022’s Welcome to Stubtoe Elementary. An island for various creatures and monsters unwanted by the human world, Creep’s Cove serves as a safe haven for these beings. The same group of likable misfits from the first book returns, including Lobo the werewolf, Quade the Sasquatch, and Vlad the vampire. New kid Elise, a witch with greenish skin and black hair, joins the crew and does her best to fit in. The book is mostly a string of vignettes held together loosely by the theme of Elise’s entrance. This jumping around means that readers won’t get bored easily, but the format is less effective in this volume than in the first. A good portion of the second half of the book, beginning with the section entitled “Terrible Choices: The Sleepover,” reads like a choose-your-own-adventure story, which is an engaging format that here features disappointingly lackluster choices and not enough fun twists or surprises. The illustrations add a lot to the text, and there are several comic strip breaks. One standout is “Science vs. Magic: The Ultimate Debate,” in which science-loving Frankie takes on Elise. Rapid-fire sparring between the two results in a surprising agreement.

A fun concept with less for readers to sink their fangs into; returning fans may not mind. (Fiction. 8-12)

THE TAPESTRY OF TALES
O’Neill, Cathy
Aladdin (432 pp.)
$17.99 | March 7, 2023
978-1-5344-9777-1
Series: Unraveled, 2

Cia skips school to quash the Evil Queen’s latest scheme and learns a shocking truth about her own family.

Having gotten out from under her personal curse in The Princess Revolt (2022), Cia flies to the rescue—literally. She travels to Paris, in her ultrawealthy friend Romy’s family jet, as soon as she learns that Snow White’s villain stepmother intends to expand her beauty products empire by selling elixirs of persistence, sense of humor, and other qualities forcibly extracted from select children. Though once again upstaged by a vivid supporting cast composed largely of characters who are either stuck in or escaped from folk and fairy tales, Cia shows fair reserves of courage as well as cleverness as her mission undergoes a sudden switch with the revelations that she has an adversary even more evil and powerful than the queen and that her own enigmatic mother is in major danger. Caught in a whirl of plots, subplots, and fairy-tale tropes, she also turns out to be a dab hand with a magic wand, or rather pastry whisk, which not only comes in handy at the climax, but hints that she may be other than the ordinary, nonmagical middle schooler she’s been touted as all along. Stay tuned. Cia and her mom present White; there is racial diversity in the supporting cast.

Side business tends to shoulder past the main plot, but this is an amiable second volume nonetheless. (Fantasy. 9-13)

LASAGNA MEANS I LOVE YOU
O'Shaughnessy, Kate
Knopf (352 pp.)
$17.99 | $20.99 PLB | Feb. 21, 2023
978-1-984893-87-1
978-1-984893-88-8 PLB

Mo Gallagher’s life is upended when her beloved grandmother dies and she is thrust into foster care.

Nan had been her loving guardian, raising her in a New York City apartment that she must now leave. Her uncle is unwilling to assume her care, but he gives her a notebook with a letter to her from Nan on the first page. Hoping to remain connected in some mystical way, 11-year-old White girl Mo fills the notebook with frank letters to her grandmother, hoping for signs that she is being heard. But in the rest of her life, she withholds critical feelings and information, even avoiding telling Crystal Wang, her Chinese American best friend, the truth. The chance discovery of a homemade cookbook leads to a brilliant recipe project with her own website (recipes are also shared throughout the book). Her caring caseworker and her therapist help Mo deal with changes, especially as her uneasy relationship with her foster parents leads to a devastating surprise. Fortunately, Crystal remains a stalwart, loving ally, and Mo develops special relationships with a variety of supportive new friends. Mo is confused, feisty, frightened, sometimes self-destructive, intensely needy, and loving—and she has a bigger heart and is stronger than she thinks. Readers will laugh, cry, and embrace Mo completely as they rejoice at the wonderful twist that leads to a happy new beginning for her. The New York City setting is well integrated into the story.

Deeply moving and tender. (Fiction. 9-12)
DEAR EARTH
Otter, Isabel
Illus. by Clara Anganuzzi
Tiger Tales (40 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
978-1-66430-014-9

How can we support the planet?
Tessa’s grandfather used to be an explorer and loves talking about the Earth. Inspired, Tessa decides to write a letter to the Earth, explaining that she, too, wants to be an explorer and describing where she’d like to go, incorporating detail both factual (“Most of your surface is covered in water”) and poetic (“I want to dive into your deep oceans and see shoals of swirling fish”). Inventive illustrations with whimsical proportions and perspectives show Tessa as she imagines swimming, running, and flying her way across the globe, full of excitement and curiosity as she investigates different natural features, environments, plants, and animals. The book ends with Grandpa reassuring Tessa—and readers—that the planet can still be saved, and informative and inviting backmatter describes the effects of climate change as well as ways that kids can make a difference. This love letter to the planet provides a shimmering introduction to the natural wonder of the Earth and an age-appropriate explanation of the challenges it faces, complete with a message about activism and hope. Tessa and her grandfather are both brown-skinned. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A loving appreciation of the Earth that blends facts and flights of fancy. (Informational picture book. 3-8)

HIDDEN CREATURE FEATURES
Park, Jane
Millbrook/Lerner (32 pp.)
$29.32 PLB | March 7, 2023
978-1-72844-567-0

Wild animals show off adaptations that are not apparent at first, or sometimes even second, sight.

If the big, bright, close-up nature photos (mostly stock) and effective use of page turns to rev up the drama don’t rivet younger audiences, Park’s pithy verse should do the trick. Here’s a platypus, for example: “I might look cute / with my BILL and fur. / But hidden from sight… // IS A VENOMOUS

REPTILE!” Likewise, the wonderfully named sarcastic fringehead fish has a mouth that snaps open like a folded umbrella to enormous size (“When challenged, / I won’t step aside. / I’m ready to FIGHT // when I… // OPEN WIDE!”). Other (less terrifying) revelations include a penguin gaping to expose a tongue covered in sharp, stiff bristles; a snowy owl dangling surprisingly long legs; a squirrel-like colugo extending broad gliding membranes; a pangolin with a long pink tongue protruding from its mouth (kept in the creature’s chest); and a swimming tiger’s webbed toes. The author adds explanatory notes with each entry and, along with a closing invitation to readers to identify their own hidden adaptations, offers several leads to broader surveys of the topic. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

High marks for presentation and showy cast alike. (glossary, photo credits) (Informational picture book. 5-7)

ESCAPE UNDERSEA
Prager, Ellen
Tumblehome Learning (248 pp.)
$14.95 paper | Dec. 15, 2022
978-1-943431-80-9

A visit to an undersea research lab off the Florida Keys plunges siblings Ezzy and Luke into life-threatening discoveries of environmental malfeasance in this third series entry.

Considering recent experiences in the Galápagos and Greenland, 14-year-old Ezzy is hardly surprised when she and her more adventurous 12-year-old brother, Luke, find themselves involved in two potentially hazardous mysteries, one involving odd local changes in water chemistry and massive blooms of green algae. The other (and more immediately deadly threat) is scary encounters with really big and highly aggressive specimens of venomous, invasive lionfish on the reef. In a double investigation that leads to a resort with iffy wastewater disposal practices and an experimental genetics lab run by an unprincipled marine biologist, Prager, a marine scientist herself, folds in plenty of suspense as well as real places, actual environmental issues, and personal experiences of marine wonders on which she expands in a substantial afterword. The siblings and their widowed father present as White, but to other characters the author attributes a range of skin colors suggesting racial diversity. Readers need not be familiar with previous entries to enjoy this latest installment. The book concludes with websites pointing readers to youth-friendly organizations working in ocean conservation as well as those offering guidance on marine science careers.

Further breathlessly paced escapades, well stocked with moments of terror and undersea wonders. (map) (Adventure. 9-12)

HEROES LIKE US
Two Stories; The Day We Met the Queen; The Great Food Bank Heist
Raúf, Onjali Q.
Delacorte (766 pp.)
$16.99 | $19.99 PLB | Nov. 15, 2022
978-0-593-48820-1 PLB

This follow-up to The Boy at the Back of the Class (2019) features two stories in one, following children who make a difference.
The Duckling Raised by Loons

Elliot Jelly-Legs and the Bobblehead Miracle

Finding Family

Awesome Orange Birthday
Duckling does.” While young loons typically hide upon seeing strange animals (loons are territorial, backmatter explains), Duckling makes a racket in one of the amusingly incongruous moments. Loon babies ride on the back of either parent while young, and the growing Duckling, its down turning to more substantial feathers, riding on a loon’s back is sweetly funny. Backmatter expands the comparison of loon and mallard characteristics and behaviors. Salas offers a philosophical note about the inconclusive ending—loons and ducks migrate as the sea-sons turn, and it’s not known what happened next—but leaves the thought that both the duckling and loon parents created a family together. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

**Engaging natural science for the very young. (bibliography, further reading) (Informational picture book. 3-8)**

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**EVERY LITTLE SEED**

Schumerth, Cynthia
Illus. by Elisa Paganello
Colors by Pete Kennedy
Sleeping Bear Press (32 pp.)
$18.99 | March 14, 2023
9781534112698

As the seasons progress, a family passes down lessons in gardening.

“Grandpa told Mom, and Mom told me: The secret of a plant lives in every little seed.” As spring melts the winter snow, Grandpa, Mom, and a child garden as a pet dog and wildlife watch closely. Readers are told how to best care for seeds; a labeled page of garden tools will be especially useful. The complexity of what happens under the soil is shown in one stunning illustration, and the colors change to vibrant spring tones as the flowers blossom. “Hungry guests” arrive, such as bees and butterflies, as well as spiders that protect plants from pests. Even as pests make an appearance—Japanese beetles, brown mar-morated stink bugs, and more—the art is still adorable, showing a solution to the problem as the child sprays “sticky, soapy water.” Fall colors take over again as the book draws to a close. With backmatter explaining more about seeds and what to watch out for when you’re gardening, the book is a solid how-to, with cyclic storytelling and an appealing art style. It may not be the first of its kind but it’s a welcome tale. Mom, Grandpa, and the child are light-skinned; Mom and the child have dark hair, while Grandpa is gray-haired. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

**Evergreen encouragement for young gardeners in the making. (Picture book. 4-9)**

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**INTERVIEW WITH BLACKBEARD & OTHER VICIOUS VILLAINS**

Seed, Andy
Illus. by Gareth Conway
Mortimer Children’s (128 pp.)
$12.95 paper | Feb. 21, 2023
9781783129119
Series: Interview With, 2

Horrid historical humans get the Q&A treatment.

With the aid of a time machine/translator, the author meekly interviews a slew of antiheroes (eight men, one woman, and one couple, the notorious Bonnie Parker and Clyde Bar-row), most of whom are of European or American origin. Brit-ish humor and amusing line drawings leaven the encounters, but quite a number of fascinating facts make it through. Each outlaw is evil in a different way. Allowed his say, Blackbeard contends that he is not bloodthirsty and disavows chanting “pieces of eight” (Seed does not mention that the piece was in fact a Spanish coin); Ivan the Terrible (or “Fearsome”) argues for the righteousness of his acts. The interviews are followed by a fact sheet with maps that finishes the story (sometimes adding
missing details, since these baddies could be secretive). Characters who might be new to U.S. readers include the self-justifying Guy Fawkes, Ned Kelly (who uses Aussie slang and whose backstory complicates his case), and Zheng Yi Sao (a female Chinese pirate). We are told of Vlad’s impaling practices but not why he remains a heroic figure in Romania. Victor Lustig, a mere con man, is outclassed by the murderers here. But they all (except Zheng) come to a bad end—unlike this engaging book, which ends with a tongue-in-cheek quiz.

This entertaining gallery of malefactors seductively introduces history. (glossary, index) (Nonfiction. 9-12)

THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF LITTLE KRISHNA
Singh, Mahendra
Feral House (32 pp.)
$17.95 | Jan. 31, 2023
9781627311328
Series: Feral Kids

Raising a young god comes with myriad challenges.

In this tale set in ancient India, a woman named Yashoda gives birth to a blue-skinned baby named Krishna. Yashoda and her husband, Nanda, raise the boy in their village among their fellow cowherders and their families. From the beginning, Krishna is mischievous, pulling the animals’ tails even before he learns to walk, stealing butter, and feeding stolen sweets to the local monkeys. Time after time, the village women ask Yashoda to discipline her naughty child, and time after time, Krishna proves too adorable and sweet to punish. When Krishna is 6, his father gives him the responsibility of helping to drive the cattle to the pasture. A bored Krishna entertains himself by playing a reed flute given to him by a monkey. When he returns home, the cows give very little milk, and the villagers are sure that Krishna is to blame. Finally, when another child says that Krishna is eating dirt, he opens his mouth and shows his mother the universe, revealing to her that he was actually a god all along.

While the story is well written, it ends abruptly, never resolving the central tension among Krishna, Yashoda, and the villagers or fully explaining Krishna’s positioning as a trickster. The illustrations feature exclusively light-skinned characters, erasing the diversity of skin tone prevalent in Indian villages. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An uneven interpretation of Hinduism’s baby Krishna myths. (Picture book. 4-7)

FETCH BOOK ONE
The Journey
Sizemore, Mike
Illus. by Dave Kennedy
Storm King Studios LLC (104 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Feb. 21, 2023
978-1-73438-919-7

Every hero needs a quest.

Twelve-year-old Danni is devastated by the death of her dog, Pirate. When a mysterious substitute teacher introduces Danni to the world of Greek mythology, she’s surprised by how much the stories help to take her mind off her grief—especially when a familiar illustration leads her to suspect that the tales might be more than mere myth. Like a 21st-century Orpheus, Danni ventures to the Underworld in hopes of getting her best friend back but finds herself deeper in trouble than she bargained for when her younger brother, Sammy, follows her down. Aided by Danni’s teacher’s book and a wily hero of old, will Danni and Sammy best the guardians of Hades and fetch what they seek? Or will the cost of tempting fate prove too high to bear? This graphic novel acts as a gateway into Greek myth for readers too young for the intensity of Percy Jackson and the like and incorporates some lesser-explored aspects of the mythos into a quest that will engage anyone who’s ever lost a friend. The true standout, however, is the energetic, expressive artwork, which masterfully depicts the shifting moods and landscapes without ever becoming overwhelming. Hints at divine meddling and a gut-wrenching cliffhanger tantalizingly open the door to a sequel. Danni and Sammy are light-skinned; Hades presents Black.

A solid series opener for budding mythology fans. (concept art, creator bios) (Graphic novel. 8-12)

WILD BLUE
Taming a Big-Kid Bike
Slater, Dashka
Illus. by Laura Hughes
Candlewick (32 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 14, 2023
978-1-5362-1567-0

A new bike gets broken in.

Kayla loves “pink pony,” an “itty-bitty bike” with training wheels. But when Dad decides it’s time for an upgrade, the two venture to the bike store and “wrangle a new one from the herd.” This bike is bigger and intimidating, with a kickstand instead of training wheels, and Kayla names her Wild Blue. Kayla, a small, tan-skinned child with dark hair poking out underneath a red helmet or imaginary red cowboy hat, tames Wild Blue in a slow, jerky process that will be familiar to kids learning how to ride a “big-kid bike” for the first time. The metaphor of comparing bikes to wild or tame horses continues to the end, with other cowboy or horse culture motifs appearing throughout. There’s some dialogue between Kayla and Dad, but most of the story focuses on the growing relationship between rider...
and bike, with a triumphant, wobble-free ride at the climax. Appealing acrylic illustrations show both wide-open spaces and crowded shops and duly capture the rough energy of the experience. A quiet story, this may help young readers who are similarly transitioning their two-wheeled steeds or prepare them for the experience of doing so. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

A new tale with a classic feel that will buoy many young riders. *(Picture book. 5-8)*

**SOMETIMES**

*A Day Full of Feelings*  
Stansbie, Stephanie  
Illus. by Elisa Paganelli  
Crown (32 pp.)  
$10.99 | Feb. 28, 2023  
978-0-593-56891-0

Feelings, high and low, big and small, make us who we are.

Two siblings, each with pale skin and dark hair, experience a roller-coaster ride of emotions as they go through their day. At the beach, one sibling is afraid of jumping between rocks until they decide to be brave and give it a try. When the pair fly a kite into the woods, it gets snagged on a tree, disappointing one sibling and prompting the other to offer comfort. Doing a funny dance to combat boredom, being kind to one another during times of sadness or loneliness, managing one's anger — these siblings find ways to help each other through experiences that will feel familiar to little ones. In the end, being together and feeling loved are the right antidotes. Stansbie’s gentle, humorous, and insightful rhymes and near-perfect meter provide concise, genuine descriptions of what these emotions feel and look like for children. Paganelli’s bright, eye-catching illustrations cleverly layer in a simple narrative that encourages deeper conversations between children and their grown-ups. The bold palette and attention to detail invite readers to look again and again to find the family pup on most spreads along with many other tiny elements. A guide at the end offers suggestions on coping with emotional ups and downs in healthy, communicative ways. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

A lovely way to help readers unpack their emotions, good and bad. *(guide to emotions) (Picture book. 2-5)*

**MOMO ARASHIMA STEALS THE SWORD OF THE WIND**

Sugiura, Misa  
Labyrinth Road (384 pp.)  
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Feb. 28, 2023  
978-0-593-56406-6  
978-0-593-56407-3 PLB  
Series: Momo Arashima, 1

Twelve-year-old Momo Arashima is trying to be a normal kid, but that isn’t easy since she sees things others can’t, gets bullied at school, and takes care of her inattentive widowed mother. After Momo is attacked at the mall by a shikome, or death hag, then rescued by talking fox Niko, who at first appears as a redheaded boy wearing old-fashioned clothing, a tremendous secret is revealed: Momo is a kami, or Shinto goddess. As the guardian of the Island of Mysteries, Mom is tasked with protecting the gate between Earth and Yomi, where the dead dwell. But wicked demon oni are emerging from the portal and harming the island, which in turn is killing Momo’s mother. Being half-kami and half-human, Momo is the only one able to visit the island and then leave it; it’s up to her to save the day. She travels across the Sea of Heaven in the company of Niko and, unexpectedly, a former friend who gets swept up in their emergency departure. Japanese American transracial adoptee Danny used to be close to Momo until he fell in with the popular crowd. This hilarious, high-spirited tale blends Japanese legends, mythical creatures, and deities. Alongside the fantastical romps, themes of fear, anger, loneliness, belonging, friendship, and inner strength are thoughtfully explored.

Funny, relatable, and full of adventure. *(author’s note, glossary) (Fantasy. 8-12)*

**LEPRECHAUN VS. EASTER BUNNY**

Tarpley, Todd  
Illus. by Stephanie Laberis  
Little, Brown (32 pp.)  
$10.99 | Feb. 14, 2023  
978-0-316-37426-2

Sometimes the holidays get messy.

When a light-skinned leprechaun — complete with red beard and clover-adorned hat — appears at the end of a rainbow on a hill dotted with tulips, he’s all set to bury his gold…until the Easter Bunny hops over in a huff. The leprechaun is digging up all the tulips where the bunny was planning to hide his eggs. Their argument escalates, and readers will be reminded of Looney Tunes battles between Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck as each employs more and more outrageous traps and tricks to humiliate the other. The duo keep the fight up until a new visitor arrives; although St. Valentine’s Day has passed, a plump, light-skinned Cupid is ready to start planning for next year — allowing the two to join forces against a common enemy. The text is told in rhyming stanzas: "’Gold!’ cried the bunny, / but when he bent over, / the leprechaun pushed him / facedown in the clover!” It’s not Shakespeare, but it moves the plot along. The digital illustrations are riotously funny, and the final image of the three spring holiday mascots scowling at one another, having reached an uneasy friendship, will have readers giggling all year long. Skilled storytellers will enjoy hammering up the action as the characters attempt to assert their dominance over their hillside home. *(This book was reviewed digitally.)*

Slapstick fun for any season. *(Picture book. 4-7)*
Anatomically exact and often funny to boot.”

THIRTY TRILLION CELLS

HOOPS
Tavares, Matt
Candlewick (224 pp.)
$22.99 | March 14, 2023
978-1-5362-0136-9

Girls’ basketball gets off to a rocky start at an Indiana high school in the wake of Title IX.

Basing his debut graphic novel on a true story, Tavares follows a small group of enthusiasts and their resourceful art teacher who moonlights as the girls’ basketball coach, from tryouts that are shuffled off to the elementary school’s gym through dogged practices and hard-fought games all the way to the 1976 state championship. Both the art and the plot are spare and cleanly drawn—the former featuring spacious compositions and easy-to-follow action both on and off the boards. The latter focuses on the friendship that develops between Judi and her teammate Lisa as the Lady Bears (“Why is it always Lady Bears?” a teammate complains, “nobody ever calls the boys’ attitudes, which get light but firmly visible exposure, the art—and cleanly drawn—the former featuring spacious compositions and easy-to-follow action both on and off the boards.”) The latter focuses on the friendship that develops between Judi and her teammate Lisa as the Lady Bears (“Why is it always Lady Bears?” a teammate complains, “nobody ever calls the boys’ team the Gentleman Bears”), lacking even jerseys until late in the season and riding to away games in their coach’s uncle’s RV because no bus has been authorized, gradually build a following.

They ultimately earn a public apology from the dismissive athletic director and, reuniting during a college break three years later, have the satisfaction of seeing the bleachers in their old high school well filled for a girls’ game. Like the overtly sexist attitudes, which get light but firmly visible exposure, the artist suggests his cast’s racial diversity rather than highlighting it through differences in skin tone and hair texture.

A winning tale, all the more exhilarating for its links to history. (author’s note) (Graphic fiction. 8-12)

THIRTY TRILLION CELLS
Thomas, Isabel
Illus. by Dawn Cooper
Welbeck Children’s (64 pp.)
$16.95 | Feb. 21, 2023
9781803380179

A lively overview of our bodies’ tiny but mighty basic components, with a chapter on the additional 30 trillion or so immigrants that live alongside them.

Following an outstanding study of biodiversity, Full of Life, illustrated by Sara Gillingham (2022), Thomas takes a younger intended audience down to the cellular level for an equally absorbing, at times amusing inside tour of nine body systems—including, unconventionally, the skeletonmuscular and integumentary systems—and some of the 200 different types of specialized cells that comprise them, from osteoblasts and ova to detritus-chomping Kupffer cells (“They are your liver’s sniffer dogs”) and the ciliated epithelial cells that run a “snot escalator” to keep the lungs clear. Following brief forays into cancer and aging, Thomas also surveys the largely communal or even beneficial microbiota that share our anatomical community and, in numbers at least, make up fully half of “one of the most complex things in the entire universe—you!” Cooper mixes images of a racially diverse cast, with a fascinating blend of body parts highlighted (fat cells twirled around a character’s arms, cells swirling around another character’s body), with simplified but recognizable depictions of cell types blessedly free of googly eyes or other anthropomorphic tweaks. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Anatomically exact and often funny to boot. (glossary, index) (Informational picture book. 7-10)

MANNY’S MOOD CLOUDS
A Story About Moods and Mood Disorders
Ubidia, Lourdes
Jessica Kingsley Publishers (48 pp.)
$16.95 | Jan. 19, 2023
978-1-83997-495-3

How can Elijah support his brother Manny through his “mood clouds”?

Elijah’s older brother Manny’s emotions change quickly and are so big they seem like colorful clouds above his head: red when he’s angry; blue when he’s sad and wants to be alone; purple when “he is very panicked and scared of everything”; and yellow when he’s “so happy, that he doesn’t know what to do with himself.” Manny’s unpredictable mood shifts are hard on Elijah—“I get scared when I see his yellow cloud turn red without warning.” But with the help of their supportive parents, Manny’s therapist, and Manny himself, Elijah learns that “we can’t control the color of Manny’s clouds, but we can try and help him work through his feelings.” Examples of helpful activities that siblings can do together are matched with particular mood clouds, giving families ideas of how they can support loved ones who have mood disorders. Alongside Ubidia’s lively cartoon illustrations, this picture book sensitively frames Elijah’s process in understanding Manny’s mood disorder. With the focus on Elijah (depicted with brown skin and short, curly brown hair) rather than Manny (a brown-skinned boy with a high-top fade), this story is more ideal for family members than children with mood disorders themselves. Backmatter, written by licensed clinical psychologist Aimee Daramus, offers tips and resources for adults. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Emphasizing connection and care, this book shines a thoughtful light on children with mood disorders. (Picture book. 4-8)
“Arrange your bookshelf to make space for this one.”

ARI ARRANGES EVERYTHING

Vernon, Katie
Running Press Kids (40 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 21, 2023
978-0-7624-8175-0

Too much arranging can be a bad thing.

Ari, who has brown skin and short, curly black hair, loves to arrange things. This affinity starts out fairly typically with baby Ari artfully stacking blocks but goes goofy as Ari positions fleas on their dog’s head. As Ari gets older, they move on to creatively piling items inside their home. Ari starts arranging flowers, leaving no blooms behind for anyone else to deliver to their sweethearts. What starts out as a hobby quickly takes over the whole town as Ari rearranges the market, the hardware store, the pool, and a toy store. Observant readers will note from the expressions on the faces of the diverse townsfolk and the funny dialogue asides that Ari’s efforts are not appreciated. Finally, a disastrous arrangement at the zoo clears Ari’s tunnel vision, allowing them to take a moment to focus on the beauty in the uncontrollable, like the clouds in the sky and the frantic fun of a neighborhood cookout. While Ari still loves to arrange, they can see the appeal of a little well-timed chaos. Ari does have an obvious organizing compulsion, but the tone of the story imbues it with lightness. Vernon’s painterly style beautifully builds Ari’s world in a gorgeous wash of colors, creating a joyful space. Overall, it’s a sweet, silly reminder that harmless mayhem can be fun. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Arrange your bookshelf to make space for this one. (Picture book. 3-6)

FINALLY SEEN

Yang, Kelly
Simon & Schuster (304 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 28, 2023
978-1-5344-8833-5

A Chinese girl moves to America to be reunited with her family. When she was 5, Lina’s parents and baby sister left her in Beijing with her grandmother. Now she arrives in Southern California as a 10-year-old stranger to her own family. And what of the American dream? Her scientist father toils (sans green card) for a villainous, bigoted organic farmer, while her mother, unemployed since the pandemic put the nail salon where she worked out of business, makes bath bombs to sell online. They live in a one-bedroom apartment whose back rent is due in six weeks. Why isn’t Lina in any of the pictures displayed in their home? School is worse. Bullied by mean girls for her English, she vows never to speak again. But with the help of her ELL teacher, the school librarian, and a new friend, Lina begins to find her confidence and her voice through reading. Yang covers a lot of ground, from immigrant experiences and socio-economic inequities to climate change and middle school angst. The plotline that really stands out, however, is when Lina discovers that books can comfort the struggling, link people together, and create changes both internal and external. This theme propels the action through the book’s satisfying climax when she must decide whether to use her voice to stop a book that she loves from being banned in her classroom.

Timely and pointed. (Fiction. 8-12)

BOARD & NOVELTY BOOKS

SKY

Archer, Charlotte.
Child’s Play (12 pp.)
$17.99 | Feb. 1, 2023
978-1-78628-626-0
Series: Look, Touch, Learn, 4

A shiny collection of objects in the sky designed for baby tummy time. From sparkling clouds to raised raindrops, this board book is an invitation to touch and explore. While it can be read with a lap-sitting child, the unique accordion-style pages allow it to be spread out and propped up in front of a baby on the floor. Minimal descriptive text (“rain drip drop,” “snow freezing falling”) accompanies the images. At first glance, the artwork might seem overly simple: a giant, shiny, smiling sun, stars against a black background. However, this simplicity makes it approachable for very little babies and allows the tactile elements (a cut-out moon in the night sky, for instance) to stand out. The final page offers suggestions for parents and caregivers sharing the work with little ones, such as “Blow or poke the moving part. Look at your child through the hole from the other side of the book.” The intentionality of each part and thoughtful guidance for caregivers make this a great first book for families wondering how best to engage their littlest ones with reading. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

An appealing, multiuse first book for infants. (Board book. 0-2)
Adult readers who grew up on Dahl’s books and Blake’s famous illustrations are the highlight and focus, as truly interesting to those who are too young to be aware of those classics. But overall, this title is really intended to appeal to adults who grew up on Dahl’s books and are eager to introduce those stories to a new generation. The book rests on Blake’s iconic images rather than offering meaningful purpose or integration with the text. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Pass on this one for other more successful titles in this line of board books based on Dahl’s stories. (Board book. 2-4)

**ROALD DAHL SHAPES**

*Dec. by Dahl, Roald
Illus. by Quentin Blake
Viking (14 pp.)
$8.99 | Jan. 3, 2023
978-0-593-52866-0*

Learn about shapes—with a little help from Dahl and Blake.

Each spread features iconic characters from a different story by Dahl—among them *The Enormous Crocodile* (1978), *Danny, the Champion of the World* (1975), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), and *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me* (1985)—and a large, labeled image of the shape in question. The shapes are also incorporated into the accompanying illustration. For example, for triangle, we see a crocodile with triangle-shaped teeth as a group of diverse children look on in awe. A bolded word in the text points out the relevant object (“Watch out, children! Run away from those sharp, pointy teeth!”), though pre-readers will need caregiver assistance to make that connection. The choice to incorporate the shapes into the illustrations makes this title more appealing and meaningful than board books that simply show and name the objects without context. Adult readers who grew up on Dahl’s books and Blake’s famous illustrations will enjoy the references to those classics and will welcome the chance to share them with a new generation. The book is really all about the images, the text merely inviting readers to take a closer look. But really, that’s what they’ll want to do anyway. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A revisit of iconic illustrations for the toddler audience. (Board book. 2-4)

**ROALD DAHL WORDS**

*Dec. by Dahl, Roald
Illus. by Quentin Blake
Viking (16 pp.)
$8.99 | Jan. 3, 2023
978-0-593-52865-5*

Dahl’s classics—featuring Blake’s labeled illustrations—are revisited for a vocabulary lesson aimed at the very young.

Several of Dahl and Blake’s collaborative works are referenced here, from *The Twits* (1980) to *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (1970) and *Esio Trot* (1990). Blake’s illustrations are the highlight and focus, as truly this is just a book of labeled illustrations. The text does pose some questions (“How many balloons can you count?” “Can you spot all 5 chickens?”), but these types of inviting inquiries don’t appear on every page. Instead of rich, unusual vocabulary, we see a retread of toddlers’ familiar word (“chicken, girl, man, and bird”). The illustrations do provide plenty of space to do it, as the beard seems to go on forever, effortlessly trailing over hills and fields as the Old Man walks about, mostly oblivious to his pastoral surroundings. Colorful, whimsical, easy-on-the-eyes illustrations, rendered in watercolors and colored pencils, bring to life the limerick, which grown-ups might want to consider helping slightly older listeners to commit to memory; after all, limericks are a fun introduction to poetry and are brief enough to learn easily after repeated reading and listening opportunities. Children are likely going to want repeat visits to this book so they can giggle at the Old Man’s predicament. Additional teaching opportunities include helping little ones identify the various animals portrayed throughout, including the birds that are named, as well as assisting kids with counting the various creatures. Adults can gather information about Lear in the backmatter, an unusual and noteworthy feature in a board book. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

Who knows? After an outing, kids may wish for birds to nestle in their hair, if not a family member’s beard. (Board book. 2-5)

**A BEAUTIFUL HOUSE FOR BIRDS**

*Lin, Grace
Charlesbridge (16 pp.)
$7.99 | March 14, 2023
9781623543471
Series: Storytelling Math*

When a girl decorates a birdhouse, readers learn about patterns.

Lin’s brilliant new addition to the Storytelling Math series explores a simple math concept with a simple story told...
in language appropriate to the board-book set. A Black girl
named Olivia, a recurring character in the series, has a wooden
birdhouse. “How should I paint it?” she asks readers. Spare
wording on each page explains her choice—pink and green
stripes—introduces the word pattern, and asks readers to guess
which color would come next. Then, in a clever twist, she gets
distracted (“Oh hello, birds!”) and accidentally paints a blue
stripe. “Oops!” The blue stripe isn’t in the pattern, but after a
brief frown, she finds a solution, giving caregivers an opportu-
nity to discuss both more complicated math concepts and mak-
ing mistakes. It is impressive how few words Lin uses to convey
important foundational concepts of patterns, problem-solving,
and caring for animals—all in language accessible to toddlers.
Her signature painting style is both colorful and homey, its
black outlines and visible paint strokes exuding a relaxed feel.
Backmatter discusses the importance of learning about pat-
terns and empowers adults to extend the learning through con-
verson and by noticing patterns all around them. (This book
was reviewed digitally.)

An exceptionally layered and educational board book.
(Board book. 1-3)

DON’T MIX UP MY DINOSAUR!
Lloyd, Rosamund
Illus. by Spencer Wilson
Tiger Tales (10 pp.)
$8.99 | Jan. 17, 2023
978-1-66435-051-9

Spin the wheel to make some fun
dino creations!

The top right corner of this board book has been replaced
with a sturdy wheel that can be rotated to help children dis-
cover missing parts of the dinosaurs presented (“Don’t mix up
my dinosaur! Her horns are rough and rigid.” “Don’t mix up my
dinosaur! His club is lumpy and bumpy”). With each new page,
readers turn the wheel to find the matching part: a horn with
a corrugated texture, a club with raised bumps, a pink furry
tail, a sparkly crest, and a tail with a slightly raised texture. It’s
an engaging book that children will love—especially dinosaur
fanatics—but there are a few stumbles. On the back page, five
of the dinosaurs are identified by name, but the dino on the
cover (who appears to be a Tyrannosaurus rex) is not included. A
thumbnail of each dinosaur in the book is depicted on the back
of the wheel, but the placement doesn’t always correspond to
the answer. This isn’t a huge issue, but it does mean some extra
turning to ensure a correct answer. Some of the vocabulary
clues aren’t always exact. The “lumpy and bumpy” Ankylosau-
rus club looks “shiny and shimmery” like the Parasaurolophus.
Though small, these quibbles add up to a few distractions from
an otherwise wonderful book.

A flawed presentation but one that will nevertheless please
young dinophiles. (Board book. 1-3)

DON’T MIX UP MY PUPPY!
Lloyd, Rosamund
Illus. by Spencer Wilson
Tiger Tales (10 pp.)
$8.99 | Jan. 17, 2023
978-1-66435-052-6

Discover some exciting dog tales—or rather, tails—in this interactive board book.

New and future readers will meet a bevy of doggies as they
figure out which tail belongs to which canine. The dog on the
cover will have to share, as they aren’t given their own. Each
cue is presented in a formulaic text block: “Don’t mix up my
puppy! Her tail is spotted and dotted.” “Don’t mix up my puppy!
His tail is black and velvety.” Readers are then tasked with turn-
ing a blue wheel in the upper right-hand corner of the page to
find the correct tail—although once you’ve found the first, the
others appear in order when the wheel is turned clockwise. The
gimmick of the wheel relies on color and texture, with each tail
made of furry material. The back of the wheel features images
of the dogs, but these doesn’t align with the correct answers.
The five internal dogs are identified on the back of the book—
a silky terrier, poodle, Irish setter, dachshund, and Dalmatian,
but the cover dog (which may be a King Charles spaniel) is
never identified. The Irish setter tail makes a good pairing for
the cover, however, so each canine looks complete. The book
is charming, and the illustrations are delightful. The wheel’s
solid construction assures that this one will survive many spins
before retirement.

One doggone cute book! (Board book. 1-3)

DINOSAUR, DINOSAUR
HAD A FARM
McLean, Danielle
Illus. by Sanja Rešček
Tiger Tales (22 pp.)
$9.99 | Jan. 31, 2023
978-1-66435-057-1

Traditional nursery rhymes are dino-fied, from “Old
MacDino Had a Farm” to “Hey, Dino Diddle.”

Most of the rhymes here simply substitute the word dino
or dinosaur: “There Was a Farmer Who Had a Dog” becomes
“There Was a Dino Who Had a Dog,” and the line “and in my
lady’s chamber!” from “Goosey, Goosey, Gander” becomes “and
in my dino’s chamber!” By and large, that’s all that has been
done to make these rhymes different. The most creative redo
is “Little Miss Dino,” which rewrites the text for a twist on
the familiar rhyme. Otherwise, these are mostly lazy changes
at best, and at worst they completely throw off the cadence
(“Hickory, dickory, dock. / The mouse went up the dinosaur
clock”). Rešček’s illustrations are sweet enough, with childlike,
cutesy purple, orange, and green dinos. These images are fairly
straightforward, though there are some nice details like the
dino footprint pattern on the pajamas worn by one character,
images of dinosaurs on a bedspread, and even carved cutouts on
"A delightful tale of darling doggies who teach readers to work together while learning themselves."

**THE GREAT TRUCK SWITCHEROO**

In this board book based on the song “Here Comes Peter Cottontail,” an accident-prone rabbit delivers Easter treats.

The titular bunny trots along with a red wagon full of surprises but doesn't quite make a clean delivery. He cracks the eggs, spills the jelly beans, and eats the chocolate bunnies. But he hides what’s left of the treats and heads back down the bunny trail. Sattler’s illustrations contrast with the more straightforward text (on a page with the words “Hippity, hoppity / Easter's on its way,” we see Peter sprawled on his face, having taken a tumble), letting readers in on the joke that the bunny isn't doing what's expected. The final page provides questions that encourage a reread: “How many eggs can you find on each page?” for example. This addition challenges toddler readers with a seek-and-find–style revisit. With his blue overalls, floppy ears, and wide, expressive eyes, Peter cuts an endearing figure. The illustrations use spring pastels like baby blue, pale green, and pinks and purples. An adorable little snail with knowing eyes opens his reflections, dipping in a toe, watching circles ripple out. The quality of the writing paired with the complementary skillful illustrations make this worthy of readers’ bookshelves. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**Vibrant text and images come together to celebrate a rainy day. (Board book. 0-2)**

**SHE IS MAMA**

Porter, Mackenzie

Illus. by Heather Brockman Lee

Little Simon/Simon & Schuster (26 pp.)

$8.99 | March 14, 2023

978-1-66592-698-0

Mothers contain multitudes.

Each page of this board book in verse pairs an illustration of a mother and a child with a couplet celebrating a different aspect of maternal love. On the first page, we see a dark-skinned mother touching noses with a light-skinned child while the text describes a mother’s enduring presence (“She is Mama. / She is many things. / Mama is there / for whatever life brings”). Another page features a mother and child with dark skin and textured hair crossing a river on a log, while another shows a brown-skinned, hijab-wearing mother helping a child learn to ride a bicycle (“Mama has patience... / Mama is steady”). The book ends with a variety of diverse mothers and their children superimposed against a large heart. Though at times the text is uplifting, it occasionally lapses into clichés (“Mama is sunshine / each hug is a ray / to brighten your heart / on a cloudy day”), weak rhymes, and unnecessary repetition. The lively illustrations charmingly incorporate detail, color, and movement that make up for these weaknesses. Overall, this is a sweet celebration of motherhood that will hold up as a bedtime read for very young children. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**A gentle rhyming board book about the strength of mothers. (Board book. 0-4)**

**PUDDLE SONG**

Salas, Laura Purdie

Illus. by Monique Felix

Creative Editions/Creative Company (14 pp.)

$9.99 | March 14, 2023

978-1-56846-383-4

A rhyming, lyrical ode to the joy of puddles.

A diverse group of children frolic, splash, and explore the drips and drizzle on a blustery day. We see galoshes, a raincoat, an umbrella, windy swirls, and even a playful pup and a rescued snail. Salas’ simple, lilting text is full of satisfying phrases perfect for reading aloud like “stompers and jumpers” and “silver skin.” In just a few short pages, there are plenty of rich vocabulary words: wind-rattled and rippling, for example. Felix’s soft, detailed ink, watercolor, and crayon illustrations match the tone of the story. One impressive image shows a close-up of boots, midsplash in a puddle, the water spraying and droplets crashing like waves against the shore. Curiosity is apparent on the faces of the children, some in awe, others apprehensive, others still gleeful and carefree. The illustrations convey so much of little ones’ inner naturalist and scientist. One child gingerly extends a leaf to rescue a snail from the middle of a large puddle. In another image, a group kneels beside the water, looking at their reflections, dipping in a toe, watching circles ripple out. The quality of the writing paired with the complementary skillful illustrations make this worthy of readers’ bookshelves. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

**A “hippity hoppity” tale and a lovely way to get little readers excited for Easter. (Board book. 1-3)**

**THE GREAT TRUCK SWITCHEROO**

Shea, Bob

Illus. by Brian Won

Dial Books (32 pp.)

$8.99 | March 7, 2023

978-0-593-32595-7

Series: Adurable

In this latest in the Adurable series, three pups learn how to cooperate by sharing their trucks and teaching one another.

When Ms. Polly tells puppies Cheddar, Dig Doug, and Puddles that they’ll be making snickerdoodles, the little dogs
are eager to help out and taste test. Before they can have a nibble, Ms. Polly gives the pups an important task: “You must do busy work while I finish baking the cookies.” The job? Using one another’s trucks to move a pile of dirt across the road. They struggle at first with swapping vehicles and learning the maneuvers, but they eventually discover that if they help each other, they can get the job done and enjoy some cookies. Dogs and trucks are surefire toddler fodder, and Shea tells a relatable tale that children and adults will appreciate. Caregivers will get a kick out of a page filled with a barrage of preschooler-esque questions (“Are they done yet?” “I want to help!” “Are they done yet?”). With soft edges and anthropomorphized dogs, Won’s illustrations have tons of kid appeal. Most pages show the images against a white background, but the pages that really stand out are those with colorful backdrops. These irresistible pups demonstrate both the frustrations and benefits of collaboration with a friendly reminder that cooperation often leads to success. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A delightful tale of darling doggies who teach readers to work together while learning themselves. (Board book. 3-5)

**Kind Crocodile**

Timmers, Leo

Trans. by Bill Nagelkerke

Gecko Press (28 pp.)

$16.99 | March 7, 2023

978-1-77657-470-4

Animals under siege solicit a crocodile’s help.

A mouse running from a snake, a warthog fleeing a hyena, and an antelope escaping a cheetah implore “kind Crocodile” to rescue them. As each would-be victim runs up the croc’s snout in terror (eventually forming a tower of animals on its back), said reptile erupts in a fearsome growl, prompting the hapless hunter to skedaddle. All seems well until a lumbering rhino, a fierce lion hot upon its heels, also appeals for assistance. As the rhino climbs on, the other animals catapult onto its back, and the rhino squashes the crocodile, rendering it speechless. A wild series of events ensues, including a welcome comeuppance for the lion and a lot of unjustified self-congratulatory comments among the formerly beleaguered animal supplicants, who seem to have forgotten to thank the crocodile for their rescues. The sly croc gets some of its own back in a teasing manner, though, and all ends on a friendly, albeit flat note; the croc’s “joke” may confuse some readers. This tale, a Dutch import by way of New Zealand, is a bit on the thin side, especially on a crowded shelf of funny board books. Still, the humorously expressive illustrations are appealing, as are the prominent appearances of onomatopoeic animal howls incorporated at strategic points throughout. (This book was reviewed digitally.)

A diverting read on the theme of enough-is-enough but nothing special. (Board book. 3-6)
These titles earned the Kirkus Star:

NEARER MY FREEDOM by Monica Edinger & Lesley Younge ......168
THE WRONG KIND OF WEIRD by James Ramos ...................... 174
DELICIOUS MONSTERS by Liselle Sambury.......................... 176
LAST CHANCE DANCE by Lakita Wilson.............................. 177

A coming-of-age romance between two high school athletes in New Jersey. Sebastian Villeda, known as Bash the Flash, and Sandro Miceli, called the Italian Yeti, know of each other from school; they move in different circles even if they’re both athletes. Black and Mexican Bash is a track captain, and Italian American Sandro is a field captain, but they couldn’t be more different—at least in the ways they’re perceived by most people. In fact, Bash has lost his mother, and since he started exploring the Spanish language, he has a word for how he feels: cansado, or tired, weary, and miserable. His White stepfather works nights, and the two don’t spend much time together. Sandro, on the other hand, has a large family, but amid the crowded, noisy chaos of eight family members sharing a single bathroom, his overworked parents don’t really talk to him. As the two seniors come together, they realize they have more in common than they’d thought, and an unlikely friendship starts turning into something more. Although the boys’ backgrounds and upbringings are fresh and intriguing, the chapters that alternate between their first-person perspectives are derailed by the stream-of-consciousness narration and characterization that lacks depth. Their explicitly described sexual explorations and awakenings notwithstanding, their relationship is lacking in genuine chemistry, making the slow prose drag. Unsatisfying. (Fiction. 15-18)

A teen with powerful magic embarks on a life-changing trek through a Jamaican jungle.

Eighteen-year-old Victoria works at Exotic Lands Touring Company guiding wealthy clients on jungle treks. She is a Wildblood: Her blood science abilities allow her to protect herself and the customers, but despite their powers, Wildbloods are treated as inferior in society. Victoria desperately wants her
As we hurtle toward the end of yet another year and celebrations of high-profile 2022 books wind down, anticipation for 2023 releases is already building. However, there’s still time to pick up 10 fantastic teen reads from this year in a variety of genres that you might have missed. Many of these are ideal adult crossover books as well.

**TJ Powar Has Something To Prove** by Jesmeen Kaur Deo (Viking, June 7): A Punjabi Sikh Canadian teen reckons with beauty standards that do not make room for naturally hirsute young women in this honest, touching, and frequently hilarious novel. TJ’s questions have a ripple effect on her friendships and romantic and family relationships.

**Bad at Love** by Gabriela Martins (Underlined, Aug. 30): Brazilian American Sasha, desperate for a scoop that will secure her a college scholarship, fake dates Brazilian pop star Daniel, who is nothing like his bad boy reputation. This charming romance will keep pages turning: Can they move past deception to something real?

**Well, That Was Unexpected** by Jesse Q. Sutanto (Delacorte, Sept. 27): Sharlot is visiting her Indonesian relatives for the first time. Jakarta boy George is excited about launching his new app. Neither realizes their parents secretly created online dating profiles for them—and the results are every bit as entertaining as you’d expect.

**Inuunira: My Story of Survival** by Brian Koonoo, illustrated by Ben Shannon (Inhabit Media, Oct. 18): This nerve-wracking true story of wilderness peril traces a caribou-hunting trip in Nunavut during which Koonoo experienced a series of life-threatening misadventures. Beautiful illustrations and photographs enhance his account of using a lifetime’s worth of Inuit survival skills to make it home.

**We Are All We Have** by Marina Budhos (Wendy Lamb/Random, Oct. 25): This textured, passionate coming-of-age story follows Pakistani American Rania and Mexican American Carlos, undocumented teens who go on the run (with Rania’s little brother in tow), fall in love, unravel secrets from Rania’s family history, and confront uncertain futures.

**This Is Our Place** by Vitor Martins, translated by Larissa Helena (PUSH/Scholastic, Nov. 1):

Eight Sunflower St., a house in a small Brazilian city, narrates this creative, thought-provoking tale of three queer teens. Ana, Greg, and Beto successively inhabit it across the decades from 2000 to 2020, exploring their identities, living through family challenges, and growing into themselves.

**Hanged!: Mary Surratt & the Plot To Assassinate Abraham Lincoln** by Sarah Miller (Random House Studio, Nov. 8): This riveting account presents a historical case in which many observers—then and now—believe that an innocent woman was executed. Miller models critical investigative skills as she describes how Mary Surratt came to be accused of conspiring with John Wilkes Booth to kill the president.

**Reader, I Murdered Him** by Betsy Cornwell (Clarion/HarperCollins, Nov. 15): *Jane Eyre* continues to be widely read, but Cornwell’s bold, dark, and provocative work in conversation with the beloved classic can be appreciated even by readers unfamiliar with Adèle Varens, Mr. Rochester’s ward, who, in this incarnation, is a queer vigilante.

**House of Yesterday** by Deeba Zargarpur (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Nov. 29): This genre-crossing, genuinely haunting debut centers Sara, an Afghan Uzbek American girl whose life is in upheaval due to painful relationship conflicts. Even as she loses her dear grandmother to dementia, she meets her again in the ghostly form of Bibi Jan’s younger self.

**Sunburn** by Andi Watson, illustrated by Simon Gane (Image Comics, Nov. 29): This sumptuous and atmospheric graphic novel immerses readers in a Greek island summer as a sheltered mid-20th-century English girl, longing for excitement and a change from the ordinary, visits her parents’ childless friends, experiences first love, and has her innocent trust battered.

Laura Simeon is a young readers’ editor.
deserved promotion to team leader, a step toward the freedom she lost when the company kidnapped her as a little girl. Her boss agrees but with conditions attached. Victoria must go on her next expedition with Dean, her light-skinned, White-passing Wildblood ex—who is also the White company owner's adopted son. And she must impress Black American gold miner Laertes Thorn and his companions on a potentially deadly trip to the Gilded Orchard in search of gold. Victoria is immediately smitten with Thorn, and the feeling is seemingly mutual. Still, she has her plate full between fending off the jungle spirits and creatures with strong pacing, and the suspense will keep readers intrigued from the outset. Victoria is a sympathetic protagonist with a painful past and a persevering spirit.

A page-turning adventure set in a vividly imagined world. (Fantasy. 14-18)
Cole breathes life into each young woman; Deja's character is developed beyond her role in supporting Alicia's growing racial awareness. A girls' discussion group led by Dr. Kareem, a local academic, offers another avenue for conversation and exploration. The specter of predatory men is ever present but never overshadows the complexity and strength of young women fighting to weave their own stories. Their conversations are varied, from the erasure of some queer identities to the intersections of racism and sexism to grief and mourning one's childhood. This book is as wide in scope as it is economical in its language.

**THE HEADMASTER’S LIST**
de la Cruz, Melissa
Roaring Brook Press (400 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 28, 2023
978-1-250-82738-8

Four teens are in a car crash that leaves one of them dead and badly injures another.

Eighteen-year-old Spencer Sandoval is an ambitious overachiever who, unlike some of her more privileged peers, has worked ceaselessly to secure a spot on the coveted headmaster’s list at her predominantly White Los Angeles prep school. Serious physical injuries are the less troublesome parts of the trauma Spencer sustains from the crash, however—she also experiences traumatic flashbacks about the accident, all the more upsetting because she can't remember much from the night it occurred. The third-person narration and Spencer’s continued Vicodin use lend themselves well to sustaining the tension, with transcripts from a true-crime podcast created by a fellow Armstrong Prep student interspersed throughout. When Spencer teams up with Jackson Chen, her ex-boyfriend Ethan Amoroso’s best friend, in an effort to find out the truth about the accident, they develop a relationship that will pull in romance fans. Unsubtle foreshadowing may lead to readers’ working out pieces of the mystery before Spencer does. Still, some original details, such as the presence of Ripley, a service dog given to Spencer, add to this story’s appeal. Ethnically ambiguous Spencer is described as brown with immigrant parents; names cue ethnic diversity in several secondary characters.

A twisty thriller with a likable and complicated protagonist. (Thriller 13-18)

**THE FAMILY FORTUNA**
Eagar, Lindsay
Candlewick (400 pp.)
$19.99 | March 7, 2023
978-0-7636-9235-3

An 1880s traveling circus star wishes to be more than a monster on display.

Born with feathers, a beak, and solid black eyes, Avita is the apple of her father's eye and his circus’s most profitable act, biting the heads off live chickens for crowds. The book’s opening lavishly sets the stage, including the circus’s garish delights—such as star stripper Luna, Avita’s beautiful, icy older sister, described as being “sex itself” even at 14 and working the “kootchie tent” since before her first period. Her brother—“born with dwarfism” but too many physical ailments to perform—is the circus’s brainy manager and their father’s punching bag. Avita’s first-person, past-tense narration vacillates wildly between being a true believer in her ringmaster father’s vision and a more jaded view; the end result is jarring. Other characters’ viewpoints include both the past and present tenses. Most interesting about Avita’s characterization is how she views her “hideous” face as a blessing even as she wishes people would look past it; less interesting is her leaning into self-objectification. Avita’s first crush kick-starts her quest to be seen as more than a monster as her family travels to a portentous city—and a showdown with their greatest rival. Surprisingly humanizing at heart is the unraveling family’s dynamic, set amid a coarse, exploitative environment run by a charismatic, tyrannical showman. Unfortunately, Avita’s eventual triumphant ending rings hollow and pat. Central characters are cued White; there is diversity in the supporting cast.

Intense but uneven. (Fabulism. 17-adult)

**NEARER MY FREEDOM**
The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano by Himself
Edinger, Monica & Lesley Younge
Zest Books (216 pp.)
$17.99 paper | $38.65 PLB
March 7, 2023
978-1-72846-407-7
978-1-72845-098-8 PLB

An important narrative presented with clarity.

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself (1789) remains one of the best-known stories about the life of an enslaved African man in the 18th century. Equiano was born in the kingdom of Benin and kidnapped and sold into slavery as a young person. His experiences of the Middle Passage, described in detail, were brutal. After working in the Caribbean, he was shipped to a plantation in Virginia and a life of bondage. When he was
sold to a British naval officer, Equiano was given a new name against his will, but he formed relationships that allowed him to learn to read and write. Through it all, he never lost his dream of liberty and the resolve to purchase his freedom. Once he was successful, he took on an apprenticeship as a hairdresser and eventually had more adventures, traveling to Turkey, among other places. His autobiography formed part of his abolitionist efforts and was important to the movement that eventually ended the institution of slavery in Britain. This highly successful adaptation of his original work uses Equiano’s own words, turned into found verse and supplemented with important historical context that makes this primary source accessible. The overall result is exceptionally readable as well as informative.

An excellent way to understand a remarkable individual and his times. (creating a verse version, timeline, glossary, source notes, bibliography, further reading, index, photo acknowledgements) (Nonfiction. 12-18)

NERDCRUSH
Emrich, Alisha
Running Press Kids (272 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
9780762480685

Cosplay culture takes center stage in this winsome romance.

Ramona Lambert has a hard time being herself. The Black high school junior’s social life mostly takes place in the cosplay universes where she can thrive as Rel, the character she’s created and has been dressing up as for several years. Ramona decides to email Caleb Woolf, the White boy from school she’s crushing on—but as Rel. The pair begin exchanging long missives, and Ramona becomes unsure of what to do, especially when she develops a relationship with Caleb in real life, too. As Ramona struggles socially, she also feels misunderstood at home, where her parents question her dream of attending Savannah College of Art and Design’s illustration program. Emrich’s debut showcases a multidimensional protagonist navigating the predominantly White spaces of comic conventions and anime and manga fandom while trying to fit in at school, where there are few other Black students. Meanwhile, she’s mocked by her cousins for her interests even as her college freshman sister earns accolades for joining a sorority and her relationship with Caleb ebbs and flows. Ramona’s yearnings to find her way and to be understood are relatable and angst-filled. The peek into the world of comics and cosplay is fun and adds depth. The mother-daughter relationship, in particular, is well depicted.

An enjoyable look at identity and what it means to belong and to stand out. (Romance. 12-17)

RAVENSONG
Fay, Cayla
Simon & Schuster (368 pp.)
$19.99 | March 14, 2023
978-1-66590-529-9

A demon-hunting war god in a teenage body falls in love with a human.

Until she crosses paths with Alexandria, a newcomer to their Massachusetts town, Neve never saw the point of making connections with humans. Neve is a Morrigan; she and her older sisters are a triad of Irish war gods living life after life as they fight demons at the entrance to Hell. However, only 17 in this current incarnation, Neve is still mostly human. She won’t be granted access to her full powers or memories of past lives until she turns 18. Alexandria isn’t scared off by Neve’s sullenness and accepts the existence of demons with surprising ease, even as one is apparently out to get her. As Neve falls in love with Alexandria and makes human friends, the
secrets begin to pile up. But when the truth begins to unravel, it’s not anything the sisters ever thought possible. Neve is a refreshingly prickly character. She softens somewhat as she forms human connections and experiences gooey love feelings, but she always maintains a fiery demeanor. She and Alexandria, both White, are a delightful romantic pair with charming chemistry. Their diverse group of friends is a fun bunch who will hopefully be more developed in the second installment of this duology. Irish lore is naturally incorporated as the straightforward story becomes increasingly action-packed.

A fast-paced, enticing blend of urban fantasy and queer romance. (Fantasy. 13-18)

The racial trauma handbook for teens
CBT Skills to Heal from the Personal & Intergenerational Trauma of Racism
Hill, Tamara
Instant Help Books (176 pp.)
$17.95 paper | Feb. 1, 2023
978-1-64848-012-6
Series: Instant Help Social Justice

A multiracial therapist for children and families shares her personal experiences and professional expertise, guiding readers in confronting a topic that is critical to emotional and physical well-being.

This compact yet comprehensive guide begins with exploring personal experiences of race, family and intergenerational dynamics, and the impact of racism on the self. Many topics are explored, including the additional layers of complexity added by differences in socio-economic status, colorism, and more. The work then covers what readers can do to move forward, with chapters such as “Coping With Racial Trauma Inside Your Body,” “Breaking the Cycle,” and “Understanding Racial Grief and Loss.” Other sections detail treatment options, explaining both when to urgently seek outside help and how to make progress independently through techniques such as self-talk, seeking role models, grounding, engaging in self-care, and so on. The author’s tone is empowering; she empathetically acknowledges challenges but also emphasizes what readers can do to break free from the consequences of the pain brought about by racism. Guided activities and lists offer specific tips and suggestions, balancing the illuminating and never overwhelming contextual data and historical information. While the book is explicitly addressed to and uses examples relevant to Black and Black biracial teens, readers of other backgrounds who have endured racism will find much content that resonates with and proves helpful to them.

A compassionate, practical self-help guide for understanding and coping with the trauma of racism. (Nonfiction. 12-18)

The everlasting road
Kineew, Wab
Tundra Books (272 pp.)
$17.99 | Jan. 10, 2023
9780735269033

This sequel to Walking in Two Worlds (2021) returns readers to the virtual and real worlds in which a teen girl navigates grief, confronts those who wish to undermine her, and grows in self-confidence.

Picking up soon after Anishinaabe teen Bugz has lost her older brother, Waawaate, to cancer, the book immediately plunges readers back into the action. Bugz is officially dating Feng, the Uighur boy who lives on the reservation with his doctor aunt, but in the depths of her grief, she spends most of her time in the virtual realm of the Floraverse with her latest creation, a Waawaate-bot. Meanwhile, the hostile players who ganged up on Bugz in the Floraverse and even destroyed the sacred Thunderbird’s Nest on the Rez have become the target of the Waawaate-bot, who grows increasingly powerful, menacing, and out of control, crossing worlds in ways that should not be possible. Seeing the terrifying impact of her well-intentioned creation forces Bugz to look honestly at how she is coping with her brother’s loss, especially when Feng receives shocking news from China. The story also follows Waawaate as his soul travels Gaagigewkinina, or the Everlasting Road, in the afterlife. Kineew (Anishinaabe) presents readers with another well-paced novel set in a vividly realized world in which young people create new paths that are grounded in community and cultural continuity.

Plenty of thrills alongside thoughtful, poignant explorations of love and loss. (Anishinaabe terms and pronunciation guide, author’s note, resources) (Science fiction. 12-18)

This time it’s real
Liang, Ann
Scholastic (352 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
9781338827118

High school senior Eliza Lin, who recently returned to Beijing with her family, is stunned when her school assignment goes viral.

Eliza’s English essay, published on the school blog, describes her relationship with her devoted boyfriend in vivid prose—and turns out to resonate with lovelorn readers worldwide. It even catches the attention of a staff member at Craneswift, a website known for jump-starting the careers of acclaimed writers. Craneswift offers Eliza a six-month paid internship during which she’ll write weekly blog posts about her relationship and offer advice on romance. The internship is everything an aspiring writer could dream of, but its success rests upon a lie. Having grown up moving from country to country due to her mother’s career,
Eliza has difficulties forming friendships, much less romantic relationships. Her boyfriend might be imaginary, but the opportunity is too good to pass up. Eliza strikes a bargain with Chinese American classmate Caz Song, a television heartthrob, to participate in a fake dating scheme in return for her help with his college application essays. The relationship can also rehabilitate his reputation, battered after a recent scandal. Pragmatism soon gives way to soul-searching as Eliza finds herself falling for Caz, whose smooth public persona hides unexpected vulnerabilities. This compulsively readable story comments on identity, social pressures, and the demands of the entertainment industry while developing an angst-y, heartstring-tugging romance between two sympathetic leads.

**Irresistible fun with unexpected sincerity.** (Romance. 13-18)

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**I WILL FIND YOU AGAIN**
Lyu, Sarah
Simon & Schuster (304 pp.)
$19.99 | March 14, 2023
978-1-5344-6515-2

Chase Ohara, a 17-year-old over-achiever, grapples with her ex-girlfriend's death while battling addiction.

“Meet me in Montauk.” That was the last text Lia Vestiano sent Chase. It was the SOS signal they used whenever they needed to escape Meadowlark, the Long Island town they called home. The two girls shared outsider status in their predominantly White community: Chase is Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Taiwanese, while adopted Lia described herself as “ethnically Korean, culturally Italian.” But now Lia is gone. The novel flashes back as Chase tries to piece together the facts: Did their breakup tear Lia apart? Did parental pressure push her over the edge? Was it an accident, or did she die by suicide? Chase teams up with Hunter van Leeuwen, Lia's new White girlfriend, for answers. An unreliable narrator, Chase's dependence on fictional drug Focentra—like Adderall, but stronger—distorts her grasp of reality. Overcome by guilt over their breakup and jealousy of Hunter, she tries to make sense of what happened. Muddling through college admissions, Chase wrestles with the mental strain of relentlessly seeking money, power, and status in her affluent community where students stoop to underhanded means of ensuring success. Unable to make space for grief, Chase emotionally unravels. Though this mind-bending novel features skillful character development, the tone shift from tragic romance to school cheating ring scandal is jarring, undermining the cohesiveness of the whole.

An impassioned and bold psychological drama that loses focus. (resources) (Thriller. 14-18)
Tantalizingly introduces readers to far-flung scientific wonders.

**THE BIG BACKYARD**

Khadija's friendship and beliefs are painfully tested as they are thrust into a war involving forbidden magic, flesh-eating jinn, and powerful shaitan, or demonic spirits. Alternating between Khadija and Jacob form an unlikely kinship; they both long for freedom and have experienced great losses that have shaped their biased preconceptions of one another. But they soon encounter two very different revolutionary groups: the violent zealots who want equality for all. Jacob's and Khadija's close since they were little, but things have been shaky in their friend group since Junie's secret fling with Graham last summer ended badly. Junie's changing relationship with Graham, one that offers a chance of real love, is heartfelt and believable, and the various side plots are equally engaging. The portrayal of Junie's relationship with her single mother is touching. The one that offers a chance of real love, is heartfelt and believable, and the various side plots are equally engaging. The portrayal of Junie's relationship with her single mother is touching. The large cast of characters can at times be difficult to track, but the primary characters are well developed. Themes of trauma, grief, and forgiveness are balanced with witty narration and clever banter in a way that shows that Markum respects teens' ability to engage with complexity.

A layer story of love, found family, growing up, and embracing change. (Fiction. 14-18)

**REBEL OF FIRE AND FLIGHT**

Despite choosing flight, a 16-year-old girl must fight for her freedom in Marufu's South Asian-inspired fantasy debut.

**THE BIG BACKYARD**

A rare look at our astronomical neighborhood's outermost reaches.

Even top-tier solar system tours seldom devote more than glances beyond the known planets to the outlying Kuiper belt and the Oort cloud. But as Miller reports in enough specific detail to satisfy even demanding young sky watchers, recent observations have revealed quite a lot going on out there—from new dwarf planets and exciting strange interstellar visitors like 'Oumuamua to immense swirling waves caused by interactions between solar winds and cosmic dust. The author threads in recaps of the solar system's formation and the history of our search for the outer planets (persuasively explaining the position of most planetary scientists that Pluto is a regular, not a dwarf, planet) and closes with annotated lists of helpful print and web resources to launch further investigations. All of this he enhances with a mix of astrophotos and his own schematic diagrams of orbits and magnetic fields as well as photorealistic depictions of space probes, comets, and relevant celestial phenomena. There are no human figures in view, but all of the dwarf planets found to date line up for (as it were) star turns. This inviting work is perspicacious adjusting, particularly for readers who haven't imagined much beyond a star, a handful of planets, and a few extra rocks.

Tantalizingly introduces readers to far-flung scientific wonders. (glossary, source notes, bibliography, index, photo credits) (Nonfiction. 12-18)

**VOLODYMYR ZELENSKYY**

A panegyric profile of Ukraine's Putin-defying president.

Expertly whipping a few morsels of information drawn exclusively from English-language news stories and recent interviews into a puff pastry of praise, Nardo tracks his subject's career from law student to stand-up comedian, dancer, and popular media star—playing, in one TV show, an idealistic high school teacher who is catapulted into the presidency on the strength of a viral video rant. Apparently widely identified with that character, he went on to win a real presidential election in 2019 and, along with taking on corrupt oligarchs, responded to the Russian invasion in February 2022 by unexpectedly proving himself to be very effective at...
TRINE RISING
2022 CIPA EVVY Awards: 1st Place in Fantasy

“Good characterization and well-described superpowers strengthen this series opener.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“…entertaining, and nail-bitingly good.”
—Readers’ Favorite, 5 Stars

TRINE FALLACY
2022 CIPA EVVY Awards: 1st Place in Fantasy

“A mature and deftly plotted fantasy sequel by a shrewd author.”
—Kirkus Reviews

“…breathtaking plot twists that will engage and enthral the reader.”
—IndieReader, 5 Stars

TRINE REVEALATION
2022 NYC Big Book Awards: Epic Fantasy

“A highly inventive and gripping installment of an impressive fantasy saga.”
—Kirkus Reviews (starred review) ★

“The satisfying climax to this epic fantasy series blends deep worldbuilding with lots of heart.”
—BookLife Reviews

For All Inquiries, Please Email cindy@ckdonnelly.com • cindy@kibbecreative.com ckdonnelly.com
leading with great resolve the defense of his country and inviting, the author notes, comparisons with Winston Churchill in the Second World War. And if this account only covers events up to early July 2022 and so leaves off with the invasion’s outcome much in doubt, it vigorously argues the case that Zelensky, who is conscious of the world’s gaze and the importance of defending democracy, is the right person for this role. Unlike the skimpy assortment of public photos showing him posing in war zones or with his wife (but not children) and various world leaders, the backmatter offers young hero worshippers and report writers sources and resources aplenty.

Timely but neither judicious nor able to offer much historical perspective. (source notes, timeline, further research, index, picture credits) (Biography. 12-18)

WALLS AND WELCOME MATS
Immigration and the American Dream
Ortiz, Lars
Twenty-First Century/Lerner (120 pp.)
$37.32 PLB | Feb. 7, 2023
978-1-72842-399-9

A fact-based look at both historical and modern arrivals in what is now the United States, including European colonization, profiles of notable immigrants, and an overview of current events.

Ortiz approaches the complex history and issues surrounding migration with a scholarly but accessible and compassionate tone, beginning with humanity’s early fossil records. Readers explore early Colonists’ travel to North America and the reasons behind it. The book continues, covering modern immigration, how authorities define legal versus illegal immigration, and how someone becomes a U.S. citizen. The text aptly supplements readers’ basic history knowledge with often overlooked aspects of America’s past, including the effects on and of Indigenous peoples, contributions immigrants have made to American industry and culture, and the backlash immigrants often face. The plight and power of new arrivals are not soft-pedaled: Readers are given facts on topics such as slavery, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the impact of the Mexican-American War, and the xenophobia faced by people of many different origins. Nativism and its impact on modern immigration policy, as well as the fallout of Covid-19, are also explored along with common immigration debates and myths. Readers are encouraged to explore their own families’ immigration stories, no matter how far back they go. A combination of real-life examples, critical historical context, and engaging graphics and data presentation makes this a solid choice.

An inviting, thorough, and accessible introduction to an important and perpetually relevant topic. (glossary, source notes, bibliography, further reading, index, photo credits) (Nonfiction. 13-18)

THE ISLAND
Preston, Natasha
Delacorte (376 pp.)
$12.99 paper | Feb. 28, 2023
978-0-593-48149-3

Paisley, a true-crime podcaster, finds herself at the center of a mystery.

Six teen influencers in the worlds of beauty, gaming, books, and more are invited to a late medieval Gothic era–themed resort, the brainchild of a billionaire who has spared no expense in building an eerie amusement park on the newly created, human-made Jagged Island. The influencers get to see everything before it’s open to the public—they have one exclusive weekend of posting to their collective audiences. The rides are great, but the staff is limited, and a big storm is closing in. Things turn sinister when one of the influencers goes missing, the island’s internet connection is sabotaged, and the cell service is jammed. Paisley needs to use her intuition, honed from digging into murder cases, to figure out who is doing this and why. Preston displays her usual exceptional pacing, with murderous delight sprinkled throughout the plot. The author effectively presents a mystery littered with clues, including red herrings, shown through the lens of a paranoid protagonist. In essence, this is a slasher film in book form, filled with the gore and violence fans anticipate and expect. Most characters, including Paisley; read White; an island staff member and one influencer are cued Black.

Will leave readers looking nervously over their shoulders. (Thriller. 12-18)

THE WRONG KIND
OF WEIRD
Ramos, James
Inkyard Press (320 pp.)
$18.99 | Jan. 3, 2023
978-1-335-42858-5

A high school senior finds himself at a romantic crossroads in a novel that mixes geeky content with Jane Austen.

Cameron Carson’s membership in Geeks and Nerds United, or G.A.N.U., a school club he’s in with best friends D’Anthony and Jocelyn, is a source of pride and joy and a big part of his identity. But Cam has a potentially explosive secret that may well shake the foundations of his social circle and perhaps even of the whole school: his clandestine summer fling with super popular student council president and theater snob Karla Ortega. But as senior year starts and he and Karla continue to hook up behind everybody’s backs while working together backstage on the school production of Pride and Prejudice, Cam starts to wonder if this is what he really wants—especially when he starts hanging out with Mackenzie, a new G.A.N.U. member. She has a penchant for snarky conversation and a shared obsession with...
“Absolutely brilliant!”

“For the past 20 years I’ve been watching the superhero genre and been waiting for someone to make a breakthrough—advancing the superhero genre to new heights by dealing more maturely and seriously with its underlying themes. Some people have managed to do it in the comics themselves, but I haven’t seen anyone do it in novel form. I think you did it.”

—David Farland, Bestselling Author of The Runelords
all things anime. Ramos’ delightful novel oozes an energetic, all-encompassing love for geek culture (especially Dragon Ball) and Austen. The main cast is Black and Latine, and some central characters are queer. Cam’s romantic entanglements are developed upon the backbone of a story about identity, growth, and learning to connect with people across different sides of a school divide.

A charmingly nerdy and romantic coming-of-age story. (Fiction. 14-18)

DELICIOUS MONSTERS
Sambury, Liselle
McElderry (512 pp.)
$21.99 | Feb. 28, 2023
978-1-66590-349-3

A haunted mansion is the site of unmistakable horrors and horrific mistakes.

Seventeen-year-old Daisy Odlin recounts constantly seeing, feeling, and fearing the dead; visions of the dead lying atop her are paired with memories of an abusive 21-year-old ex-boyfriend, betraying an unrelenting sadness that Daisy theorizes the dead feed on. With an estranged father and a volatile relationship with her mother, Daisy, whose family has origins in Trinidad and Tobago, doesn’t resist when an opportunity arises for mother and daughter to leave Toronto for northern Ontario and an inherited home. A decade later, Black film student Brittney is investigating what actually happened to Daisy, her mother, and the notoriously deadly house for the web series Haunted. Brittney’s own abusive mother was a guest there after Daisy’s mother turned it into an Airbnb, and it was a positive turning point that she wrote about in a bestselling memoir that put the so-called Miracle Mansion on the map. In parallel narratives, Brittney and Daisy—with the help of a documentary filmmaker and psychic, respectively—seek truths while struggling with the realities of their respective mothers. The paranormal logistics are complex, and while Daisy is at the center of it all, Brittney’s investigation cuts through to discover layers upon layers of trauma that imbue the house with its supposed supernatural, if not psychological, power. As the saying goes, haunted people haunt people.

A story that is careful to make its ghosts and monsters painfully real. (author’s note, content warnings) (Thriller. 14-18)

CHAOS THEORY
Stone, Nic
Crown (288 pp.)
$18.99 | $21.99 PLB | Feb. 28, 2023
978-0-593-30770-0
978-0-593-30771-7 PLB

Andy and Shelbi find love while navigating mental health challenges in suburban Georgia.

It all starts when 18-year-old Andy Criddle drunkenly texts the wrong number. The mistaken recipient ends up offering him emotional support and asks him not to drive drunk. Despite agreeing, he gets behind the wheel—and into an accident. After being charged with a DUI, Andy, the son of a congresswoman running for Senate, is barred from attending his graduation and shamed in the press. Meanwhile, 16-year-old AP physics student Shelbi Augustine, who finds car crashes interesting for scientific reasons, picks up Andy’s wallet at the scene of the wreck. She returns it to him in class and gives him a pep talk before nervously rushing away. The judge orders Andy to complete community service at a soup kitchen where Shelbi regularly volunteers, and when their paths cross again, she confesses that she was the person he was texting. As they grow closer, Shelbi, who has bipolar depression, has Andy sign a friendship agreement. Rule No. 6 reads, “Do not, under any circumstances, fall in love with Shelbi.” Naturally, this is a rule destined to be broken. The comfort and ease the two have are mirrored by Stone’s breezy writing. Her casual tone acts as a potent salve for the heart-wrenching scenes and the searing portrayal of healing. Most characters are Black; Andy’s dad is White, and Shelbi’s paternal grandmother is from India.

A thoughtful, realistically messy emotional wallop that destigmatizes mental disorders. (author’s note) (Romance. 14-18)

AND OTHER MISTAKES
Turner, Erika
Feiwel & Friends (320 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 14, 2023
978-1-250-83484-3

After a hard junior year, a Las Vegas teen tries to get back on track.

When Aaliyah, a 17-year-old Black girl, was outed by an older church member, her already unpredictable home life became that much more unstable. While her alcoholic, abusive dad took the news of her queerness in stride, her mom tried “to pray the gay away,” attacking her with Scripture and forcing Bible study on her. Aali’s mental and physical health deteriorated, and she lost her role as cross-country team captain. Her one constant through all the stress was her Filipina best friend, Yasmin—but Yas kissed her and then ghosted her, leaving Aali alone, feeling insecure, and trying to make sense of everything. Her grades suffered, and she ended
the year on academic probation. As senior year begins, Aali is determined to find joy again and make the new year count. The complexities of engaging in self-exploration while struggling for survival is a thread explored through multiple characters, some with more depth than others. Self-harm as a coping strategy is also present but not addressed in depth. Turner weaves together multiple aspects of dysfunction present in family, friend, and romantic relationships, and while there is no perfect ending, readers are left with hope.

An emotional read with the clear and important message that your mistakes don't define you. (Fiction. 14-18)

DAUGHTERS OF ODUMA
Utomi, Moses Ose
Atheneum (368 pp.)
$19.99 | Feb. 7, 2023
978-1-66591-813-8

Girls battle for their families in this West African–inspired world.

Sixteen-year-old Sis Dirt used to compete in the girls' martial art of Bow- ing. Their training builds up to the God Bow tournament, from which come new recruits who become sisters in a Fam. As an elder and the Second sister of the Mud Fam, which only has the bare minimum of five members, Dirt is tasked with coaching younger Bowers in hopes of boosting their Fam's status and replenishing their ranks. If their numbers drop below five, Mud Fam will be disbanded. When she turns 17, each sister officially becomes a woman: She has her Scarring ceremony, travels to Antie Yaya's compound, and leaves her Fam forever—and Dirt turns 17 shortly after the next tournament, making victory more crucial. Sis Webba, the First and their star Bower, has a chance of winning it all, but when another competitor injures her with an illegal move, the family's hopes fall on Dirt, who is next in line but out of practice, out of shape, and lacking the confidence that she can save them. Mud Fam's underdog status and Dirt's journey are easy to root for. The immersive worldbuilding paints a picture of a community with a compelling social structure and lore, populated by Black girls who glory in their strength and large size. The fluid dialogue is written in an expressive pidgin.

A vividly realized fantasy world centering strong girls and chosen family. (map) (Fantasy. 12-18)

LAST CHANCE DANCE
Wilson, Lakita
Viking (336 pp.)
$18.99 | Feb. 21, 2023
978-0-593-52561-6

A senior tries to get over an unexpected breakup by participating in her high school's end-of-school dance for unfulfilled crushes.

With only three weeks left before graduation, Leila Bean is shattered when Dev Rajan, her boyfriend since freshman year, suddenly dumps her despite their previous plans to keep dating in college. Bree, Leila's best friend, encourages her to sign up for Baldwin High's Last Chance Dance, which matches seniors with up to three former crushes they never dated—if the interest is reciprocated—so they can decide whom to ask to their final dance. Leila, a Black bisexual girl, is surprised when she's set up with all three of her picks: super fit social media influencer Kai, charismatic activist Mason, and beautiful book-loving Eva. There's also an unwelcome, algorithm-chosen wild-card match: her snarky lab partner and nemesis, Tre'. Leila agrees to give each of her matches a chance except for Tre', who she initially refuses to believe is a serious contender—until she realizes he's more than just a class clown. Wilson's part breakup tale, part rom-com isn't just about falling in and out of love; it's also a story about Leila's rediscovering herself in the face of loss, learning from her mistakes, and giving people a chance to redeem themselves. Set in Prince George's County, Maryland, a prosperous, predominantly Black suburb of Washington, D.C., the story mostly centers Black characters; Dev is Indian American, and Mason is White.

A charming and hopeful story about life post-heartbreak. (Fiction. 12-18)
A young twin realizes that she and her sister are different in this debut picture book about identity.

Stella and Paige are twins, but they don’t look the same and they like different things. Both get frustrated when people treat them as though they’re the same or interchangeable: “We have the same last name, but we are not the same person!” Others consider the girls’ differences strange, believing that they should be more alike because they’re twins. With everyone comparing them, Stella starts wondering if she’s the lesser twin. But when her older brother asks for her help because she’s better at drawing, Stella realizes she’s more skilled than her twin at other things, too. Both girls have strengths, and together they make a great pair.

Telling the enjoyable story through Stella’s voice, Bader creates an authentic look at how frustrated the girl is by other people’s expectations. The short sentences and accessible vocabulary make this a good choice for newly independent readers. Soto’s soft-edged, digital cartoon illustrations clearly portray the White twins’ differences in style and personality, bolstering the text with visual evidence. The drawing of the sisters’ brother depicts characteristics of both twins in his coloration and features, showing their family resemblance without reducing their distinctions. Stella and Paige’s world is filled with diverse friends, neighbors, and teammates, heightening the theme that all people are unique in their looks, interests, styles, and abilities.

An engaging celebration of self-love from the perspective of a twin.
The teachings of an 18th-century rabbi are explored in this hybrid translation, commentary, and reference book.

Born in Pintshov, Poland, in 1696, Rabbi Yehonatan Eybeshitz delivered teachings that have influenced generations of Jewish scholars, but they have been obscured in the public eye due to a lack of translations from the Hebrew and his esoteric writing style. After a serendipitous encounter with Barber, an internationally acclaimed rabbi and motivational speaker, Eybeshitz’s descendant Julie Gerber was inspired to produce an English translation of her ancestor’s rich body of work. This collaboration between Barber and Gerber resulted in the 2021 book *Pearls of Wisdom*, which offered English readers an unfettered translation of the rabbi’s oeuvre. Recognizing the difficulties that many lay readers may have in grasping Eybeshitz’s writings, Barber offers this sequel to the general public, which is a more accessible translation of the rabbi’s works accompanied by a wealth of contextual and religious commentary. The book begins with a brief look at the life and legacy of “a charismatic rabbi, an expert on Jewish law, a master Kabbalist, a prolific writer, a peacemaker, and so much more.” The bulk of the volume focuses on the “Torah Giant’s” thoughts on topics that span from angels and divine communication to fish and tefillin. On wealth, for instance, Eybeshitz cautions: “Money doesn’t just go into a person’s pocket or bank account; it also goes to a person’s head.” On the Exodus story where it lets people visit websites by thinking about them; conduct conversations with thoughts; record video of everything they see; and form a collective “Meta-Mind” to vote on referenda or serve as jurors in criminal cases. The downside is that the government wants to use the Interface to set up a totalitarian “thought readjustment” program and has made not getting an implant a capital offense; the law is enforced by the all-powerful Federal Anti-Terrorist Authority. Battling these injustices is Taiki Graf, the cyberneurologist who invented the Interface but now opposes it as an affront to individual freedom. He’s found a way to get the implants to cause infections that make people slaughter everyone they come across; he hopes this will quickly convince people to remove them. He squares off against his half brother, Egon Graf, FATA’s ruthless director; caught between them is Yara Avril, a New York City police captain who’s the ex-lover of both brothers. Assisted by journalist Jericho Jones, Yara tries to track down Taiki before he can let loose the brain plague. Britz-Cunningham’s vision of a tyrannical hive mind is detailed in her update of present-day internet and smartphone tech. Fortunately, the novel features nifty terrorist plotting and police procedural elements and characters that are sharply drawn and magnetic, if sometimes a bit hammy (“I can have you flayed alive and have molten lead poured into your bowels,” fulminates Egon). The prose is also punchy and colorful throughout: “With a quick machinelike motion, the Moose yanked the Bowie knife from the parrot man’s hand and buried it in his eye. The parrot man waved his left hand, feebly, that will appeal to lay readers, who are eased into complicated topics with ample context and commentary. This user-friendly approach extends to a glossary, the volume’s topical organization, and brief introductory chapters that provide important contextualization. Despite the book’s emphasis on contemporary relevance, there are some subjects left unaddressed, including LGBTQ+ issues, reproductive rights, and systemic racism. There is still much of value in this inspirational volume, particularly its reminder to look beyond people’s “superficial faults to the core of their beautiful soul.”

A well-researched, accessible guide to an important but often overlooked Jewish thinker.
as if batting off a fly, then fell to the ground in silence.” The result is an engrossing page-turner.

An often entertaining and energetic dystopian yarn with plenty of intricate action.

**WHY UKRAINE MATTERS**

*Chowdhury, Fazle*

Fabrezen & Phillipe (421 pp.)

$28.95 | $17.95 paper | $9.75 e-book

Sept. 23, 2022

978888317846

979887963907 paper

In this nonfiction book, a foreign relations expert surveys the global impact of Russia’s war against Ukraine and offers context.

Dedicated to “all Ukrainians” who “shall triumph over this war too,” this volume analyzes the Eastern European nation’s historic relationship with Russia and how the world came to its “most challenging moment” since the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Chowdhury’s erudite account walks readers through the turbulent history of Ukraine during World War II and the Cold War, its post-Soviet independence, and the forces inside Russia that initiated the current conflict. While this story is not unknown, it is related here in an accessible yet nuanced writing style. And the book often adds underreported elements to its contextualization of the war. While not justifying his behavior, the work complicates the standard depictions of Vladimir Putin, reminding readers that he petitioned for NATO membership during his first term as president. Indeed, throughout Putin’s first two terms in office, at a time when he “needed the West to rebuild, reshape and reorganize Russia from the economic mess he inherited,” he presented his country as an unflinching advocate of America’s war on terror and provided logistical support for United States endeavors in Afghanistan. It was only after his subsequent reelection in 2012 that Putin’s posturing shifted to anti-Western rhetoric that promised Russian citizens a “new destiny” and the nation’s return to its former glory, which corresponded with military expeditions in Syria, Libya, Georgia, and Crimea. The roots of this book lie in Chowdhury’s undergraduate thesis at George Mason University, which in part explored Ukraine’s complex history. Two decades later, as a fellow at the Global Policy Institute with a graduate degree from Harvard University and multiple books on Middle Eastern geopolitics and nuclear arms, the author provided significant updates to his unpublished work on Ukraine. Backed by solid research found in more than 30 pages of references, this volume is a detailed, historically minded addition to the conversations surrounding Russia’s war in Ukraine. But at more than 400 pages, the book may be intimidating to some readers.

A well-written, convincing case for why Ukraine matters to the world’s future.

**FLIPPING HOUSES QuickStart Guide**

*Covington, Elisa Zheng*

ClydeBank Media (330 pp.)


July 11, 2022

978-1-63610-032-6

978-1-63610-030-2 paper

A comprehensive how-to manual on the business of buying and reselling houses for profit.

Debut author Covington, a veteran real estate investor and developer who attests to seven-figure yearly profits, provides a wide-ranging tutorial aimed at eager but apprehensive novices. This latest entry in the QuickStart series covers all the basics, including getting in on deals with the help of real estate agents, whom she recommends as an indispensable source of leads; financing purchases with a mix of standard and offbeat sources, from mortgages to credit cards to money from investment-club members; and assessing the quality of a property and the repairs needed to bring it up to market value. She also discusses scooping up, budgeting, and overseeing renovations; selling a renovated house with specialists such as “stagers,” who supply furniture and décor to provoke an “emotional attachment” from prospective buyers; and structuring one’s business enterprise to take advantage of tax loopholes. Beneath the broad outlines are a wealth of insider tips regarding such topics as paint colors (Covington is partial to “neutral, modern shades such as gray or cream” for interiors), scripts for cold-calling real estate agents, and red flags regarding shifty contractors: “Do they talk a lot and promise you the moon, or do they speak conservatively, laying out all the downsides and risks?” All this information is clearly organized with helpful charts and diagrams, checklists, and an appendix of sample contracts and other necessary documentation. The author brings all this to life with entertaining stories about her own flipping triumphs and pratfalls, complete with expense figures and bottom lines. Overall, Covington conveys her advice in lucid prose that’s stocked with aphoristic wisdom: “You always want to purchase the worst house on the block for your flip, not the property next to the worst house!” she writes of one deal in which she paid the next-door neighbors to spruce up their exterior. Readers eyeing a plunge into real estate investing will find Covington’s practical advice and street cred helpful and reassuring.

A savvy, soup-to-nuts primer full of useful information and insights.
This illustrated collection of verse indulges in fairy-tale absurdity and is sufficiently zany to have children and adults squealing with glee.

This book’s cover reveals that the work is the recipient of a “Baldersquash Medal,” which honors the “very best in high-falutin nonsense.” The decidedly suspect award is later explained as one that is delivered to “lucky writers” as a gold coin clasped in a chicken’s beak. Such tall tales and tomfoolery offer a mere taste of the eccentric brilliance to follow. In these pages, readers encounter Mary Melissa Miranda McGurk, who is “uncommonly fond of homework”—she loves learning so much that her rapidly expanding head literally explodes with knowledge. Readers are also introduced to Salmon Delicious, a fish so ambitious he wishes to be consumed by no one but a king. Other poems, like “The One-Man Band,” express delight in bodily noises, declaring: “Sneezing, too, is quite a sound / And glorious noises, declaring: “Sneezing, too, is quite a sound / And glorious / But farting is my favorite noise: / There’s nothing like a toot.” In contrast, the closing poem, “My Father To Save,” is the disarmingly poignant tale of a prince sent to slay a good-hearted beast. DeRoche’s writing is clever, silly fun. In poems like “The Bear in the Boat,” the dependence on rhyming couplets enthrallingly determines the narrative’s direction. For instance, “He grabbed the tail / Of a whale, / Who gave him a hand / To the land.” Soon, readers will predict that the only thing on which a bear can spend his “hard-earned money” is, of course, “honey.” Elsewhere, the only job that can “generate coin” is found in “Des Moines.” This playful approach found through traditional chapters that clearly address these components, additional elements notably enhance readability and relatability, including a fictional female entrepreneur named Chris who faces challenges that many small-business owners will surely recognize. Another is the inclusion of “value drivers” relevant to the nine components; for example, “Clearly Differentiated Strategy, and Business Design.” Although the book is divided into traditional chapters that clearly address these components, DeRoche details its nine specific components, each of which is discussed in detail, including: “Confidence, Vision, Curiosity, People, Communications, Cash Management, Financial Forecast, Capital Strategy, and Business Design.” After labeling the final product a “Breakout Valuation,” Donohue details its nine specific components, each of which is discussed in detail, including: “confidence, vision, curiosity, people, communications, cash management, financial forecast, capital strategy, and business design.” Although the book is divided into traditional chapters that clearly address these components, DeRoche details its nine specific components, each of which is discussed in detail, including: “confidence, vision, curiosity, people, communications, 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“Scar,” for instance, ponders how people know very little about Florida theme park. An overenthusiastic father tries to orchestrate the greatest day of their lives, but it appears past traumas don’t disappear easily. “Rotini” is about a family meal, after a man intent on buying a particular ferret to placate his partner caretaker of her stepmother, Constance, and stepsister, Susan—over time. Compelling plotlines create veneers of normality each other when they first meet. Dorfman pinpoints this sense collection closes with “Beachgoers,” in which a couple have contrast reactions to an encounter with a lost child. Dorfman’s writing excavates the complexities of relationships, from their mysterious beginnings to their often bitter endings. The story “Scar,” for instance, ponders how people know very little about each other when they first meet. Dorfman pinpoints this sense deftly in the space of a brief sentence: “She was an unknown entity, a thumbnail of a true human being.” Dorfman also effortlessly captures unexpected shifts of emotion by employing fresh, thought-provoking similes: “As she had many times before, she imagined him with their future children. The usual clear image was shaken, unsteady, like an old VHS tape that had degraded over time.” Compelling plotlines create veeners of normality that fall away to reveal underlying pain; the result is a dark collection that readers will likely want to finish in one sitting.

A compilation of intense, penetrative character observations.

**CINDERELLA AND THE DUKE**

*Drake, Lydia*

Entangled: Amara (352 pp.)


978-1649373144

A proposition leads to an unexpected connection in this debut Regency romance.

At the age of 27, Julia Beaumont is resigned to spending her life as a spinster in Kent, England. When she was 14, her father died, leaving her as the primary caretaker of her stepmother, Constance, and stepsister, Susan—. Constance is especially dependent on her, denying Julia opportunities to attend social functions where she might meet eligible men. A failed elopement when Julia was 17 served to cement her status as an unmarriageable woman. Gregory Carter, the Duke of Ashworth, is a devilishly handsome man accustomed to having any woman he desires, married or single (“Over much of the past ten years, he’d solidified his reputation as London’s most devastating rake”). His conquests have formed a club devoted to discussing their exploits, while the married women’s husbands regularly challenge him to duels. When Julia and Gregory meet at the Weatherford ball, it is hardly love at first sight. After Julia rescues Gregory from another unhappy husband, he impulsively kisses her. Startled, she flees the ball, leaving behind one of her shoes. Intrigued, Gregory goes to her home to return the shoe and receives a surprise when Julia proposes a marriage of convenience. The arrangement will offer Julia freedom from Constance while protecting Gregory from betrayed husbands. The situation is ideal until a man from Julia’s past and an invitation to attend the queen’s ball force her and Gregory to consider if their unconventional beginning will have a true fairy-tale ending. Drake’s romance is a sparkling take on “Cinderella” with nuanced lead characters and a fast-paced narrative replete with plenty of sexual tension. Julia is an amiable hero, devoted to her stepsister but determined to escape from a life caring for Constance. Julia’s intelligent and headstrong nature is complemented by Gregory’s temperament. He’s a man whose pursuit of hedonistic pleasures masks a sensitive nature and a fear of following in his parents’ footsteps and ending up in an unhappy marriage. The strong supporting characters include Susannah, a talented musician seeking more out of life than marriage, and Julia’s former suitor Lucas Campbell.

A charming love story perfect for Bridgerton fans.

**SCAVENGERS TIDES**

*A Mystery*

*Hanafee, Susan*

BookBaby (268 pp.)

$15.95 paper | $9.99 e-book | May 12, 2021

978-1-09-836473-1

In this mystery, a middle-aged Florida transplant deals with new friends, a hot fisherman, and body parts on the beach.

In Hanafee’s second book about inquisitive, wine-loving Leslie Elliott, the former Midwestern public relations executive now resides in Southwest Florida, where she attempts to start a new career as a mystery writer. Recently divorced, she also tries her hand at a new man: dimpled, sandy-haired Frank Johnson. Frank has a fishing boat and a spirited wife; supposedly he will soon part ways with one of them (spoiler alert: It won’t be the vessel). One night while grilling fillets of fish at her condo, Leslie tells Frank she snooped inside a beachfront house under construction and found buzzards and a headless dog carcass. Frank reckons the house’s renovation is slow because the owner, widower Peter Thompson, lives primarily in Canada, and he suggests the dead animal was probably a coyote (but where’s the head?). The next
day, Frank goes AWOL, and local children find a body in a boat on the beach. Yet when the sheriff arrives, the corpse is gone. Later, Leslie’s friend Deb Rankins and her art class find body parts on the shore, and the two women call the sheriff. But the sheriff—who told Leslie to mind her own business earlier when she called about the headless canine—again seems nonplussed. Leslie wonders: “Was there a killing spree in paradise that no one was talking about except for my friends and me?” Although thinking about Frank and writing her novel take up much of her days, she saves some time for dinners with Peter, who arrives to check on his house. It’s not clear in Hanacek’s story why two men are vying for Leslie’s attention, especially eye-candy Frank (“The man kind of takes your breath away”). And the crime novel fails to tie up loose ends, perhaps signaling a third installment starring the intrepid Leslie, who loves to look for clues and fears that she is “destined to be alone like the spinster ghost in the Tarpon Bar.” That said, juicy gossip about the community’s residents and amusing banter between Leslie and her mother—who confirms “There IS sex after 70”—make this enjoyable mystery’s pages turn quickly.

Fresh-catch grilling, red wine swilling, and a perplexing killing fill this breezy beach read.

“Affecting, canine-heavy account of disappointment and self-discovery.

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**I’M NOT SINGLE, I HAVE A DOG**

**Dating Tales From the Bark Side**

**Hartzler, Susan**

McFarland (232 pp.)


March 10, 2021

9781476684482

A woman recounts her adventures in love and dog ownership in this debut memoir.

Like many chronically single people, Hartzler found herself questioning her choices in matters of the heart. “The one thing I’ve never been confused about is my deep love of animals, dogs in particular,” writes the author in her preface. “That love started with my childhood dog, Siesta. An ugly mutt, Siesta taught me about unconditional love and acceptance.” Hartzler rescued her first dog as an adult, a German spitz mix named Blondie, following a breakup when she was 29 years old. “A rebound dog’s better than a rebound man,” she quipped at the rebound dog.” The memoir becomes a squalid but gripping story of wilderness survival. Snowed in at a freezing cabin with bears prowling outside, he endured horrific withdrawal symptoms—“I was crying, tears falling, snot dropping from my nose, drool from my mouth, throw up in my mouth, yellow/orange vomit shooting out in the front, black liquid squirting out from behind”—that sapped his will to live. The author’s account lays bare the dynamics of opioid dependency, from the corrupt collusion of doctors in promoting addiction to the egotism and hubris of addicts in imagining they can control their habits. His prose is vivid and evocative in conveying the rush of opioid highs—“The colors of the forest and lake were vivid and pulsating….I sat on a boulder and wallowed in my addiction, exhilarated beyond ecstasy, a whole body and mind orgasm throbed through...
my entire mind, body, and what was left of my soul”—and unsparing on the relentless taskmasters the drugs become. (“They turn you into a robot—going through life’s motions, yet everything revolves around your next dose, next hit, next snort, next visit to the doctor or dealer, the endless counting and recounting of pills.”) When Hayward finally writes of gleaning hope from God, his redemption feels authentic and moving.

An engrossing account of degradation and hard-fought recovery.

**HOSPITAL!**
*A Medical Satire of Unhealthy Proportions*

*Jones, Kyle Bradford*
Black Rose Writing (128 pp.)
978-1685130909

A curmudgeonly doctor struggles to keep his job in this farcical novel.

Family physician Jones takes a light-hearted, satirical approach to health care through comical characterization by way of egomanical Dr. Camus, the most hated figure at Code Blue Memorial Hospital of Her Motherly Excellence. With a cantankerous demeanor and a diminutive stature, the notorious “scabrous predator” gives new meaning to career burnout. He’s become the hospital’s worst nightmare, slinging callous insults at staff and patients alike while misdiagnosing anyone in his care with rare maladies he finds on Wikipedia. Not the product of childhood neglect or an unfortunate addiction, Camus is “simply a jerk” who “kept showing up after his residency ended.” Obnoxious to a fault, he has alienated nearly all of the hospital staff and couldn’t care less about the consequences, calling his patients “relentless and annoying.” This behavior doesn’t go unnoticed by the hospital’s administration, particularly the medical center’s CEO, whose hands are tied with budgetary constraints restricting him from terminating Camus. Efforts to curb the doctor’s toxic and abusive bedside manner amount to assigning a “Censor,” who shadows his every move, bleeping out spewed expletives. But could a one-month work suspension and a mandatory intensive session with infamous behavioral hypnotist the Amazing Ralph be Camus’ saving grace? While Jones has conjured a premise that’s certainly ridiculous and preposterous, the book is hilarious, with scene after scene of outrageousness (at one point, an exasperated Camus even ejects a wheelchair-bound patient into the flower garden on the side of the hospital). Recounted by a humble, omnipresent narrator with a wry sense of humor, the story revolves around Camus as attempts to dilute his nastiness only amount to a whole new set of problems. Quite a departure from the author’s debut memoir, *Fallible* (2020), about the struggle to navigate mental illness as a clinician, this novel is compact, effortlessly amusing, and seemingly written with readers’ funny bones in mind. This story demonstrates Jones’ wild versatility as an author and will likely attract the readers who enjoyed his candid memoir.

A witty, satirical spoof of a cynical physician’s transformation.

**LEX LEADS THE WAY**
*The Second Story in the Capables Series*

*Jordan, Danny*
Illus. by Agustina Perciante
The Capables (44 pp.)
Oct. 3, 2022
978-1-73645-805-1
978-1-73645-806-8 paper

Thinking differently leads a little girl to discover her secret superpower.

Lex is excited about her class trip to the science museum, but she’s anxious, too. Her brain works differently than other kids’, and she worries that she won’t be able to keep up if the visit requires a lot of reading. (In this standout picture book, children learn that Lex has dyslexia, which means she has difficulty recognizing words and letters.) At a display of famous mathematicians, scientists, and more, Lex struggles to read about Katherine Johnson, the groundbreaking Black NASA mathematician, while her classmates have already moved on. Her spirits rise when she is told how many brilliant, accomplished people were also dyslexic. And, when the class is stumped by a three-dimensional geometric puzzle, Lex realizes that “different” can be “super.” She uses her ability to process information as visual images to provide the answer. Expertly designed as a graphic novel for young children, the book features Perciante’s beautiful depictions of Lex’s world (Lex and her family are Black; her classmates and other adults appear ethnically, racially, and physically diverse). Rich with saturated color, the illustrations, some full page, incorporate strips of text and dialogue balloons. Following *Rae’s First Day*, a *Kirkus Reviews* best book of 2021, this is the second book in Jordan’s resonant Capables series, which is structured around the theme of inclusion and features children with disabilities discovering their “super-capabilities.”

A visual treat and a lively, child-respecting story of inclusion.
“Each author writes well, dropping believable characters into fearful or outright terrifying situations.”

THAT WHICH CANNOT BE UNDONE
An Ohio Horror Anthology
Ed. by Landry, Jess
Cracked Skull Press (244 pp.)
979-8218052232

This collection of Ohio-based stories, edited by Landry, revels in the macabre. The collection’s 18 writers offer a wide range of creepiness—a growing boy’s fixation on snatching people’s teeth; a woman’s repeatedly dying in others’ bodies; and assorted monsters. Megan E. Hart opens this book with a punch. “In the Clearing” follows struggling addict Becka’s hopeful turn as a surrogate mother. The intended parents’ generosity, however, is quickly overshadowed by their unorthodox methods and increasingly grim behavior. Some of the other opening stories are scary but mere teasers for the true terror. War veteran Luis Gomez in Weston Kincade’s “Every Good Deed...,” for example, waits at a hospital for news on his sickly wife, but he stays calm by fidgeting with a grenade. Likewise, young Amanda of Gary A. Braunbeck’s “When Daddy Was All Fixed-Up and Everybody Was Happy” wants somehow to fix her well-known horror writer and psychologically disturbed father. The book’s real star, of course, is Ohio, the state of “fairly friendly” cities, ice cream shops, and wide-open countryside. These tales, however, show what may be hiding underneath, from ghosts at the Ohio State Reformatory to the unsettling figure a housekeeper spots in a cabin in Hocking Hills. Each author writes well, dropping believable characters into fearful or outright terrifying situations, and most readers will knock out (and relish) this book in an afternoon. The collection’s final entry, Lucy A. Snyder’s darkly humorous “Avoca-tion,” takes a slight but welcome detour; a woman on a first date recounts the worst thing she’s ever done. Her buoyant narration (“No, I don’t do threesomes. May I finish my story? Thanks”) stays charming even as she gets closer to confessing her sin.

An assembly of refreshing horror tales that unnerve with panache.

LIKE THE GLIDE OF A DRAGONFLY
Healing and Finishing Strong After Surviving the Boston Marathon Bombing
Lehto, Natalie
FriesenPress (234 pp.)
978-1-03-915361-5
978-1-03-915360-8 paper

Lehto describes the aftermath of surviving the Boston Marathon bombing in this debut memoir.

The Canadian author, a kinesiologist and amateur long-distance runner, wasn’t physically injured in the blast during the Boston Marathon in which she took part on April 15, 2013—a domestic-terror incident that killed three people and wounded hundreds. However, Lehto walked away from that day with psychological wounds so severe that a mention of Boston at a book club meeting a year and a half later was enough to send her into a panic attack. Running had been a part of Lehto’s life ever since she was a teenager in Thunder Bay, Ontario; she ran her first marathon shortly after graduating from high school. Only minutes after she crossed the finish line in Boston, Lehto was celebrating with her family down the street when the first explosion happened. “It wasn’t a boom,” she recalls. “It wasn’t like the movies. It was, however, a sound I will never be able to forget. Loud. Loud enough that it stopped all of us on the street.” Although she and her family all made it home alive, the emotional turmoil left an impression on her that lingered through the subsequent decade. Lehto’s prose is lean and measured—appropriate for a distance runner. Over the course of the book, she effectively captures the seeming randomness of trauma’s effects, as when she discusses breaking down after hearing the lyrics to a pop song that featured the phrase “I’m alive, I’m alive, I’m alive”: “A giant reminder and slap in the face to focus on the genuine and simple fact that we are alive. We are here; we did not die...And out of all people, Justin Bieber is the one to point this notion out to me!” Although the memoir starts to lose steam the further it gets from 2013—the final act is set during the Covid-19 pandemic—Lehto does manage to artfully demonstrate the many ways that one can travel the road to recovery.

An insightful, if slightly shapeless, remembrance of running and PTSD.
THE BOY WHO BURPED
Lewis, Beth
Illus. by Daniel Włodarski
Citrus Press (33 pp.)
March 28, 2023
978-1-779498-0-0
978-1-779498-4-7 paper

A junk food-loving family learns the value of eating healthy and getting exercise in this picture book debut.

The Everyday family prefers being inside to exercising outdoors. Brother loves video games and chocolate; Sister eats candy and plays with her phone all day; Momma watches TV while eating ice cream; and Daddy spends the day on his computer, drinking soda. Their habits lead to embarrassing noises: Brother burps, Sister sneezes, Momma hiccups, and Daddy “toots.” One day, the whole family seems zombielike. Brother, who feels isolated, turns to the family dog for companionship, and they spend the day outside. Afterward, Brother drinks water, eats a healthy dinner, and is surprised how good he feels—and that he has no more burps. The next day, he makes a healthy breakfast for his family, says, “Let’s do something together,” and rescues his family from unhealthy routines (and gasses). Lewis’s over-the-top characterization of the Everyday family will make young readers giggle. Brother’s agency shows that even the youngest family members can help turn a family’s problems around. It’s simplistic but effectively bolsters the overt message. The simple text feels lengthy on some pages, but the vocabulary includes only a few challenging words (beverage, quirky). Włodarski’s large-headed, big-eyed, full-color cartoon figures, and their body-function sound effects, amp up the comedy.

A goofy, gassy tale with an obvious but important moral.

HOW WE DISAPPEAR
Novella & Stories
Masih, Tara Lynn
Press 53 (164 pp.)
$27.95 | $17.95 paper | $9.99 e-book
Sept. 13, 2022
978-1-950413-45-4 paper
978-1-950413-44-7

This fiction collection, centered on the theme of disappearance, is international in scope and examines complex emotional relationships.

Made up of short stories and a novella, this volume travels around the globe, from the American Southwest to a Puerto Rican beach town and the Siberian taiga. Exploring the inner thoughts of those who lead private lives, the haunting “What You Can’t See in the Picture” is about a photo/video analyst with a police department who helps track down a kidnapper. “Fleeing Gravity” captures almost the entire life span of a Native American man in the West. The short but satisfying “Agatha: A Life in Unauthorized Fragments” re-creates key moments in Agatha Christie’s life from the mystery writer’s perspective, including the loss of her dream of a music career and her well-known disappearance (“But you have done your job too well, and the only way out, when Archie finds you, is for him to declare you are mentally unwell”). The disappearance motif, which at times is a mere possibility, extends to the Caribbean in “Delight,” in which a Puerto Rican girl, skilled in making confec-

THE QUEEN OF GAY STREET
Mollica, Esther
Idée Fixe Books (204 pp.)
$16.99 paper | $0.99 e-book | Nov. 8, 2022
979-8986958118

A young lesbian looks for love in New York City in this bittersweet memoir.

In 2010, Mollica, who wrote the “Broads in the Big Apple” column for GL Magazine, abandoned what she saw as the preachy counterculture of lesbian San Francisco for what she hoped would be the raftish glamour of lesbian New York. Unfortunately, the glamour proved elusive: Her Friday nights were given over to TV-watching with the elderly widow next door, and her dating life revolved around hookups that felt meaningless. She finally found the “femme and aggressive” person she longed for in Juliet, a charismatic blond editor who set her pulse racing; they enjoyed electrifying sex and racy repartee. However, Juliet’s energy also entailed relentless womanizing. Much of the book covers Mollica and Juliet’s testy relationship, probing their mutual infidelities and stormy breakups and makeups, which rolled on until Juliet spiraled into drugs and suicide attempts. In telling her story, the author also explores a dysfunctional, abusive childhood in which her mother spent child support checks on jewelry instead of food; she also writes of a devastating rupture with a woman she considered a soul mate. Mollica’s reminiscences are both a celebration of the promise of New York to a young woman hungry for connection and a plangent account of the pitfalls of bad relationships and isolation. Her depictions of lesbian life and dating are well observed and brimming with humor (“You lost track of how many people you’ve slept with?” “No! I, ah, I just mean that it’s more than twenty, and either at or less than thirty. I think”), but
she also writes with penetrating subtlety about the pain of sputtering relationships. “This time, something in her touch and embrace had drawn me in deeper and shown more of her vulnerability than any time before, yet I felt something else fading and falling apart.” The result is an exhilarating ride on Gotham’s emotional roller coaster.

An entertaining, often poignant portrait of New York romance blending humor with heartache.

THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN HEAVENS & Other Stories
Morganstern, Mark
Recital Publishing (318 pp.)
$15.00 paper | $4.99 e-book | Sept. 23, 2022
978-1-73374-647-2

A volume of literary novellas and short stories ponders death and God. Heaven isn’t far away in this collection—but its proximity isn’t necessarily a good thing. The house of the title novella is home to the Rosenweigs, Polish Jews fresh from Hitler’s Europe, who seek to build a new life for themselves in upstate New York. The novella takes its name from the adjacent seven-story ramp used by workers at the local General Electric plant. The family’s youngest daughter, Davora, wants nothing more than to break out of the rigid future prescribed for her by her parents—even as strange religious visions cause her to question her sanity. A second novella, A Factotum in the Land of Palms, follows a former Florida real estate agent with loose morals who loses his job when his employer is investigated for human trafficking. The ex-agent moves to California looking to start over. There, he is thrown for a loop by the many disparate characters and philosophical traditions he encounters in and around Los Angeles. The accompanying short stories deal with aging and loss: A man in his 70s contemplating his life and legacy sees a phantom coffin on his lawn; a husband, whose health-nut wife just left him, stages a condiment-heavy feast for one. Morganstern’s prose is sharp and surprising. He’s able to capture his characters’ humanity with a few revealing descriptions, as here in A Factotum in the Land of Palms: “I stared at him, the guy I knew in college. The angle man as he was known because he was the self-proclaimed master at zeroing in on what benefited himself the most at any given moment. At least he did when he wasn’t drunk and hurling partially digested pizza and beer on the monuments in the quad.” The novellas have impressively expansive worlds, but both drag a bit, especially in comparison to the three short stories. Even so, the pieces are in conversation with one another, and the book works as a thoughtful, evolving meditation on grief and acceptance.

An imperfect but often arresting fiction collection.

‘WORLD CITIZEN’
Journeys of a Humanitarian
Olson, Jane
Self (429 pp.)
$14.95 | Oct. 19, 2022
978-1-5136-9569-3

Olson recalls her international social justice work in this inspirational debut memoir.

Born nine months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Olson grew up in a rural community in western Iowa. As a child, she was handed a prize pistol by her father only to accidentally drop it in the river. From that moment on, she “forever hated guns.” At 15, she gained experience penning articles and obituaries for her hometown newspaper, which compelled her to write with compassion, “hoping to ease the pain of those who grieved their loss.” Olson graduated from the University of Nebraska, where she majored in history and journalism, before taking on an editorial role with the Philanthropist Press in Ann Arbor. Her husband, Ron, a law school graduate, worked in the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, and as a young wife and mother, Olson volunteered at Los Angeles organizations serving underprivileged children. The author notes that injustice always made her angry: Her first of numerous overseas forays was to Nicaragua during the Contras wars as part of a delegation to assess the threat of spreading communism. Working with humanitarian organizations, she later visited Eastern Europe during the fall of the Soviet Union and worked extensively throughout Africa, Asia, South America, and the Middle East addressing issues such as refugee conditions in the Caucasus and the HIV/AIDS crisis in Malawi. Olson also catalogs her roles in key organizations, such as chairing the International Board of Human Rights Watch and the Landmine Survivors Network.

Olson’s descriptive prose transports the reader to the many locations she traveled. For example, here she talks about Yugoslavia: “A light snow started falling, dropping big flakes that melted instantly on the windshield of our car, a wet snow that reminded me of early winters where I grew up in Iowa.” She goes on to tie trauma to the scene before her: “Snow always made the landscape look so clean. That thought struck me as ironic, since this war in the former Yugoslavia was called the ‘ethnic cleansing of Bosnia,’ and slaughter was anything but clean.” Olson also documents the atrocities that result from conflict. The author shares the story of Happy, a Rwandan genocide survivor and speaker at a conference focusing on war crimes against women, who describes the grisly discovery of a “seven-month-old baby drinking blood from his mother’s wounds” following a militia attack on a Catholic mission. In addition to writing about human pain, the author writes movingly about the power of human connection, describing a “deeply human kinship” she shared with Alma, a mother and former prostitute in Nicaragua who was “trying so hard to improve her life.” Driven to help others and bring about positive change, Olson recounts an extraordinary journey that describes the reality of conflict and
injustices across the globe and across decades. This well-considered, affecting book may move others to follow a similar path.

A stirring account of humanitarianism.

THE FITFUL SLEEP OF IMMIGRANTS
Ortega-Medina, Orlando
Amble Press (335 pp.)
$20.95 paper | April 25, 2023
978-1-61294-263-6

A gay lawyer copes with relationship problems, addiction, and a seductive stalker in this twisty thriller.

San Francisco attorney Marc Mendes seems to have it made, with a thriving employment-law practice and a blissful relationship with his boyfriend, Isaac Perez. But problems percolate, including his struggle to maintain sobriety after years of drug abuse; his estrangement from his father, Gabriél, a Syrian Cuban American rabbi and Talmudic jurist who frowns on homosexuality; and Isaac’s precarious position as an undocumented refugee from El Salvador. (It’s 1997, so Isaac can’t marry Marc to gain legal residency.) Infinitely complicating things is Alejandro Silva, Marc’s client in a workplace sexual harassment lawsuit that starts to go south when it emerges that Alejandro is on parole from a manslaughter conviction and has a history of sketchy imbruglos with older gay men. Young, handsome, and edgy, Alejandro also bears a strong resemblance to Simon, Marc’s first love, who died tragically. When Alejandro starts coming on to him, Marc is captivated despite his better judgment. The infatuation strains Marc’s relationship with the jealous Isaac, who is facing deportation, but when Marc pulls away, Alejandro only pursues him more cunningly and finally lures him into a night of drugs and debauchery that imperils his future with Isaac. Ortega-Medina’s novel works on many levels—as a twisty romantic melodrama; as an expose of the cruelties of immigration law; and as a meditation on family and homeland that grows more poignant over time we met at your office.’ ”)

Readers will enjoy watching Alejandro throw a monkey wrench into everyone’s best-laid plans.

A riveting yarn with a charismatic tempter.

THE WEAVER’S DAUGHTER
Patience, Sylvia
Paper Angel Press (200 pp.)
$14.99 paper | Nov. 1, 2022
978-1-977146-98-0

A Mayan girl immigrates to the United States in this middle-grade novel.

Twelve-year-old Ixchel is used to being away from her father, who works in California and occasionally comes home to Mérida, Mexico, where the tween’s mother and grandmother are raising her. But the girl is not accustomed to him failing to answer her letters. When Ixchel’s mother announces that she had a vision that the tween should join her father in the United States, the girl’s world is upended. She slowly warms to the idea, and her friend Rosa, whose brother lives in Texas, decides to make the trip with her. The girls make their way to Tijuana, but the “coyote” whose name they were given has left, and they are stuck with his nephew, who is well intentioned but inexperienced. After a first attempt at crossing the border fails, he sends the girls through a tunnel, where Rosa gets caught by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Ixchel narrowly escapes an attacker. Ixchel makes her way to Los Angeles, but her father is not overjoyed to see her, and she discovers his new wife and baby. With help from the art dealer who sells her mother’s weavings in his gallery, Ixchel and her father eventually reconcile, and she comes to terms with making a new life for herself in America. Patience tells a story of migration appropriate for young readers without being overly sanitized—for instance, the tension is palpable in Ixchel’s confrontation with her attacker, and there is mild violence. But the overall danger level is low, and the book never goes into detail about the threats an unaccompanied girl would likely face. While the depictions of Yucatecan life are vivid and well researched, they are clearly written for an American audience (Although hundreds of years have passed since the conquistadores came from Spain, we Yucatec Maya are still proud to speak our language”). The plot and pacing are solid, and the characters are well developed, making for an enjoyable and educational story for young readers.

An engaging tale about family and migration.

ASSEMBLAGE
The Art and Science of Brand Transformation
Probst, Emmanuel
Ideeypress Publishing (240 pp.)
978-1646871254

A comprehensive look at the nature and practice of branding.

Once upon a time, companies developed their brands solely for recognition purposes and distributed them through limited and well-worn
channels, as Probst makes clear in the groundwork for his impressive new book. A farmer or a small-town shop owner might respond to a particular brand by buying a product, but the relationship usually went no further than that. But now, as Probst asserts, “We consume all these goods because marketing convinces us they make us happy, loved, and esteemed, but too many products make us feel happy one moment and miserable the next.” The author begins by noting what most consumers already understand: Brands “can foster meaningful relationships with their customers by being more empathetic and delivering a personalized experience.” But he quickly expands his discussion to include far more cultural and psychological elements. He contends that the advent of the internet has split most of us into three people—the real, digital, and virtual selves—which sometimes makes it difficult to remember who we really are. This conflux of identity and advertising is a note struck throughout the book, which repeatedly cites the ubiquity of a new mode of advertising. “People who want to express their ‘real me’ are more engaged with brands online and are motivated to co-create brand value,” he explains. “They become brand advocates.” All of this is in service to what Probst calls “contextual commerce,” the modern phenomenon of instant gratification that consumers expect—being able to “buy anything at any time without interrupting their lives.”

Readers of Probst’s Brand Hacks (2019) will remember his snappy prose style and quick pacing, but nothing in that earlier book will prepare them for the manic, thrilling sweep of this new book, which begins as a discussion of the ways branding must adapt to the demands of the present moment and steadily expands into nothing less than a penetrating portrait of an entire culture. Indeed, one of the most interesting and challenging main takeaways of the book is the extent to which branding has become the entire culture, for good or ill. “Consumers no longer expect brands to merely market their products,” he writes, “but to provide reliable and accurate information, take a stance on social issues, and make a positive contribution to society and the community.” In these pages, Probst takes the inner workings of consumer marketing and transforms them into an utterly fascinating snapshot of the way we live now. As Probst notes, the playing field has never been broader. “Small brands used to be hindered by few retailers carrying a limited number of brands along with their private labels. E-commerce has solved this by giving anyone access to an audience,” he writes. “Amazon shelf space is unlimited.” The author touches on everything from recycling and “green” initiatives to amateur-dominated social media platforms like YouTube or Instagram to the “woke” movement, and he illustrates his points by referencing TikTok trends and celebrity endorsements. Probst’s combination of agile writing and insightful observations makes most other books on modern branding look both overly circumspect and woefully incomplete.

A fascinating—and surprisingly fun—wide-angle look at advertising.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SECRETS FOR EMOTIONAL SUCCESS
(It’s All About Love)
Rabenstein, Kelly
Koehler Books (356 pp.)
$25.08 | $10.95 paper | $7.49 e-book
Aug. 10, 2022
9781646637621
9781646637607 paper

A counseling psychologist shares her insights for achieving emotional well-being.

Rabenstein, aka Dr. Kelly, pulls back the veil of her practice in this engaging self-improvement manual, conveying what she terms “layers of exploration” to create “deeper connections.” The first-person account, in which the author reveals portions of her personal journey, provides a warm intimacy to a book that could otherwise be intimidating. The content takes a deep dive into emotional health and addresses topics typically covered in counseling sessions, including identity, defense mechanisms, bias and privilege, the understanding of feelings, and mindfulness. In each chapter, Rabenstein presents psychological theories, integrates her own experiences, and, most important, offers well-crafted exploratory exercises that immerse readers in serious self-reflection. The numerous exercises that appear throughout the volume cannot be taken lightly; they involve answering questions, completing rating scales, practicing skills, and employing thoughtful introspection. Some of them encourage creative expression; for example, in “Emotion Rainbow,” Rabenstein asks readers to review a comprehensive list of feelings and then use crayons or markers to “color-code the emotions” in order to understand their own and others’ reactions. These therapeutic forays are a large part of the book’s appeal. The overriding subject of her work, writes the author, is empathy: “Empathy is so powerful that I’ve spent half of a book discussing it.” If nothing else, Rabenstein’s perspective on empathy (and the related exercises) should help readers become more sensitized to others. A particularly important empathetic skill is active listening, which she renames “mindful listening.” The author encourages readers to practice mindful listening skills with another person. The manual includes a useful section concerning how to connect with children that should be valuable for both parents and teachers. Also in the mix is a chapter entitled “Emotional Success at Work,” in which Rabenstein explores the psychological aspects of work, the identification of one’s worth, the setting of work-life boundaries, and the special challenges of remote employment. In her conclusion, the author urges readers to use the book as a “basic template” for life.

A beneficiary therapeutic journey led by a sensitive, compassionate guide.
NEVER CROSS A HIGHLANDER
Rayne, Lisa
Entangled: Amara (400 pp.)
978-1649370952

In this historical romance, two adventurous Scots go from enemies to lovers.
In 16th-century Stirling, Scotland, Ailsa Connery is trapped—literally. Three years ago, the Caribbean-descended free woman was separated from her beloved clan during a festival and abducted into enslavement by Scotland’s royal family of King James VI. Now, she waits hand and foot on spoiled Princess Elizabeth under the given name of Anne Blanke. Her only source of recourse and amusement is giving the teenage princess the occasional ridiculous hairstyle.
Ailsa longs to return to the Connery clan—most do not share her brown skin, but the clan allowed Ailsa’s grandparents to buy their freedom and allowed Ailsa and her now-dead mother to make a home with them. Enter Duff Kallum MacNeill, an ace swordsman and the foremost warrior of his own clan. Like Ailsa, Kallum is Black and living in a community that is predominantly White, but he is a free man, and his prestigious adoptive family is loving. After the tournament, Kallum abducts Ailsa, who is attempting escape for the third time, but as she soon discovers, his intention is to set her free. Kallum’s secret identity is that of the fabled Shepherd, a one-man Underground Railroad devoted to giving enslaved people a better life. As they set out on their journey, squabbling the whole way, Kallum and Ailsa discover that they may have more in common than they initially thought…and their growing romantic chemistry begins to complicate matters. Both Kallum and Ailsa are of the titular Highlands: a beloved and diverse Gaelic-speaking region over which Scotland’s monarchy is looking to exert tighter control. Neither trusts the other at first but eventually bond over not only a shared attraction, but deeper principles of equality and freedom. The author deftly weaves tropes from historical romances of old—hero kidnapping heroine chief among them—with issues foremost in modern readers’ minds, including racism, sexism, and culture. Kallum is a strapping, handsome hero who has his own compelling emotional journey to make over the course of the novel.
A flawless combination of modern-day issues and old-school romance.

THE HOMESTEADER HERBAL HANDBOOK
5 Simple Steps To Grow, Harvest, and Store 25 Backyard Medicinal Herbs To Craft Your Natural Remedies
Rempel, Jenni
Self (206 pp.)
$25.99 | $16.56 paper | $0.99 e-book
May 4, 2022
978-1-77797-185-4
978-1-77797-182-3 paper

A manual focuses on the biological benefits of natural herbal remedies.
From her homestead hobby farm, Rempel and her husband, Dave (who tills, waters, and helps with harvesting), believe wholeheartedly in the simplicity of living a beneficial lifestyle through organically grown food, including medicinal herbs that “inspire and create health.” While in her 40s, the author, who admits she “grew up a city girl and never thought about where my food came from,” sought a naturopath after several enduring illnesses and adopted natural and herbal solutions to the things that plagued her health. The book’s introductory sections present the history of the pre-pharmaceutical use of herbs juxtaposed with their modern, conventional-medicine counterparts. Rempel’s herb tour begins with the most popular home remedy—aloe vera—and touts its leaf gel for burns and as a mild anesthetic and recommends consuming it as a “juice” to relieve digestive issues. Less recognizable yet equally intriguing plants follow, like the ancient Indian immune booster Ashwagandha, or hyssop, and moringa. More recognizable herbs and cooking spices include chamomile, echinacea, ginger, garlic, parsley, turmeric, and the multifaceted mint family. The author shares the herbs’ origin stories and range of uses as well as precautions about potency and possible side effects. What makes them accessible even to the amateur gardener is the inclusion of a five-step method to each herb’s cultivation, growing needs, and harvesting protocol. Rempel’s mindset revolves primarily around the belief that there is relief just a garden plot away since “healthcare systems worldwide are put under more and more pressure.” She touts the importance of traceability, stressing that knowledge about where a person’s food comes from is essential to improved wellness and vitality and less consumption of environmental toxins. Also helpful are scannable QR codes offering color photographs and enhanced media with instructions on creating a natural first aid kit at home. The book concludes with a generous recipe chapter putting all these homestead herbs right into tempting homemade savory main dishes, sauces, desserts, and cocktails, making the volume inviting and accessible to even those with just a passing interest in herbalism.
An enthusiastic, useful, and proactive guide to increasing wellness through home herbal agriculture.
MAP OF A SOUNDLESS CLOCK
Book Two of the Golden Dolphin
Reynolds, Matthew Rudd
Self (272 pp.)
$26.79 | $17.55 paper | $8.99 e-book
Sept. 9, 2022
979-8218070588
979-8218066666 paper

A girl and a special dolphin lead a lost ship through space in this YA sequel.

Andi and Artie Johnston are 12-year-old twins traveling the cosmos. Andi rides her “supernatural” golden dolphin, Lux, with whom she has a mental bond. The brilliant but taciturn Artie is safe aboard the Kronos, a sailing ship belonging to Capt. Grubb and his crew. Lux is pulling the ship through space so the crew can eventually “find their lost people.” Suddenly, a mysterious armored figure approaches the ship and accosts Lux. This is Mynost, who seems to demand the dolphin’s help and transmits to Lux the image of an eye in a circle. The ship’s navigator, an aquatic selkie named Calypso, believes the image refers to the legendary Oracle, which Andi and Lux are best suited to find. Some aboard the ship don’t want them to leave, however. After several violent acts demoralize the crew—and one severely injures Donalys, Grubb’s 10-year-old nephew—Andi and Lux scout out a distant world. On it, they meet the alien Mashah. He leads them to a series of metal symbols that form the Horologium locus, which will aid in the journey. Back on the Kronos, it’s soon discovered that Mynost also covets the Horologium locus, and an unthinkable choice is made to preserve the mission. Reynolds’ protagonists may barely be teenagers, but their complex emotional travails make for elevated YA reading. For example, Andi keeps a secret from Artie about their mother’s true fate; meanwhile, their best friend, Jubal, has an abusive, alcoholic mother. The depictions of deep space are exquisite: “Each ball of sun, every pinprick of far-flung stars, and the wavy, curvy nebulae whispered to her.” Unexpected terrors, like a creature made of blood, break up ethical discussions and interpersonal drama that give the space journey a disquieting realism. The final quarter reveals a surprise enemy in the crew’s midst and some dark cosmic happenings.

A challenging thematic sequel that never talks down to YA audiences.

THE ZALTHAGOR BOX
Schultz, Terrie
Self (218 pp.)
979-8351576565

This debut middle-grade novel offers a creepy horror story about a girl who must save her family from a demon that her mother inadvertently unleashed on the world.

Evelyn Taylor’s life isn’t exactly idyllic. Her father recently moved out, and her mother never seems to have time for her—and to make matters worse, the eighth grader has been experiencing frightening visions of people getting badly hurt. But when she shares these terrifying premonitions with the folks involved in an attempt to save them from harm, they don’t believe her. After her best friend, Kayla Phillips, ignores Evelyn’s warning—and is hit by a car and severely injured—the protagonist suddenly becomes a pariah. Everyone in her middle school, including her former best friend, shuns her, and she is soon known as the “wicked witch” who brings bad luck to all she encounters. The summer grants Evelyn a respite of sorts from the teasing and ostracization, but her life takes an even bleaker turn when she, her mother, and her younger brother must travel cross-country to take care of the estate of her recently deceased great-aunt. A key and an ominous letter warning to keep something called a “Zalthagor box” safe at all costs doesn’t stop her mother from finding and opening it—with nightmarish consequences. With her family members’ lives at stake, Evelyn and her brother must unearth her ancestors’ dark history to understand the mystery of the box. Character depth is an unarguable strength of Schultz’s engaging story, as Evelyn is both identifiable and endearing. Additionally, the themes explored are spot-on for the readership (bullying, self-esteem, the force of family), as is the tone, which is scary without being traumatizing: “Its ghastly face had shining red eyes and a wide, snarling mouth. It moved like a snake in the air, writhing and twisting. Black wings on its back unfurled, almost filling the small room.”

A satisfyingly spooky tale with some subtly powerful themes.

TAMING FEAR IN THE AGE OF COVID
Sedhoff, Winfried
Senraan Publishing (344 pp.)
$12.98 paper | $0.99 e-book | Sept. 12, 2022
9780994609144

A guide provides practical tactics for facing up to fear. Australian physician Sedhoff has written a self-help book that goes far beyond the terror associated with Covid-19. This eminently readable text addresses fear in the larger sense, offering an authoritative overview of the subject
Part 2 takes a more novel approach: Here, Sedhoff suggests fear and talk to it regularly, it can lead us down dangerous discrete chapters how the 10-step method applies to taming four mindfulness skills, four "methods to create structure and designed to reduce the "fear burden." Each of these stages as well as a programmatic way to "resolve" one's apprehensions. Part 1 begins with an illuminating introduction to the ways in which fear affects the brain specifically and individuals in general. The author then dives into a seven-stage process designed to reduce the "fear burden." Each of these stages contains numerous, clearly identified actions to take, such as four mindfulness skills, four "methods to create structure and routine," and three steps to overcome social anxieties. One of the more intriguing chapters in the first part of the book concerns how the media can heighten various forms of fear.

Part 2 takes a more novel approach: Here, Sedhoff suggests strategies for turning the "fear monster to friend." The author characterizes the fear monster as "a balloon monster...that looks real on the outside, but get inside it and we find it is full of hot air." Using this imagery helps to amusingly but dramatically undermine the frightening aspects of fear and leads into a 10-step method for overcoming any type of anxiety. What Sedhoff does next is ingenious: After summarizing the guide in a chapter that acts as a "mini-workbook," he illustrates in discrete chapters how the 10-step method applies to taming the fear of severe illness, death, Covid-19, and PTSD—the last included "because PTSD and the fear it elicits are so extreme, but also because it can be challenging to navigate out of." In the final chapter the author concludes: "Unless we walk with fear and talk to it regularly, it can lead us down dangerous paths that we may not know we are taking until it is too late." Sedhoff’s voice throughout the volume is compassionate, calming, and reassuring. The numerous, diverse examples of scared patients helped by the author add richness to the work and credibility to his methodology.

A manual that should be highly therapeutic for the fearful and anxious.

9 DAYS
A Dee Rommel Mystery
Selbo, Jule
Pandamoon Publishing (318 pp.)
Sept. 28, 2022
978-1-950627-55-4
978-1-950627-55-0 paper

Private eye Dee Rommel returns to investigate an apparently murderous rich family in this knotty mystery series entry. This second outing finds Dee working for 11-year-old Zar Sants-Mekler, who wants her to prove that his mother, Agnes Sants, a wealthy heir and astrolaberg, didn’t kill their gardener, who was found dead of a gunshot wound in their backyard. Complicating the case is Zar’s insistence that the crime be solved in just nine days so that he and Agnes can make their Thanksgiving flight to Vienna; complicating it further is Agnes’ statement to the Portland, Maine, police in which she confessed to the murder. Dee’s crusty boss, Gordy, wants to drop this turkey, but other developments make Dee question what seems an open-and-shut case: Unknown assailants viciously beat Zar’s father, Tobias Mekler, causing him to be put into an induced coma; an acquaintance of Gordy’s, involved in questionable real estate dealings with Mekler’s company, becomes part of the mystery; and Dee’s car is vandalized by two criminals who seem vaguely mixed up with the family. Dee delves into Agnes’ astrological community and is skeptical of its claims, but Agnes’ colleague does an astrological chart that has a weird prescience. The PI also gets a fix on the odd denizens of the Sants-Mekler household, including the frosty, secretive housekeeper, Dolba; Zar’s bullying teenage brother Fletcher; and his even crueler eldest brother, Toby Junior, a charismatic but menacing practitioner of Brazilian jujitsu who’s hell-bent on selling off Agnes’ heirlooms. As Dee sorts through this tangle, she weathers nightmarish flashbacks to the crime that caused her to lose the lower part of one leg and butts heads with Robbie Donato, the handsome police detective working the murder, with whom she had a brief romantic connection before he took up with the glamorous news anchor now carrying his child.

Selbo sets her yarn in an atmospheric panorama of Portland, where, hidden behind a quaint veneer, poverty is plain: “Ratty sofas weigh down broken porches. Beer and soda cans have gathered into thick piles against fractured curbs. Empty lots sport tall, brown weeds, most have trapped trash in their thorns.” Her prose is punchy and evocative, as when she describes the aftermath of Tobias’ assault, with “his h ashed head splotted with coagulating globs of vital fluid.” The novel is also stocked with vivid, sharply drawn characters. Zar, in particular, is a compelling creation: a nerdy know-it-all—named after the soothsaying prophet of Friedrich Nietzsche’s Thus Spake Zarathustra—who’s forever spouting trivia that often sounds inane (“Do you know what gout is? It’s when the joints in your body get full of too many crystals made of uric acid or something and you swell up and your big toe can hurt a lot”) but sometimes turns out to have subtler meaning. Dee herself is shown to be a complex, prickly hero living with disability and harboring a deep curiosity and empathy beneath a hard-bitten exterior. Readers will happily follow her down many rabbit holes.

A twisted, entertaining whodunit with sharp sleuthing and a lot of heart.
FINDING A PLACE TO STAND
Developing Self-Reflective Institutions, Leaders and Citizens
Shapiro, Edward R.
Phoenix Publishing House (204 pp.)
$34.95 paper | $34.95 e-book
Sept. 11, 2019
978-1-912691-33-3

An in-depth examination of “the psychology of citizenship.”

Using his dual perspectives as a psychiatrist and an organizational consultant, Shapiro addresses a subject that has vast implications for individuals and organizational leaders. He methodically analyzes human connections in the broadest sense of the word, beginning with the family, progressing to the group, and culminating in organizations. Part I is a crash course in organizational dynamics. It begins with three engaging stories that uniquely demonstrate how a single individual’s actions can significantly impact a group. Shapiro accurately observes, “The more we become aware that our experience of ourselves is affected by others...the less sure we seem to be about where our individual experience begins and ends.” In Part II, Shapiro shows the ways leaders help shape institutions. He relies heavily on his experience as CEO and medical director of the Austen Riggs Center, a psychiatric hospital and residential treatment center, to both offer an understanding of the CEO psyche and outline the complexity of the leader’s role. At Riggs, Shapiro discovered “central aspects of collaborative citizenship.” Part III is expansive; it moves from a consideration of the ways institutions respond to society’s needs to individuals’ identities within nations, specifically the United States. Shapiro wrestles with some uncomfortable truths in this section and offers insightful observations: “In assuming its own mature responsibilities for contributing to the marginalization of subgroups both within and without, this country might offer a realistic hope for transcending differences in the service of a larger integrative mission.” At the close of Part III, Shapiro ponders what it means to be a global citizen.

The book’s sections flow cohesively from one to the next, so the logical progression of the argument becomes clear. The author explores the complex psychological dynamics of individuals, families, groups, and organizations in lucid writing free of medical and scientific jargon. Throughout, Shapiro cites pertinent examples and includes anecdotes, each of which aptly illustrates a key point. These stories, whether they are about individuals in families, patients in hospitals, or employees in companies, all serve to enrich the theories presented here. The author’s observations also further understanding of the less-than-logical ways humans process their situations, something that seems intuitive only once it’s explained. For example, about workers, he notes, “The fantasies and beliefs that individuals carry about the nature of their workplace has at least as much of an impact on organizational behavior as the workplace itself.” About leaders, he writes, they “must be transparent about their motivations and the effects of their own irrationality.” Shapiro projects his own humility; too; describing an experience as an “Institute Leader,” he steps outside the story and inserts his own reflections, questioning his role and observing his behavior at the time. This adds an element of psychological self-analysis that makes the narrative even more interesting. His hypothesis at the end of the book—“It is perhaps possible to conceive of humanity as a multicellular learning system, with each of us as a working cell”—is worth remembering.

An observant, discerning work on understanding and improving organizations.

BONFIRES OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN AMERICAN RHETORIC, LITERATURE AND FILM
Shaviro, Daniel
Anthem Press (136 pp.)
$38.24 | $18.99 e-book | June 14, 2022
9781839983825

A professor examines the thematic use of the American dream in speeches, books, and film.

When it was first released in 1946, Frank Capra’s It’s a Wonderful Life was labeled by J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI as “Communist propaganda” due to its depiction of the greedy, cold-hearted slumlord and banker Henry Potter. In the 1980s, the memorably wholesome film was described by one critic as the “perfect film for the Reagan era.” This paradoxical interpretation of It’s a Wonderful Life, argues author Shaviro, represents competing definitions of the American dream, in particular the historic conflict between market meritocracy versus egalitarianism. Analyzing the rhetoric of high-profile U.S. politicians and ideologues, works of literature, and films, Shaviro explores these rival meanings of the American dream. Egalitarianism, he notes, focuses not just on equal opportunities, but on “ex post economic outcomes,” while the meritocratic view assumes that “winners and losers are not equal after all” and that, ultimately, the more deserving rich “owe the poor nothing.” A professor of taxation at NYU Law School whose previous publications have centered on literature and inequality, Shaviro has a firm command over both U.S. economic policy and pop culture, and his analysis of the contested American dream explores a diverse raft of books, from The Great Gatsby (1925) to Atlas Shrugged (1957), and films, from The Searchers (1956) to The Wolf of Wall Street (2013). The book also includes a sophisticated analysis of the ways in which “White solidarity has frequently proved powerful enough to outweigh economic and class concerns,” as evidenced in American books and films as well as in the speeches of politicians like Donald Trump. It concludes with a convincing, if pessimistic, assessment of 21st-century racism, economic inequality, and conservative backlash. Backed by an impressive bibliography, this is a well-researched book that carefully balances a scholarly writing style with engaging anecdotes from popular movies and books.
Its efforts at making academic writing more accessible are bolstered by its brevity.

A concise, nuanced investigation of contesting definitions of the American dream.

**BEATRIZ IN THE INFINITE LIBRARY**

*Smith, Bridget*

ICS Media (222 pp.)

$9.99 paper | $8.99 e-book | June 1, 2022

9780578290911

Two students using a magical artifact teleport to a fantasy realm—straight out of the pages of the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges—where the author is alive and imprisoned in a remarkable library.

Smith offers a YA fantasy starring the same lead as her debut novel, *The Forest in the Hallway* (2006). Beatriz has a talent for stumbling into alternative-reality realms and figuring out their riddles. Now a college student, Beatriz and her mother-studying best friend, Iris, have embarked on summer internships and studies overseas in the Middle Eastern nation of Uqbar. The country intrigues Beatriz because it puts her in the vicinity of Borges—where the author is alive and imprisoned in a remarkable library.

Smith does not write a condescending fairy tale for a school-age demographic. Even when wild animals help Beatriz, they remain, thankfully, largely inscrutable and non-English speakers (take that, Harry Potter). Curiously, the North Americans evoke little sense of danger and are routed by Tlön mysticism. The storied Tlön itself feels like a strange hybrid of the Westernized mundane (computer users and restaurant workers going about their daily business) and *Through the Looking Glass* fantastical. The most distinctive feature is a Tlön subculture of Lake People who change their genders at will—which evidently gives the North American interlopers the willies. (The author’s name was Gordon Smith when the first book was published, and she has since transitioned.) Beatriz even muses about the adventurous sexual possibilities with her main Lake Person buddy, but in between trying to rescue Borges and fix a few alternate universes, the college student remains chaste.

A curious and engaging LGBTQ+-friendly narrative of metafictional fantasy and offbeat whimsy.

**BOSTON TABLOID**

*The Killing of Robin Benedict*

*Stradley, Don*

Hamilcar Publications (272 pp.)

$18.99 paper | Nov. 1, 2022

978-1-949590-35-5

This true-crime book revisits Boston’s 1980s-era “professor and the prostitute” murder case, catnip to the media at the time.

Boston-based author Stradley focuses on a particularly attention-grabbing slaying in the city: the 1983 murder of 21-year-old sex worker Robin Benedict by Tufts professor William Douglas. The work early on details the discovery of a bloody hammer and clothing found in the trash by some bottle collectors after Benedict disappeared. The account then traces how overweight porn addict Douglas came to meet up with Benedict, recently jilted by her New England Patriots boyfriend, in Boston’s Combat Zone red-light district. The couple’s transactional relationship soon led to Douglas’ putting Benedict on the Tufts payroll and embezzling some $67,000 (over $215,000 today) in university funds, ultimately leading to his dismissal. Douglas ended up confessing to Benedict’s murder as part of a plea deal to serve time only for manslaughter. The deal followed investigations uncovering damning evidence, including brain matter on clothing in the professor’s home and a treasure trove of obsessive letters, turned over by Benedict’s pimp, that Douglas wrote to the sex worker. While a condition of Douglas’ plea was to tell investigators where he dumped Benedict’s body, his recollections were, intentionally or unintentionally, hazy, and her remains were never found.

This thorough book includes some recent interviews, including a 2021 conversation with the state trooper first assigned to the case, and concludes with the coda of Douglas’ rather surprising post-prison period and how “it is possible that he spent the last years of his life with no memory at all of Robin Benedict.” This ironic ending for Douglas, who died in 2015, is just one of the ways that Stradley weaves engrossing new details and dimensions into this account of a rather well-known true-crime story. The author acknowledges that the case has already
One of the most captivating aspects of this story is the manner in which Joseph and Duvalle appear to mature naturally as the narrative unfolds. It is intriguing to observe their differences in approach and subtle sibling tensions. This is something that Sweeney communicates elegantly through well-written dialogue: “'Brother, you must promise me something.' Duvalle, deep in thought, responded, ‘What, Joseph?’ ‘Please contain your temper when we meet these Englishmen. Let us use diplomacy rather than threats.’ 'I'll act the gentleman as long as they treat me with respect.'” The author not only displays an extensive knowledge of Joseph's life and character, but also pays close attention to broader cultural details: “Uguchuru kept the hard-packed earthen floor swept clean. She used a small hearth in the middle of the room at night for light. Its smoke helped to keep the mosquitoes at bay. A stewpot sat to one side on glowing coals, exuding tantalizing smells.” Yet despite a desire to capture Carib life, Sweeney is often reluctant to expand the sensory descriptions. For instance, readers are left to guess the exact nature of the “tantalizing smells.” As a result, the audience learns how the Carib live but never has the full sensory experience of being transported to the island. This is a precise and enjoyable story that celebrates a daring national hero and draws attention to a striking and often overlooked moment in history. Those unfamiliar with the Carib chief will find this tale an education. Although it would have benefited from more serious depictions, the book proves to be a thought-provoking introduction to an important figure and his cause.

A thoroughly researched, painstakingly detailed, sharply written tale of a Black Carib chief.
him has helped shape the man I am today,” the author fondly writes. He recalls enjoying day camp as an athletic, adventure-some boy, but, as a football player in grade school in Washington, D.C., he was regularly shuffled to Bethesda Naval Hospital for random sports injuries. As the descendant of military warriors, Van Ness believed it would be “natural for me to think I would follow in their footsteps,” and he soon began dreaming of a Navy medical career. Though the staunch anti-war movement of the 1960s derailed any interest in military enlistment, the author eventually became a Navy physician, setting the groundwork for a career as a medical officer that would inform and greatly enrich his adult life.

While the volume’s timeline isn’t always reliably linear, Van Ness’ account shimmers not only with palpable pride for his familial heritage, but also the honor and respect he holds for America as well. Written with the same verve, authority, and redemptive honor as his debut biography about his grandfather’s legacy, General in Command (2019), this striking follow-up deftly intermingles Van Ness’ own life and adventures with those of his grandfather, offering greater insights and more meticulous details than the first work. The author draws from his experiences as a Navy doctor and the son of a naval aviator to infuse authenticity into a busy book that also includes complex stories from his friends, classmates, and their families as well as evocative retellings of historical events like the Battle of the Bulge, which his grandfather actively participated in. Though wartime tales can sometimes be dismal and cumbersome, Van Ness is a passionate, natural storyteller, and his dynamic prose strikes sincere, uplifting, and heartfelt notes throughout, with an extra emphasis on the preservation of history since, as the author posits about the contemporary political climate, “we are facing threats to our republic.” The volume concludes with an extensive reference section that features historical photographs, maps, document snapshots, Anderson’s military roles and rankings, and heavily detailed notations and ancestry charts of the author’s family’s expansive progeny. The result is a literary time capsule that informs, educates, and enlightens while paying an honorable personal tribute to the heroic veteran experience.

A sublime amalgam of personal recollections and meticulous wartime biography brimming with reverence and brio.

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intended for adaptation into a manga or anime series.) The book is divided into six parts (plus an epilogue), each with a lurid, black-and-white frontispiece by Bendert. It concludes with full-page character pictures that emphasize the larger-than-life conflict. Fans of kaijū and kaiju media should approve.

An epic, vivid, and gory SF revenge tale with graphic-novel undertones.

MARKET IN CHIEF
How Each President Sold the American Idea
Voiovich, Jason
Jaywalker Publishing (632 pp.)
9781737001317

A reconsideration of American presidential history centers on the categories of modern marketing.

Voiovich is not a historian—in fact, his diverse background includes “product development, persuasion, psychology, marketing strategy, storytelling, value signaling, audience segmentation, negotiation, and sales.” Unsurprisingly, his nonfiction book aims to reassess the history of the United States and, in particular, its parade of presidents in light of their attempts to sell ideas to their constituencies, to persuade them to buy into the latest stage of the always-evolving American experience. The model for this role—“Marketer in Chief”—wasn’t a president at all. Benjamin Franklin “made the French fall in love with the idea of America” and, as a result, should be considered an “advertising and marketing genius.” The author appropriates the categories of a theory devised by Everett Rogers, a communications expert, called the diffusion of innovation, in which people generally fall into different groups depending on their psychological attitudes toward novelty and risk. The range extends from “innovators” and “early adopters” to “laggards,” those who stubbornly resist invention until such intractability is rendered impossible. George Washington counts as an innovator, one charged with pushing the frighteningly new, while Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford are considered laggards. The two men focused on holding on to America’s “past in the face of dramatic change around the world.” Voiovich invents a new category as well—Barack Obama and Donald Trump are labeled “disruptors,” two “leaders who saw the challenges of declining dominance and decided to shake up the system to do something about it.”

The author’s knowledge of modern marketing is impressive, and the book is spangled with astute comparisons to McDonald’s, Walmart, and Kodak. In addition, his interpretations can be refreshingly unconventional—for example, he argues that James Polk “is the most important President you’ve never heard of” and that Abraham Lincoln’s principal rhetorical gift, his “superpower,” was his talent for humor, especially his “power to lampoon ridiculous behavior.” Given the influence of popular opinion on a democratic republic, it simply makes sense to look at executive action from the perspective of modern marketing categories. But there are limitations to this mode of analysis, and some presidents are harder to capture in these terms than others. Voiovich admits that he struggled to explain Ronald Reagan’s presidency using this method. Moreover, the most disappointing accounts the author offers are of the more modern presidents, Obama and Trump—scant insights are provided into the kinds of public sentiment that defined those historic presidencies. To his credit, Voiovich acknowledges the limits of his analytical perspective: “This history—exploring the role of the Presidency as Chief Marketing Officer of the American idea—is another simplification. Because of that, there are plenty of stories I chose not to tell. Like all histories, I needed to curate a small selection of stories to help illuminate an aspect of the Presidency that hadn’t been fully explored.” There are far deeper works of scholarship on the development of presidential rhetoric, ones that delve more rigorously into the speeches given and the strategies devised. But for those looking for a more accessible synopsis, this is an entertaining and instructive book.

An enjoyable and edifying guide to presidential history.

#IRL
Wachsman, Matthew David
Self (174 pp.)
$17.70 paper | $9.92 e-book | Oct. 10, 2022
9798986868509

A poet ruminates about the difficulties of the mortal world in this collection.

Hashtags are for the digital world—they help people find and organize specific information in an ever-expanding internet landscape. But the acronym irl means “in real life,” and it’s in the tangible sphere that Wachsman wants to orient his poems’ speakers, as they use the abstract means “in real life,” and it’s in the tangible sphere that Wachsman wants to orient his poems’ speakers, as they use the abstract to convey how hard the monotonous tedium of existence can be. At first glance, being alive seems unforgiving and mysterious, and every step forward is like taking a “muddy footstep” into the unknown. Readers have all felt stuck in a loop of “I did this / I did that then more of this and that and / then other stuff and this other stuff / and wondered how I could ever get to this this and that / that other stuff / and then this?” To Wachsman, some days teach people harsh lessons about human nature (“It’s Too Late for Sleep”) and the awkward phases of adolescence and romantic regrets (“A Performance of Rituals”). Other pieces reflect on aging, the seemingly inevitable momentum involving the formation of people’s characters, and the tensions of generational differences (“The Ghosts of Tiny Arms Around Her”). The author excels at creating distinct narratives quickly, and the strongest poems are those that use accessible conceits to parse what life is trying to teach humans as a species, if anything. His speakers express loss keenly and often meditate on the past. Simple statements punctuate more illustrous language in disarming ways.

Despite a title that suggests some fixation with the digital divide, the book is light on technology references and critiques, with only passing mentions of “monetizing clicks,” cellphones, and the misery of online dating. One poem is titled like a
website (“what3words.com”). Technology is not the primary antagonist here—human nature is. There are a few pandemic and insurrection allusions (“the wave,” “My Hands Are Better Than My Body”) that date some of the pieces, but most feel timeless. Wachsman's eclectic citations include classic works and such figures as Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Bach, and Orpheus woven in with Radiohead, the prom, and woke culture. This mix of high and low culture skillfully reflects how readers cobble their worldviews from a variety of sources. The pieces overall have a pessimistic take on how life shapes us and how “we are normalizing / the unacceptable / and thus become normal / Normal is what we agree to accept.” But the enduring light in the absorbing collection is love. Compared to the wrongs that seem to materialize from nowhere, Wachsman argues, love is something earned, and that effort is what makes it worthwhile: “At last there is one man / who was a stranger schooled and loved and loving / seasoned and preparing outside of your awareness...now harvested / Relief and love / the fruits so long sought.” According to the poet, looking to the past to explain one's current social failings is easy; looking to the future with hope is much harder.

This compelling collection presents an undaunted examination of how humanity copes with rot and despair.
INDIE

Books of the Month

THE YACK YACK
Judyth Emanuel
A captivating homage to the city and the restless souls inhabiting it.

THE VANISHING
David Michael Slater
A tense and spell-bindingly gripping fantasy meditation on the horrors of the Holocaust.

A LIGHT TO DO SHELLWORK BY
Georgiana Valtolye-Sanchez
This tale’s gorgeous images and graceful poetry should inspire travelers to see the world’s beauty.

ASSASSINATION IN VICHY
Gayle K. Brunelle & Annette Finley-Croswhite
A thrilling work of historical scholarship, thoughtful and scrupulous.

BANKS OF THE RIVER
Melvin Litton
A well-crafted mystery and look at small-town Kansas life.

70 ADS TO SAVE THE WORLD
Jerry Mander
A beautifully designed history of iconic nonprofit advertisements.

70 ADS TO SAVE THE WORLD
Jerry Mander
A beautifully designed history of iconic nonprofit advertisements.
Q: What was your favorite thing about creating *H Is for Harlem*?

**DINAH JOHNSON:** My favorite thing about writing *H Is for Harlem* was doing the extensive research required to celebrate and to do justice to this important place. The most difficult thing is knowing that the book only scratches the surface. I hope it piques the curiosity of readers young and old.

**APRIL HARRISON:** My favorite part in illustrating *H Is for Harlem* was the incredible opportunity to not only paint the rich tapestry of Harlem’s historical landmarks but the opportunity to artistically recreate the iconic people who gave and still give Harlem its soulful heartbeat.

Q: The book is incredibly rich in content. What’s something you want readers to keep an eye out for?

**DINAH JOHNSON:** I hope that the book will inspire readers to appreciate the contributions made by everyone—not only well-known people but the extraordinary ordinary people who, together, create community. I hope that readers think about the poems and newspapers, lyrics and scripts, speeches and street names, that uplift individuals and communities. I hope they linger just a few extra seconds on “L”—celebrating the importance of bookstores and the liberatory power of words.

**APRIL HARRISON:** I would like for readers to take the pages of *H Is for Harlem* as a jumping off point and to become curious enough to research and unfold the multifaceted layers of the people and places that are Harlem. Not only the ones presented in the book but those not mentioned due to the limitations of space. In essence, take time to uncover the Soul of Harlem.